Music in Butterfly Burning

Elisabet Åkemark
Abstract

This thesis discusses the role of music and musical sounds in Butterfly Burning by Yvonne Vera. It analyses the way that Vera has used music interlinked with the action of the novel. This thesis analyses a few areas where music is represented and is important such as: music as an element of healing/forgiveness; music as an element of hope; music as an element of despair; music as an element of working life and the absence of music. This thesis also briefly discusses who the narrator of the novel is and Vera’s writing technique that incorporates images with hypothetical sounds.

The conclusion shows that music and musical sounds are important to the novel. It also shows that the music in Butterfly Burning can be compared to the music in a film. Vera has managed to combine the story of the novel and the description of music so that it becomes one inseparable unit.
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1. Introduction

When I read *Butterfly Burning* the first time I found that the novel seemed to be very naïve both in the way it was written as well as the story. Things that may seem naïve upfront can, however, often be very complex. Upon my second reading of the novel it came through as extremely dense and with multiple layers of images. This novel can be seen as a film where different picture frames have been added one on the top of the other and next to each other in a sequence. Yvonne Vera was very interested in film and photography and this interest comes through in the way she has written this novel. She had studied film at the same time as literature in Toronto. In an August 2000 interview Vera says:

I’ve always been visually oriented, and before I worked at the National Gallery, perhaps my larger influence was film, and how images are prepared, constructed and made to move. I also have a strong leaning towards photography. When I’m writing I start with a moment – visual, mental – that I can see, and I place it on my table as though it were a photograph. This moment, frozen like that, is so powerful that I can’t lose sight of it, visually or emotionally. From it I develop the whole story, the whole novel. Everything ripples around that, the story grows out of the image. For me, an entire history is contained in such a moment. (Bryce 39)

Most films have music and so does this novel. Vera has incorporated music and sounds of all sorts possible throughout the novel. As I believe that the description music and musical sounds are as crucial in this novel as music is to a film, I will analyse the use of music and its various functions in this novel. I think that it is necessary to look at the way that music is represented as the music adds dimensions like suspense, action and transmission of feelings to the reader. Even the most insignificant item or hint of sound is important. However, one exception to this is found in the novel; at this narrative point Vera uses colour instead of music.

*Butterfly Burning* is a drama about life, death, happiness, despair and poverty. The novel starts with a description of how people live and it finishes with death. In between Vera shows life and death as this is part of an ongoing process that the characters of her novel are faced with. She depicts the complete circle from birth to death and includes the importance of the land where people will eventually rest.

Vera has in the multiple layers of this novel included the importance to the characters of the four elements air, fire, land and water. In the 1940s it was important for the people to own their land. She further shows what life was like for the African women, where they lived as
well as what their lives in the city were like. Vera has included the hopes and fears of Phephelaphi and of Fumbatha who do not share the same dreams for the future. She further depicts interesting portraits of the three women Zandile, Getrude and Deliwe as well as their influences on Phephelaphi.

The style of the novel is very complex. The words are often juxtaposed to convey a picture that the reader might have problem in understanding until he/she starts to analyse the words. Often two or more images are juxtaposed to enhance a mood or feeling such as when the narrator says that “Now she remained alone after he entered the room” (78). This contradictory sentence shows that Phephelaphi felt alone even though Fumbatha had come into the room where she was.

In the multiple layers can be found a thread that goes through the whole novel *Butterfly Burning* and this thread is of music, musical sounds and everything that music represents.

While this thesis deals with the significance of music in Butterfly Burning I have also included a brief discussion about the narrative technique in the novel. However, the focal point of the novel is not on the narrator but on the action of the music.

2. Aim and approach

The aim of this paper is to highlight some of the ways that Vera uses to describe music in her novel to support the story. This essay argues that a consideration of music is crucial for our understanding of *Butterfly Burning*. Vera interweaves musical images in many scenes of the novel and connects the music to hope, despair and everyday life. Music is interpreted psychologically as feelings and charged with emotions (Oxford Music Online).

I want to look at how Vera has presented music in general as well as in a few specific areas. I consider how the novel employs music both generally and more specifically. These four specific areas are music as an element of healing/forgiveness; music as an element of hope; music as an element of despair; music as an element of working life. A final area of analysis that I have included is the absence of music. The absence of music or the introduction of unpleasant sounds rather than musical sounds is just as important as the presence of music.

As I have already established music is important to the story in *Butterfly Burning*, and I will in this thesis analyse how the music functions in the novel, both thematically and formally.
3. Secondary sources

Below I outline the secondary sources that have proved important to the study. In order to provide a background to music in literature I refer to “Music, Metaphor, and Emotion in the Poetry of José Hierro” by Bruce A. Boggs. This article analyses the way that Hierro uses music in his works. I am also using *Trumpet* by Jackie Kay as a secondary source for the part on music in literature.

Critics have written much about *Butterfly Burning*. I have chosen a number of these articles that speak about music and its importance in *Butterfly Burning* to support my analysis. I am using an “Interview with Yvonne Vera, 1 August 2000, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe: “Survival is in the mouth”” which was done by Jane Bryce. This interview is interesting as Vera herself explains why and how she writes.

The article “Imaginary snapshots: cinematic techniques in the writing of Yvonne Vera” by Jane Bryce describes how Vera uses imagery to construct meaning in her fiction. In “Language, Kwela music and modernity in Butterfly Burning” discusses Lizzy Attree how Vera has juxtaposed sound, rhythm and image. Violet Bridget Lunga in ”Between the pause and the waiting: the struggle against time in Yvonne Vera’s Butterfly Burning” talks amongst other about music and the importance of the Kwela music. Paul Zeleza “Colonial Fictions: Memory and History in Yvonne Vera’s Imagination” describes the elegance, sweetness and sound in Vera’s writing. Carolyn Martin Shaw’s article entitled “Turning Her Back on the Moon: Virginity, Sexuality, and Mothering in the Works of Yvonne Vera” discusses the question “who is speaking” in the novel.

I am also using “Subject and History in Selected Works by Abdulrazak Gurnah, Yvonne Vera, and David Dabydeen” by Erik Falk.

4. Short summary of *Butterfly Burning*

*Butterfly Burning* is set in the mid-1940s, in the black township of Makokoba in the city of Bulawayo, Rhodesia (nowadays called Zimbabwe). The novel tells the story of a young girl, Phephelaphi Dube and her hopes, fears and dreams. She meets, falls in love and moves in with a much older man, Fumbatha. Phephelaphi had always believed that her mother was a woman called Getrude. Getrude was a prostitute whose name in reality was Emelda and she was killed by one of her customers (a white policeman). Phephelaphi learnt after Getrude’s death that Getrude’s real name was Emelda and this created confusion in Phephelaphi’s mind.
Phephelaphi understands at the end of the novel that Zandile, another woman, and a friend of Getrude is her real mother. Phephelaphi dreams of becoming a nurse and when she is admitted to the nursing school she finds out that she is pregnant. She decides to have an abortion on her own without any help and without telling Fumbatha, who is the child’s father. But Fumbatha finds out about the pregnancy and leaves Phephelaphi for Deliwe, the owner of a local shebeen\(^1\). Phephelaphi finds herself pregnant again and commits suicide as Fumbatha has left her and because her pregnancy has made it impossible for her to become a nurse. Admittance to nursing schools had been opened to coloured people in Rhodesia in the 1940s. A nurse could however not be married or pregnant. Phephelaphi is the main character of the novel and all the other characters circle around her.

I will now start with a description of music and the effect it can have on people.

5. Music in general

Music is an art form that has been present in people’s lives for thousands of years. To people in many cultures music is a natural part of their daily life. Music is important in many people’s lives and people react differently to music. You can choose to filter and not listen to spoken words but you can never stop listening and shut out music. You hear the music even when you do not want to and when you do not listen, it is there as a background sound. Music is a form of art composed of sounds. It can be organised or improvised. Furthermore, music can be experienced in many different social circumstances: the individual listener may be alone by the stereo or part of a large audience at a concert, for example.

Music has been part of mankind for a very long time and it can take many different forms. Early kinds of musical instruments such as bones pierced with lateral holes that have been found on Palaeolithic sites (for example in Europe or Africa); archaeologists believe that these were used as flutes. Music is found all over the world, for example, in India with the description of its classical music that can be found in scriptures which are part of the Hindu tradition (its earliest parts are believed to date from 1000 BC). China had a well-developed musical culture under the Zhou Dynasty (1122 BC – 256 BC). Music was also important in Greece where choruses performed at various occasions such as celebration and spiritual ceremonies (1100 BC to 146 BC). In the 9th century Al-Isfahan, an Arab scholar wrote a book on music called “The Great Book of Music”. In Europe music has been divided into different periods such as medieval music (Gregorian chants), Renaissance music, Baroque

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\(^1\) illegal bar with homebrewed alcohol “skokiaan”
Music and the Romantic era. Musical forms evolve all the time and continuously develop all over the world: jazz, rock, country music, pop and rap are only a few kinds of music (Oxford Music Online).

That music has been and is important to people can be seen by all the different folk music that exist all over the world. This folk music means different things in different cultures and is played by using different instruments. For example in Sweden the accordion and the fiddle were commonly used, in Peru the Andean panpipe, in Morocco the lute and the violin.

In southern Africa the pennywhistle was used (also called tin whistle, the tin whistle, whistle, or Irish whistle). All these different names indicate that it was a popular instrument which existed in many places and that was often used. The use of the pennywhistle is cheap and it can be used alone or together with other instruments. The music based on this instrument became known as Kwela. Kwela is taken from the language of the largest South African ethic group (10-11 million people), the Zulu, living in the province Kwa-Zulu-Natal. A small number of them live in Zimbabwe, Zambia and Mozambique. Kwela means “get up” but it also means a police van in slang, which was referred to as the “Kwela-Kwela”. The flute could therefore be not only an invitation to dance but also a warning. It is believed that young men who played these pennywhistles outside in the streets acted as lookouts to warn those who attended the local illegal bars, the shebeens (South Africa info.).

Music means different things to different people. Music provokes and brings out feelings and thoughts in most people. These feelings can be of varied kind anything from hate to love. Music may have a great psychological importance which is something that the business world makes use of all the time, for example by introducing different kinds of music in different parts of a shopping mall. Similarly the music played in airports or hotel lobbies has a soothing effect on the people there. Vera has used the music to strengthen the descriptions in the novel. This reference to music helps the story of the novel by enhancing the images.

6. Music in literature

The following section provides a brief comment on music in other literary texts in order to offer a context for Vera’s novel.
Many authors use musical descriptions as part of their novel: a character may play the piano or attend a concert. The music described in these books is generally of no primary importance to the story.

Other authors write about music in their books. Jackie Kay, for example, describes the life of a trumpet player in her novel *Trumpet*. Kay tells the same story from different points of view and the reader gets information about what each character thinks and believes. Kay said in an interview published by Random House that: “I was interested in how a story can work like music and how one note can contain the essence of the whole. I wanted to write a novel whose structure was very close to jazz itself.”

José Hierro, a Spanish author, uses the description of music in his literary texts. Bruce A. Bloggs writes:

…Hierro’s poetry exhibits a seemingly limitless creative potential through its use of languages as an attempt to access the often indescribable emotions that underlie everyday experience. (209)

Blogg further states:

The intersection of music, emotion and language begin with Hierro’s poetics that link rhythm and emotion in a literal “musicality” of the verse. (210)

Referring to Daniel Melnick, Blogg writes about Étienne Mallarmé (part of the French Symbolists) who Melnick says lay the foundation for the belief:

“… poetry ought to achieve music’s self-sustaining transcendence of modern reality. Poetry should imitate music’s playful, suggestive, and – in terms of content – infinitely ambiguous evocation of feelings form.” (214)

Blogg further writes:

Stravinsky’s belief that music’s principal goals was to “promote communion” (Storr 17) can be explained by the fact that music appears to consolidate or coordinate the emotional disposition of the group, thus, promoting unity or wholeness where there was a difference. (218)

The above can be applied to *Butterfly Burning*. Vera is an author who connects so closely the music with the life of the characters. Without the music her story would fail to reach the impact on the reader that she achieves with this way of writing the novel.

7. The narrator of the novel

The use of the all-knowing narrator is interesting as in Africa in general there has been a long tradition of oral storytelling where nothing was written down as the people were
illiterate. A storyteller could change the story as it was told. In this oral tradition the storyteller was only the messenger of the story and the narrator was unknown. At the same time the story became a part of the storyteller and the storyteller became the story. Vera chose to write down her stories and she has concentrated and made the content compact. By using the written word she has managed to convey thoughts, feeling and opinions to readers all over the world by using an omniscient narrator. The reader still does not know what Vera herself thinks at the end of the novel.

Most literary critics find it difficult to define who is talking in Vera’s novels. As Carolyn Martin Shaw points out the reader never knows who is speaking in Vera’s novels. She says that it is difficult to find an answer to the questions “who is speaking? What is she talking about? What is real? What is imagined by one or by many?” (38) She explains that this difficulty comes from the fact that Vera has very carefully chosen each word.

The story is told by an all-knowing narrator. The reader does not know if there is one or more narrators of the story. Peter Barry says:

One kind of narrator (the kind that often goes with a zero-focalised narrative) is not identified at all as a distinct character with a name and a personal history, and remains just a voice or a tone, which we may register simply as an intelligent, recording consciousness, a mere “telling medium” which strives for neutrality and transparency.

Vera has written this novel using the third person in singular and plural. There is only one place in the novel that the character, Phephelaphi, speaks directly using “I”. Up to this point the reader has been part of the novel learning about the life of its characters and making his/her own judgement of them. There has been no indication whatsoever what Vera thinks about the different characters, she is a neutral narrator. In chapter twenty, the nearly last chapter of the novel, the reader is all of a sudden faced with direct information from one of the characters. Phephelaphi shares her inner thoughts about Fumbatha leaving her, her thoughts about life and how she sees herself die. With the use of this direct speech Vera increases the tension and the reader can begin to suspect the end of the novel especially as Phephelaphi sees herself die in a storm and the way in which she speaks about the ground. The last chapter is again told by the all-knowing narrator.

Erik Falk in his Thesis made at Karlstad University finds that:

“The most prominent examples of improvisational becoming that Vera’s literary style simulates are the narrators that present her stories. Vera’s novels are all written in free
indirect discourse and have little dialogue. This is arguably modernist way of writing, reminiscent, for instance, of a writer like Virginia Woolf, enable a fluid combination of narrator and character that unsettles the distinction between them.” (101)

This use that Vera makes of the all-knowing narrator allows the reader to concentrate on the story without having to take into consideration what one or another of the characters think or say. Whilst this gives the reader the possibility to freely interpret the novel it, at the same time, demands much more of the reader’s imagination and understanding. I have used the pronoun “she” throughout this thesis when speaking about the narrator. By using “she” I mean “he” at the same time as the narrator of the story is not known.

8. Analysis

I will start this section with a general analysis of the description and use of music in the novel. Then I will describe the music under four different categories: music as an element of healing/forgiveness; music as an element of hope; music as an element of despair and music as an element of working life. I have taken certain passages from Butterfly Burning that I think illustrates the use that Vera makes of music and musical sounds. There will be a fifth section on the absence or near absence of music as the music certain times slows down, stops or is non-existent. There are also unpleasant noises which can be heard.

8.1 General analysis

Martin Shaw says:

Vera’s writing is poetic, self-conscious, each word-choice measured, designed for its effect on the page, and on readers’ minds and emotions. The voice of the author as writer never intrudes to comment on the action of the novel or the process of writing, nevertheless, through her construction of the story, manipulation of timeline, poetics of metaphor, and exteriorization of internal monologues, the reader attends to Vera’s artistry. In this self-conscious writing, it is surprising that Vera’s work can pack such an emotional wallop. Her omission of referential details and immersion of the reader in the character’s stream of consciousness forces the reader to concentrate on images and feelings. (38)

The vocabulary, which Vera uses, is very dense and full of meaning as she creates many images throughout the novel. She is a master in using metaphors and symbolism and she
describes the music and the musical sounds in many different ways throughout the novel. Words and phrases such as: hum a tune, lullaby, handmade guitars, coins crash and jingle, creates different images in the mind of the reader.

This novel can be compared to a film with its different picture frames and settings. Vera manages to convey images of life, death, hope and despair to the reader which can be like watching a film with or without music. Vera says:

I’ve always been visually oriented, and before I worked at the National Gallery\(^2\), perhaps my largest influence was film, and how images are prepared, constructed and made to move. I also have a strong leaning towards photography. (Bryce 219)

The representation of music is present nearly all the time and in nearly every chapter. It can be compared to the music in films or TV series that can be heard faintly all the time like a background sound. This background music changes when something important is about to happen or happening. The intensity increases, it becomes very present and very enhanced. This music can also be soft and gentle to emphasise the action or it can be harsh and threatening. In the novel the music helps to create the images in the reader’s mind. An example of this background sound is when the author introduces singing as the black men “hum a tune, and fume, and lullaby” (3) when they cut the grass. There are two important parts in this, one is the grass as it gives the men work to do even as the work may seem boring. The second part is that the men are singing to pass the time whilst they are working and this makes, according to Violet Bridget Lunga, life at work bearable. Lunga further states that “The role of music can be read as a counter movement against forced labour” (195). It is therefore necessary to sing or to have music to survive. The music or the singing alleviates the pain and the boredom of a monotonous, repetitive work when there is no hope for a future.

The first chapter of *Butterfly Burning* is filled with images and descriptions of men working and pulling the grass. Vera has managed to include rhythm in the work that the men perform when she writes how they “cut and pull. Cut and pull. They bend, cut, and pull”(5). The rhythm of the narration thus parallels the rhythm of the work. The narrator also manages to convey to the reader a feeling of movement and rhythm when she writes: “The grass is a thin slippery tarnish as it waves smoothly. It sways away and again away in this current of heated air” (4). By using the words “waves smoothly, sways away, again away, current” the reader can imagine how the grass moves with the wind. This is partially a use of assonance to create the feeling of movement and wind.

\(^2\) In 1997 Yvonne Vera became director of the National Gallery of Zimbabwe in Bulawayo.
The narrator manages to connect movement and dance together when she writes “The movement of their arms is like weaving...” and compares this movement to “a dance spreading out, each sequence rises like hope enacted and set free” (4).

This first chapter sets the scene for the whole novel. It is an introduction to black men working, the city of Bulawayo, its inhabitants and its longest street, Sidojiwe 22. It also introduces music of all kinds and especially Kwela music. The author writes, for example “Kwela music brings a symphony of understanding, then within that, other desperate confusions. Poverty prevails over innocence. In such times, a song is a respite” (7). Vera repeats “Kwela. Cut, pull, bend” (7). This reinforces the impression of hard work and at the same time the relief that the music gives.

Music and songs are shown as being important elements in the novel. The music and singing introduce hope, possibilities and the courage to continue to live in poverty and hardship. Lunga finds that this offers relief even though it might not be long lasting. The narrator emphasise again that music is important by stating that it is necessary to sing when life is harsh:

Kwela strips you naked. Anything that reminds of pride can be forgotten in the emptiness introduced. A claim abandoned. A lover lost. It is the body addressed in its least of possible heights. A stone thrust. The knees down and the baton falls across the neck and shoulders. Kwela. Climb on. Move. Turn or twist or … move. No pause is allowed, and no expectation of grace. Kwela. Cut, pull, bend. It is necessary to sing. (7)

This passage shows the importance of Kwela when there is nothing left. The men have no hope or any pride left as they are beaten with a baton. The image that the author introduces is that of slavery. She refers to the past colonial times in Rhodesia when the men had to work continuously for the white people. The music and singing helps to alter and alleviate the awareness of life.

Lunga writes “While Kwela offers flight, at night, Kwela in the daylight forces the characters to remember” (196). The Kwela music is important and according to Lunga it gives both promise and pain and it is closely linked to the struggle of freedom.

The narrator compares the Kwela to a fruit. She metaphorically compares the music to a heavy fruit hanging loose on a branch: “the fruit touching ground with every movement of the wind: they call it Kwela” (5). The description continues: “When the branch finally breaks and the fruit cracks its shell, the taste of the fruits is divine” (5).

As stated earlier description music and musical sounds can be found in many varied forms in the chapters of the novel. The narrator begins the novel by writing: “There is a
pause. An expectation” (3). This pause, this expectation makes the reader stop and ask why a pause and what is the expectation. The novel continues with “They play a refrain on handmade guitars; lovers with tender shoulders and strong fists and cold embraces” (3). This pause can be a stop, a pause in the music before it continues. This scene gives a hint to the reader of what he/she can expect to find in the novel, for example music and lovers. It is worthwhile to notice the last words in chapter one: “There is music” (9). This is a clear indication of the importance of music. Even with the hardship of cutting the grass and with life in general, the music is still there and it helps to ease the pain.

8.2 Music as an element of healing/forgiveness

Singing takes away the pain from a boring and fruitless life and music is said to be healing. The narrator writes: “As for healing they have music” (5). Lunga finds that “Music is imaged as “healing”. Lunga continues the analysis with “Certainly humming a tune during hard labour alleviates the pressure. When we sing we begin to focus on the song and rhythm instead of the work, and in that sense singing is a form of healing” (195).

The music becomes very present when Phephelaphi’s visits Deliwe in her shebeen and hears the Kwela for the first time: “On this strange and joyous evening she feels everything on the skin, including the caress from the brief notes of a guitar being tested at a far corner of the room” (64). Phephelaphi does not expect the power that music has over her: “She is thoroughly unprepared. When the music tears into the room she almost falls to the floor with agony. A hurricane of tender tones meets every ear, escalating, on and on” (66). The metaphor which the narrator uses here for the strength and force of the music is presented as a hurricane. This shows the author’s density and master of words in writing as a hurricane is something that happens fast. It is also part of the four elements which are present throughout the novel and which the author often uses metaphorically.

The narrator describes a man playing the Kwela at Deliwe’s shebeen “his music is healing” (66). This visit to Deliwe’s shebeen helps Phephelaphi to accept her mother’s death and finally to forgive her. Phephelaphi had always believed that her mother’s name was Getrude and she found out, after her mother had been killed, that her name in reality was Emelda. This had caused distress to Phephelaphi as she could not understand it. The music helped Phephelaphi to accept that Getrude had been killed and that she was left alone. At this moment in time Phephelaphi does not know that Zandile is her real mother.
8.3 Music as an element of hope

Paul Zeleza writes that “Vera’s writing seduces you with its elegance, its sweetness, its sounds. She is a visual and aural writer who makes you see and hear everything in the worlds she creates” (13). This is exactly what Vera does when she writes about children and she manages to make the reader see and hear the children playing. Children, as a metaphor, is usually used as a description of hope as children are considered to be the future of a country. Children often play in the same way in many countries around the world using whatever they find to play with. The children in the third chapter of this novel are talking and playing along Sidojiwe E2 (a road in Bulawayo) and they play with what they find. The narrator subtly introduces music or more precisely the making of music as when the children blow across empty bottles “The bottles whistle” (17). “Music tears from the bottles in brief and surprising interludes” (17). When speaking about music here the narrator uses words such as, “rusted metal drums”, “guitars made out of empty, battered cases of Olivine Cooking Oil. And flutes. Of pawpaw stems” (17). It is interesting to note that the author introduces the word “flutes” here as the Kwela music, which she talks about in the novel, is actually music performed on a flute. The narrator has so far not described the Kwela music in any detail, she only says that it is Kwela. It has been up to the reader to find out what kind of music Kwela is and she uses the word “flute” again only at the end of the novel. The author conveys the message that the music is important but not the instruments on which it is played. The children are described as having much imagination as they are trying to make some sound come from a broken record which they have found. They “pick a grass and take turns to trace, carefully and steadily, each concentric ring round and round”(19).

There is a chapter describing Zandile, her life and her relation to other characters of the novel. It starts with:

The music. It makes for a bargaining and temporary sort of self-love. Everyone free, the young joyful. (35)

The narrator, a few lines later, writes “the birds had started singing”. These phrases give the impression to the reader of a feeling of happiness and youth. They also set the pace of the chapter with the word “bargaining”. Zandile is a prostitute and she bargains with her customers over the price.

The reader can feel, hear and nearly smell the trains as they are described by the narrator “Nothing has more music in it than trains” (51). As Butterfly Burning is situated in 1940 the trains were very different from what they are today. The wagons could have been
pulled by coal driven locomotives or slightly more modern locomotive. The characters described in the novel used to go to the city with a train that had Fourth Class coaches. Trains are movement and seen as a hope as they bring work, such as the building of the railway, or when people travel to the cities to work or to find a job. The author makes a complete description of how important the trains were to Bulawayo and that they went to many places such as Fort Victoria, Gwelo and Salisbury. The narrator talks about:

Accent rubs against accent, word upon word, dialect upon dialect, till the restless sound clears like smoke, the collision of words, tones, rhythms, and meanings more present that the trains beating past. (53)

Talking is also music as there are different dialects and some of them can have a singing tone. Other languages and dialects can be more rhythmical or harsh to the ear of a listener.

8.4 Music as an element of despair

Trains do bring happiness to the people travelling or working with them but they can also bring unhappiness and therefore they can also be seen as an element of despair. The narrator describes people coming from the countryside and who believe that upon arrival at the city they will find their friends or acquaintances easily. As the city is bigger than what they thought they have nowhere to go and they stay at the railways station until they are thrown out. The author has managed to convey this feeling of desperate waiting by writing “From waiting room, to waiting” (54). The narrator uses strong images such as it is like an earthquake when the trains arrive and when the people touch the ground it feels like a heartbeat. People still manage to sleep through “that frenzied beat” (55). The description of musical sound is here represented in “the beat” and the fast movement at the railway station.

The narrator writes: “… he had moved from his own song into her astonishing melody” (35). This is an elegant way to explain to the reader that Fumbatha has become one with Phephelaphi. He is protecting her but he is at the same time scared that she might leave him.

Phephelaphi has many thoughts after that Fumbatha has left her. Despair comes through in the novel as Phephelaphi wonders if Fumbatha would come back to her and leave Deliwe “and her wondrous song” (146). The narrator further writes “Will he rise out of her song into mine?” (146). To further strengthen the feeling of despair in this passage it is written:

Nothing is mine. I will not. I have been falling and falling and now it seems I have stopped falling. Stopped. Falling. (146)
The movement in the above creates a steady ongoing rhythm until the word “Stopped” where the movement is sharply halted. This repetition of the word falling “falling and falling”; “stopped falling” and “Falling” is a very effective way of writing and getting a message to the reader using few words. This is a writing technique which the author uses with other words in other places in this novel. An example, described earlier, is the “cut and pull” used by the men as they are cutting the grass (5).

Amongst other thoughts Phephelaphi says that she hears something beautiful and that she sees herself die in a storm. The narrator has emphasised the importance of the sound of this storm by saying:

A storm has amazing sounds, beautiful, like eggshells crushed between palms, only louder. More certain. There are loud sounds and there are small sounds in a storm. It is the small sounds which are ephemeral, thin like life, and they make me long to die in a storm, amid its small and alluring sounds, wrapped in those tiniest sounds; a blanket made only of petals. (146)

The narrator metaphorically uses the words “eggshells crushed between palms” and “thin like life” to create the image that life is fragile and can be finished in a second. This sound of the storm and the thoughts that Phephelaphi has creates yet another deep feeling of despair as Phephelaphi looks forward to dying in a storm.

8.5 Music as an element of working life

The description of singing, humming and all other sounds which can be regarded as musical sounds permits the reader to get a feeling of movement and creativity of the people. The singing and music perpetuates movement and energy: “Poverty prevails over innocence, a song is a respite” (7). The music helps the people in the dwellings to live their lives and it gives them hope for the future. The narrator emphasizes again and again that the men sing when they are working: “They sing as brick pounds from hand to hand” (68), “They sing when their breathing can allow, their chant and pitch hard like charcoal” (69), “They shovel and hollow the earth and sing” (73), “There they dig and listen to trains and sing along with that motion” (79). Therefore singing is an important element in their lives. Lizzy Attree finds that:

Sound, rhythm, image and touch are simultaneously juxtaposed, and in harmony with subject and content, heightening the aesthetic experience. This beautiful language both balances and offsets the severity, gravity and pain of its content; yet it does not distract
nor detract from the subject but enhances it. Part of this defamiliarization lies in the fusion of poetry with prose, using language in an unfamiliar way: poetry representing the private language of beauty and emotion, matched with the harsher social reality of prose. Both are woven around the fabric of music, which threads through the novel (64).

When describing Fumbatha who is trying to sleep in the construction of a house which he is building for others, the narrator says that: “He will whistle a tune till it dies on his lips, with sleep. He will sleep in tune” (24). This passage shows how working life was for the people who could not afford to go home every night. These were men like Fumbatha who built the city after that their fathers had fought the war “on the side of the white men” (25).

Attree also believes that “What Vera’s writing does allow is a new way of seeing, a more sensual form that immerse us in the rhythms and sounds of everyday life in Makokoba, as well as the plight of the individual in a modern apartheid urban context” (63).

### 8.6 The absence of music

Zeleza thinks that nothing much happens in Vera’s novels but that “images overwhelm ideas and visual snapshots accumulate, and as they flow they accelerate into stunning cinematic motions of incredible symbolic force (13)”. The author shows this force when she stops the music or puts it on hold. When there is a moment of immense despair or sorrow the music slows down, completely stops or is non-existent.

A moment without music is when the author describes the dead men hanging from a tree. One of these men is Fumbatha’s father who died the same year that Fumbatha was born, in 1896. The author has here included the history of Rhodesia where a revolutionary struggle against British colonial rule had taken place in 1896-1897. This was called the First Chimurenga. The author describes how the men are hanging and that a man can be hanged more than once.

Attree believes that the hanging of the dead men in the tree evokes “the blues of the haunting poem “Strange Fruit” sung by Billie Holiday and which is about lynching in the southern states of America” (75). There is some indication of music as the narrator says that the dead men borrow “voices from the birds and speak in fluent sounds”. This chapter about these men stands out as a contrast to the previous chapter. The first chapter of the novel is, even though there is hardship and poverty, bright and full of hope. This following chapter shows a bleak, gloomy and dull picture where there is no hope as there is nothing that can be
done to save the dead. The author then skilfully moves onto the next chapter that indicates elements of hope.

Another important chapter with nearly no music is chapter sixteen when Phephelaphi performs the abortion. This chapter is incredibly rich with images and colour but it contains hardly any description of music or musical sounds. Even the water is noiseless when Phephelaphi talks about slipping away “a swimmer in noiseless water” (116). The sounds which are to be found in this section of the novel are very hard as when the narrator speaks about birds “lifting into the sky is a shrill of breaking chorus” (118). She continues with “the birds fly off in scattering cries”. The narrator continues, whilst still talking about the birds, with “They land with silent wings back” (119). These words “shrill”, “scattering cries” and that they land on “silent wings” conveys a message to the reader of unrest and unruliness. These sounds are unpleasant to hear and they indicate that something unpleasant is taking place. This together with the use of image and colour is a technique that the author uses to describe the pain that Phephelaphi feels. Vera in an interview with Bryce says that:

For instance, in *Butterfly Burning* (published 1998), when the woman is having her abortion in the forest, I want you to be there, I don’t want you to hear about it, I want you to be a witness, which means taking part in what is happening each moment, as it happens. But I want to do it without crudity, with a certain elegance, so you feel you can still endure it and see beauty in it. And this beauty can only be in the language, I don’t see where else it can lie. That’s where language becomes important. (222-223)

Music also disappears when Fumbatha understands that Phephelaphi had performed an abortion. He “stopped whistling her favourite song” (113). To show that Fumbatha’s love for Phephelaphi is gone Vera uses the image of a flute. Deliwe has given a tiny bamboo flute to Fumbatha that Phephelaphi finds when she goes through his pockets. When she confronts Fumbatha he takes the flute and throws it across the room so that it breaks. Fumbatha then leaves the room. Phephelaphi who has found out that she is pregnant again does not tell Fumbatha and instead she commits suicide.

When Phephelaphi commits suicide in the last chapter of the novel, many strong descriptive images have been included. There are also various descriptions of music and musical sounds. Fumbatha walks into the house where he and Phephelaphi have lived together at the same moment that she puts herself on fire. He enters the house:

… whistling a tune, he has picked up under the streetlights. One of those tunes which linger, is repeated without thought. Nothing lost or found. A tune without pitch or strain. (149)
The descriptions of sounds are intense when the narrator says: “That he hears instantly. The sound swallows him. Fast fearless, astonishing” (149). Phephelaphi is dying without a scream: “No whispering moan or sob. No rejection of suffering. This quality of pain can only heal” (149). “Vanishing: the sound of her breathing swallowed by the flame” (150).

Phephelaphi tries however to tell Fumbatha something: “She can whisper, before her voice turns to ash, the one true thing he will always remember” (150). Phephelaphi has earlier believed that she would die in a storm:

And she is dying in her own storm, and can hear the wind gather over her knees, and the finest flood threatening each terraced pain, each threshold, each slope and incline, and she is underneath that flood holding her breath knowing that no matter when, no matter how, she will eventually rise in her own song. (150)

For Phephelaphi this is hope to get out from a life that she did not want and from which she saw no other exit. The author has managed to convey to the reader an image of something beautiful even though Phephelaphi is dying. Phephelaphi is portrayed a very strong person as she does not cry out or utter any words even though she is burning and in pain.

9. Conclusion

It is crucial to pay attention to the description of music and musical sounds in this novel as it shapes the whole story. *Butterfly Burning* is a novel in which Yvonne Vera very skilfully uses the description of music and musical sounds to enhance the story. The music is important and a vital part in the story as it helps to point out and emphasize different situations that make life bearable for the characters in the novel. When for example the music nearly disappears or becomes absent then there is something serious and really important happening. Vera uses words such as “shrill”, “scattering cries” which creates unpleasant images in the readers mind. She also uses happy music and musical sounds such as the Kwela to create more positive images in the readers mind although she is writing about the hardship of life.

Considering the enormous impact that music has on the human mind it is fascinating to read *Butterfly Burning* and see how Vera actually uses the description of music and musical sounds to precipitate the reader into a state of mind where the reader becomes part of the novel. The reader is able to understand how the characters of the novel survive the hardship of life due to the music that surrounds them. The reader needs to take of layer after layer of images in order to see the richness of the story and the unique way of writing that Vera has. It
takes a while for a reader to realize how this novel has been constructed and that even the smallest item or action is important and that this is enhanced by music or musical sounds such as “bicycle bells”.

When someone listens to music that person can be doing other things at the same time such as looking out the window. That is, music is perceived both passively and actively by the individual. It is far more complex for the reader of a novel to see and hear music. The music does not start pouring out of the novel the moment the novel is opened and no music is heard by the ears. The reader has to create the music through the images that the text creates in the reader’s mind.

I believe that one can compare the novel *Butterfly Burning* and the music and musical sounds which are described in the novel to music in a film. There are many films which have music where the music has become famous on its own, for example the music in Starwars or Casablanca. *Butterfly Burning* is not famous because of its music, it is well known because of the close and densely knit word structure that Vera has created. Vera’s writing technique incorporates images with hypothetical sounds and thus emphasises and strengthens the impression that she wants to give to the reader.

I believe that it would be interesting to make a deeper study of *Butterfly Burning* to explore how Vera uses music and colour together. It would also be interesting to make a study on if and how music is represented in her other novels.

Yvonne Vera is unique in her style and she manages to combine the story of the novel and the description of music to form one inseparable unit.
Bibliography


