

Reinfandt, Christoph, and Silvia Mergenthal. "Literature and Music: Introduction." Lilo Moessner, Christa M. Schmidt, eds. *Anglistentag 2004 Aachen: Proceedings*. Trier: WVT, 2005: 195-198.

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Literature and Music: Introduction

The relationship between literature and music has long been an intimate but troubled one. A much quoted quip with regard to these troubles is the observation that "Writing about music is like dancing about architecture,"¹ and this leads us directly to the heart of the matter: Writing (and speaking) about music seems completely inadequate, given the nonrepresentational character of music, but we cannot avoid doing so if music is to have any meaning beyond immediate experience. As Nicholas Cook in his recent *Music: A Very Short Introduction* puts it: "We use words to say what music cannot say, to say what we *mean* by music, what music means to us. And in the end it is largely words that determine what music *does* mean to us."² But even in close conjunction, as for example in a musical setting of a literary text, the meaning of music remains more unstable and contestable than the meaning of the literary text in question, and any generalizations have to take into account the role of culture in shaping responses to music *and* literature. It is the challenge of this double perspective that made the field of musico-literary study a forerunner of many later interdisciplinary cultural studies projects.

In 1984, Steven Paul Scher edited a collection of essays entitled *Literatur und Musik: Ein Handbuch zur Theorie und Praxis eines komparatistischen Grenzgebietes*. In his introduction, Scher strikes a markedly defensive note: scholars engaged in interdisciplinary research on the relationship between literature and music venture into a kind of no man's land (the "Grenzgebiet" of his title), a journey which demands breadth of knowledge in two disciplines, each with its own highly developed critical vocabulary (Scher 1984, 9-10). Scher suggests that this journey is more easily, or perhaps more readily, undertaken by the musicologist, as genres such as the lied, the opera, or the oratorio, though clearly musical rather than literary compositions, do have obvious, and significant, textual components.

Eight years later, Scher, in his preface to *Music and Text: Critical Inquiries*, considers the no man's land between literary criticism and musicology as, at least partially, mapped: he lists numerous theoretical approaches which have contributed to this mapping, among them, "poststructuralism, hermeneutics, semiotics, reception aesthetics, and deconstruction, as well as Marxist, feminist, psychoanalytic, and reader-response criticism, and more recently New Historicism" (Scher 1992, xiii). He claims that, as a result, "'melopoetics' seems to fare

1 The remark is most commonly attributed to the songwriter Elvis Costello and frequently evoked in all kinds of recent writing about music. However, a brief internet search indicates Frank Zappa, David Bowie, Woody Allen, Thelonious Monk and even Clara Schumann as alternative sources. For a documentation of the quest for the source of the quote cf. <<http://home.pacifier.com/~ascott/they/tamildaa.htm>> (21 Sept. 2004).

2 Cook, "Foreword" (n.pag., original italics), who also quotes Costello's statement in this context.

well in the critical climate of postmodernism," and has, in fact, become a respected field of interdisciplinary research (Scher 1992, xiv). Contrary to his earlier prediction, however, this field appears to him to be more assiduously cultivated by literary critics than by musicologists, though he considers the latter's resistance to "postmodern" theoretical approaches to be on the wane.

In parenthesis we may note that neither volume of essays employs the term "intermediality" – as against "intertextuality" – which tells us something about how very recently the term "intermediality" was actually coined, or at any rate, became common usage. We can, however, still agree with Scher that, as evidenced by the 2003 Anglistentag panel on "Text and Image: Intermedial Relationships," "postmodern" interdisciplinary research has, so far, privileged relationships between word and image over those between word and sound.

Like any kind of interdisciplinary research, inquiries into the relationship between literature and music are fraught with methodological, and indeed terminological problems. In his contribution to the second Scher volume, an essay entitled "Music and Literature: The Institutional Dimensions," John Neubauer uses the concept of "performance" to exemplify some of these pitfalls when he asks "how similar is a reading 'performance' to a musical one?" (Neubauer 1992, 13). He points out that, while it is true that creative reading and listening may be called performances because they bring to life what exists on paper, there is still a difference between the kind of activity which, in the realm of music, is routinely undertaken by musical listeners, music critics, or musicologists studying musical scores on the one hand, and that of a violinist or any other active musician on the other. Neubauer adds: "Furthermore, performances in their traditional sense are more than just creative interpretations. Playing or practicing alone is no performance in the usual sense, for this implies display and necessitates an audience" (Neubauer 1992, 14).

For a way out of our theoretical and terminological dilemmas, we can, of course, retreat to the old certitudes – which have now, perhaps, become platitudes – about similarities and differences between the sister arts, as catalogued, for instance, in Calvin S. Brown's study *Music and Literature: A Comparison of the Arts* (1948): both literature and music are auditory arts, dynamically unfolding in time and hence dependent on their audiences' retentive memories. However, do we still believe that, according to Brown and numerous others, the most important difference between music and literature is that the first is an art of sound qua sound, that is, of sounds relating to one another but not to anything outside themselves, while the second employs sounds to which external significance has been arbitrarily attached?

Historically speaking, there has been a striking inversion of hierarchies: until the end of the eighteenth century, music was generally considered secondary to language, an art form pleasing to the senses but devoid of the aesthetic and moral significance of representational art forms such as poetry or painting. It was only in the course of the eighteenth century with its final culmination in Romanticism that music emancipated itself from language, to paraphrase the title of John Neubauer's seminal study of the subject (Neubauer 1986). The programmatic Romantic formulation of a new attitude which treated instrumental music as the incarnation of what came to be known as 'absolute music' (cf. Dahlhaus) marked a first instance in a sequence of battles about the nonrepresentational potential of modern art. Paradoxically, while literature and other forms of modern art were increasingly "striving toward

the condition of music" on their way into the twentieth century, music itself seemed to be "striving toward the condition of language", as Marshall Brown points out in an essay on the "origins of modernism" in the nineteenth-century evolution of "musical structures and narrative forms" (Brown 1992, 85). It is important to note, however, that, as Brown puts it, "these apparently opposite strivings arose out of a single impulse, to substitute embodiment for denotation in order to restore expressivity where formal control had been lost" (Brown 1992, 85). This cryptic but acute assessment of the foundations of our own post-modernist condition points to our need for critical tools which are up to the task of tackling the complex relationships between formal complexity and cultural context, a task for which the "critical climate of postmodernism" evoked by Scher in 1992 seems to be well-suited.

The next question, then, is that of the theoretical and methodological framework, or frameworks, within which our interdisciplinary research can be situated. Among the more recent attempts to establish such frames, we should mention, in passing, attempts by linguists and semioticians to establish the sign as a common denominator shared by the two arts, as, for example, in a volume of essays entitled *The Sign in Music and Literature* (ed. by Wendy Steiner). More importantly, in our present context, we should like to refer to John Neubauer's "institutional theory of interpretation," which – in what we regard as a genuine cultural studies approach – considers the meaning of a work of art within the context of its "art-world," which is, in turn, enmeshed in an unstable and often contradictory system of other institutions. Hence, John Neubauer concludes: "A responsible institutional theory of interpretation will have to allow that the meaning we attribute to an artwork is co-determined by properties of the work, the intellectual and emotional disposition of the observer, and the guiding conventions of the relevant institution(s). Neither of these is fixed and powerful enough by itself to define meaning" (Neubauer 1992, 19).

The panel discussed various facets of the relationship between literature and music from the early modern age to the present; the contributions will be presented chronologically. Systematically, we can point out beforehand that the contributions by Susanne Rupp and Hans-Werner Breunig extend the longstanding tradition of inquiry into the relationship between poetry and music (cf., for example, Hollander, Winn, Kramer, Berley). The papers by Burkhard Niederhoff, Enno Ruge and Lars Eckstein, on the other hand, focus on the many possible functions of music in literary fiction, a topic on which much scholarly effort has been expended in recent years cf. also Wolf and the majority of contributions in Meyer). On a more general level, Annegreth Horatschek's paper is concerned with the role of music for the constitution of the self as depicted in literary texts. John Neubauer's keynote lecture, finally, extends the perspective of his seminal book about the 18th century emancipation of music from language into the 19th century, when new functions of language for music emerged, many of which are still with us today.

We would like to thank all participants for their contributions to the amiable and stimulating atmosphere of the panel.

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JOHN NEUBAUER (AMSTERDAM)

The Return of the Repressed: Language and Music in the Nineteenth Century

In 1839, Hector Berlioz, one of the most innovative nineteenth-century musicians, completed his *Roméo et Juliette*, a work I shall call a "composition" for the lack of a more precise generic designation. He divided the composition into seven parts, according to the following scheme:

- 1 Introduction
Combats – Tumulte – Intervention du Prince
Prologue
Strophes
Scherzetto
- 2 Roméo seul – Tristesse – Bruits lointains de bal et de concert – Grande Fête chez Capulet
- 3 Scène d'amour
Nuit sereine – Le Jardin de Capulet, silencieux et désert
- 4 La Reine Mab, ou la Fée des Songes (Scherzo)
- 5 Convoi funèbre de Juliette
- 6 Roméo au tombeau des Capulets
Invocation
Réveil de Juliette
- 7 Final
Air
Serment (Berlioz 1900)

Even a cursory look at this cryptic outline tells us that Berlioz did not follow Shakespeare's play accurately but rearranged the plot and focused differently. The outline does not show that the work contains both operatic (i.e. texted) and pure instrumental sections. More exactly, voices appear only in parts of the "Prologue" ("Strophes" and "Scherzetto"), in the short opening of "Nuit sereine", in a brief passage in "Convoi funèbre de Juliette", and in the "Final."

Is this an opera that has ingested a symphony, or a symphony, whose frazzled edges spill into an operatic frame? Both views are tenable: one may regard the composition as a partly "detextualized" opera (Albright 64),¹ or as a symphony that opens up to vocal music, fol-

1 Albright speaks of Berlioz's "detextualized approach to drama".