

WHEN WORDS FAIL: ON VERBAL REPRESENTATIONS OF MUSIC IN LITERATURE

by
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The aporia of musical description is shared with the limitation of language generally. The description of music is, in principle, no different from the description of, say, a room and its furniture. So instead of deploring the aporia involved in verbal representation of music, we are rewarded by considering the representation of music not primarily in its mimetic, but in its aesthetically functional aspect within the literary construct, that is, as an integral part of the structural and thematic make-up of the literary work.

For the artist, too, cannot transcribe what he sees; he can only translate it into the terms of his medium. He, too, is strictly tied to the range of tones which his medium will yield. (Gombrich 1972: 30)

The facility of verbal communication makes us take for granted that we can talk, write and read about all kinds of phenomena, irrespective of origin or relationship. Thus, a visitor to an art museum does not find it in the least unnatural or disturbing that s/he is informed verbally about the paintings in a descriptive catalogue. S/he may even have prepared for the visit by consulting a handbook of art history, also filled with verbal descriptions of art works. It is quite symptomatic that we talk about 'reading' a painting, as if we pay our attention to it as we would to a page of printed letters. However, we do not 'read' but we 'translate' the painting into a verbal message, which may contain a whole narrative or, at least, something which

the specific combination of colours and patterns may be seen to imply verbally.¹ But we cannot respond directly to colour or pattern in terms of words, unless there is language whose functionality relies on culturally shared verbal codes of signification. Facing a painting, perhaps one by Miró with his famous recurring dots, we translate the dots into significance in accordance with some line of verbally expressed and communicated interpretation.²

Languages constitute closed-circuit communicative systems whose use value *vis-à-vis* non-verbal phenomena are consensual and functional. Trivial observations like 'I have no words for this,' or 'It moves me beyond words' indicate, however, some awareness, perhaps not always fully realised, that speakers find the gap between certain areas of experience and language unbridgeable. Of course, language relies on common consent in a given language community about the applicability of words to phenomena considered to appear to all the language-community speakers in roughly the same way. In situations when we feel that words will not apply to the situation, we have recourse to words nonetheless, indeed then typically in the form of cliché and set phrase. But words, arranged in startlingly new ways, are also the resource for us when we try to escape stereotypical expression by stretching language to its limits in the very effort to do away with the cliché-laden and therefore eventually trivialising statement.

The fact that one kind of manifestation does not lend itself immediately to description in the signification system of another type of manifestation is well known in musicology, illustrated clearly in this essay on the performance practice of old music:

Concern with recreating the original conditions of musical performance is a relatively recent phenomenon with many potential dangers. Nuances of aural expression are even more difficult to convey in words than in notation, yet the historian of performance practices relies largely on written descriptions

to determine how music was created by past interpreters. Ten minutes at the keyboard with any one of these would be far more illuminating than a surviving treatise or table of ornaments. (Marshall 1998: 128)

The principle of verbal aporia obtains even in the relationship between musical notation and actual performance:

The notation of music is at best an approximation of the timbre, quality and placement of sounds in time. Musicians universally rely upon aural traditions to fill in notational gaps, and this is especially true in keyboard training, which usually takes place in individual lessons where the teacher instructs the pupil through verbal descriptions and practical demonstrations. Traditions of interpretation are passed from generation to generation through this personal contact where ambiguities arising from the descriptions can be clarified by the demonstrations. (Marshall 1998: 113)

In the following the focus will be on verbal representations of music in literature, in three twentieth-century novel passages by Dorothy Richardson, James Joyce, and John Fowles respectively, and with verbal structures attempting to re-present musical patterns and effects.³ Verbal representations of music may be encountered outside of literature, in concert notes, in composers' programmatic descriptions, or in musicological treatises. In such cases, however, we do not have to do with aesthetically organised texts relating to traditional standards, but with texts relating 'directly' to music, as it were. Representation of music in literature, like any other kind of verbal description, inevitably fails in its aim to re-constitute music. We are dealing with a necessarily aporic, that is lack-of-passage or dead-end, attempt at description, if the criterion for descriptive success is the precise evocation of the complex sound

phenomenon of music. But, ultimately, the aporia of the verbal description of music is shared with the limitation of language generally. The verbal description of music is, in principle, no different from the verbal description of, say, a room and its furniture. A distinction between the immaterial referents of musical description and the material referents of the room and its furniture seems invalid when we turn from the referents – immaterial or material – to their translation into the sense data of their perception. So instead of deploring the aporia involved in verbal representation of music, we are rewarded by considering the representation of music not primarily in its mimetic, but in its aesthetically functional aspect within the literary construct, that is, as an integral part of the structural and thematic make-up of the literary work. In other words, musical description is, in principle, of symbolic value on a par with all the other verbally constituted symbols of the given literary text.

In *Pointed Roofs* (1915), the first novel in her multi-volume project *Pilgrimage*, Dorothy Richardson has her protagonist Miriam listen to her school mate Emma Bergmann playing Chopin:

Miriam, her fatigue forgotten, slid to a featureless freedom. It seemed to her that the light with which the room was filled grew brighter and clearer. She felt that she was looking at nothing and yet was aware of the whole room like a picture in a dream. Fear left her. The human forms all round her lost their power. They grew suffused and dim ... The pensive swing of the music changed to urgency and emphasis ... It came nearer and nearer. It did not come from the candle-lit corner where the piano was ... It came from everywhere. It carried her out of the house, out of the world.

It hastened with her, on and on towards great brightness ... Everything was growing brighter and brighter ... (Richardson 1979: 43)

In this long work of fiction the reader follows Miriam over thirteen volumes as she grows from a little girl into a mature woman. The perspective is Miriam's, and we follow the wanderings of her thoughts in a manner along the lines of both Proust and Joyce. For Miriam music is the great existential catalyst. Listening to music facilitates and enhances her search for a grip on life. The passage above is Miriam's response to her school mate playing Chopin's 'Nocturne 15', as the sentence preceding the quotation makes clear. Now, Chopin's nocturnes are usually identified by opus number (the nocturne in question being opus 55, no. 1, in F minor) rather than the consecutive numbering indicated here, although most collections of the nocturnes – sheet music and recordings – also use consecutive numbering in addition to the opus numbering. However, in the case of Chopin's preludes, each of the seventeen preludes from opus 28 has its individual number, and is usually identified by it.⁴ There is nothing whatever to make the reader doubt that nocturne opus 55, no. 1 is actually being played by Miriam's school mate. But let us quite hypothetically assume an authorial mistake here, a mistake of nocturne 15 for prelude 15. Such a mistake may be quite likely, since the prelude is partly structured as an extended crescendo, which would indeed also support especially the second paragraph of the quote. Listening to the prelude instead of the nocturne would not at all disturb the point, which is that the Chopin piece is meant to descriptively help transport Miriam away from her bodily self. This very potential for productive dreaming (Miriam does not use music for escapist but for consciousness-raising purposes) is the symbolic significance of the music in the novel. Hence it hardly plays a major role which particular piece by Chopin was being played, although the dream-enhancing quality of both the nocturnes and the preludes is important. Arguably, the text might be said to speak for itself by its suggestively dreamlike style, even without Chopin being drawn in at all. This is how the text at any rate must be taken to work its effect to the reader unfamiliar with the composer. Still, the author,

having decided to work her effect by referring to a particular composer, must be considered to have aimed at a carefully calculated effect determined by the Chopin sound quality.

One of the most conspicuously sustained efforts of musicalisation in literature is to be found in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), chapter 11, the so-called Sirens episode. Joyce's intention emerges in his reply to a letter from Harriet Shaw Weaver:

Perhaps I ought not to say any more on the subject of the *Sirens* but the passages you allude to were not intended by me as recitative. There is in the episode only one example of recitative on page 12 in preface to the song. They are all the eight regular parts of a *fuga per canonem*: and I did not know in what other way to describe the seductions of music beyond which Ulysses travels. (Gilbert 166: 129)⁵

The core of the problem we are dealing with here is that simultaneity of different tunes or notes, that is, the progressive counterpoint of a fugue or a chord of simultaneous notes, cannot be constructed by language, nor really by a musical instrument incapable of chords. But in both cases we can resort to illusion, to sleight of hand. The chapter opens with the piling up of fragments, all to be completed in the text that follows. Also this is usually taken to be part of the musical imitation, only the critics have not been able to agree on the exact mode and function of this introductory matter (I quote the last few fragments just before the proper chapter beginning only):

His gouty fingers nakkering.
Big Benaben. Big Benben.
Last rose Castile of summer left bloom I feel so sad alone.
Pwee! Little wind piped wee.
True men. Lid Ker Cow De and Doll. Ay, ay. Like you men.
Will lift your tschink with tschunk.

Fff! Oo!
Where bronze from anear? Where gold from afar? Where hoofs?
Rrrpr. Kraa. Kraandl.
Then, not till then. My eppripfftaph. Be pfrwritt.
Done.
Begin! (Joyce 1993: 246)

It would be natural to consider the fragments with which the chapter opens a kind of *tutti* chord before the various voices take up their individual and soon intermixing tunes. However, writing and reading cannot proceed but sequentially. Not even a resemblance to a musical score will work here, because the initial chord indicated by the notes written into the score will require simultaneous reading, a kind of reading indeed impossible in the case of the fragments. Whereas a chord taken in as the simultaneous auditory impression of a number of different notes *is* the 'meaning' of the music, for the text to achieve its meaning through a 'chord' there is no way round the verbally progressively, not instantaneously, produced sense.

A standard work of *Ulysses* annotation suggests cautiously that the usual way to deal with this initial sequence is to consider it an 'introductory announcement of the episode's musical motifs' (Gifford 1988: 290), having the benefit of the double applicability of the term 'motif'. Somewhat more audaciously it then suggests that 'the episode's 'form' may also be developed by regarding this sequence as the 'keyboard' on which the 'fugue' is to be performed (Gifford 1988: 290). A somewhat absurd suggestion in that it would imply that the incidents foreshadowed by the initial fragments, which are each of a certain narrative duration, would have to correspond to single notes. The duration of the notes in a chord is not identical with textual duration in terms of a – however fragmented – verbal sequence. In the World's Classics Paperback 1993 edition of the 1922 edition, Jeri Johnson in the explanatory notes sticks to Joyce's explanation to Harriet Weaver ('*Sirens* ostensibly follows the struc-

ture of a fugue') and reads the introductory fragmentary lines as a prelude that 'most resembles a quick flick through the score by the conductor before its performance' (875).

There seems to be no doubt that Joyce intended chapter 11 as a text relating to music, and that he, for the purpose of this chapter, chose not to discuss in principle or detail any problems arising from transferring elements and principles of one medium to another. But, although we have no clear indication from Joyce himself, and although critics differ on the exact principles of composition of this chapter, any reading or critical appreciation is bound to proceed in accordance with an explicit or implicit interpretation of the chapter.⁶ One might at this point ask the apparently preposterous question if a reading in terms of an actual and very close approximation to music would in any way enhance anything. Indeed, to me it makes much more sense to argue that the effect, hence the whole validity, of the chapter, depends on analogy, not identity, contributing to Joyce's overall effort of making *Ulysses* a test of the verbal possibilities and hence boundary lines of human language, *as* language, not anything else.

A third example of the importance of the verbal representation of music for the issues at stake in the literary universe could be adduced from John Fowles's novel *Daniel Martin* (1977). The major theme, as in most of Fowles's work, is man in his existential plight, forced to live his life by being conscious of choices, always in search of authenticity. At a crucial point in the narrative, not far from the end, Dan the narrator has decided to commit himself decisively to Jane. An impromptu concert in an Egyptian restaurant provides the backdrop for what seems to lead up to a romantic culmination, which is also an existential high point. At the piano one of the other dinner guests first plays some Chopin, then turns to Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. Fowles makes obvious thematic use of this music, for which no description is attempted, though. Familiarity with the specific variation is not required to appreciate what is going on,

but a vague idea of the Baroque mode in music does enhance the effect. Thematic significance is to be found in the way the music underlines the narrator's sense of getting nowhere, generally and in his relationship with Jane:

They sat in the endless sound, the precise baroque complexity, so calculated, so European; in the African darkness... And gradually there stole on him, both with the music and from outside it, a sense of release, a liberation from lies, including the one he had told himself before dinner. It was less that the music particularly moved him, he had never really enjoyed Bach, but it did carry a deep intimation of other languages, meaning-systems, besides that of words; and fused his belief that it was words, linguistic modes, that mainly stood between Jane and himself. (Fowles 1977: 627-8)

The need to bridge gaps is at stake here, symbolised by the otherness of Bach's music. The need for the authenticating choice is presently woven into the music:

There came a very slow variation, which seemed, or was made to seem by the pregnant manner in which it was played, to hesitate, to suspend, to hang on the brink of silence. It appeared to Dan isolated from the rest, symbolic of things he had buried or was not even aware of in his own being; in all being, perhaps. He stayed in it mentally, after it had finished; and to the end. (Fowles 1977: 628)

The onomatopoeic attempt to imitate the impression of suspension, of timelessness, marked by the three verbs in close succession, and by the carefully calculated effects of punctuation, is meant not so much to describe a passage from the *Variations* (the lack of precise reference apart from 'There came a very slow variation' underlines

this point) but to enhance the sense of suspended time, time almost made space in the moment a crucial decision is made by Dan, committing him for the rest of his life. The otherness of the music helps the narrator to overcome his existential void, a fact spelled out by so many words in the narrative, but lent emotional substance by the musical metaphor. The music, like all the other elements in Fowles's preferred format of the *Bildungsroman*, is subjected to the needs of educating the protagonist.

As everyday language works by force of a complex set of functional agreements in a language community for everyday purposes, specialised or technical language, including musicians' or musicologists' language, works by exactly the same force, only the agreements here relate to a narrower field with details appertaining to that specific field, thus relating to semantics but not interfering with ordinary verbal conventions. Literary language covers a vast and varied ground, ranging from the imitation of everyday language to the complete break-up of all functional agreements. But however much the literary exploits its licence to wrench language away from such functional agreements, language, also in its breach of agreement, remains the premise of literary sense.

The success of intermedial dynamics in a literary text depends to some extent on the readiness with which the reader encounters the text, not of any verbal ploys. If the reader does not know or cannot remember what a fugue sounds like, verbal description will go some way to convey the characteristics of a fugue, but real knowledge will depend on having heard it or on being able to construe it mentally from reading the music. With language as the common mediator the reader is reminded of what s/he already knows or has experienced, and the memory may be triggered by certain constellations of words. Indeed, words may also lend shape to or enhance some hitherto unarticulated response to an experience. This is a matter of verbal rationalisation, of making sense by verbal means of the non-verbal, or of the previously only poorly realised or articulated.

But response to or experience of music exists prior to or beyond verbalisation and cannot be identical with it, only re-medial. The radical difference between music and literature inheres in the non-transferability of mediation between systems of meaning, one depending only upon sound, the other upon verbal language, being used both in its everyday function and for aesthetic purposes. Music is non-verbal, although it may be brought to co-exist with words, as in opera and *Lieder*.

Literature can never escape the verbal, being always 'caught' in the double bind of everyday functionality and aesthetic effort, sometimes admittedly getting quite close to music, as in the use of rhythm or onomatopoeic effects. No matter the degree of complexity or effort to escape grammar and syntax, the aesthetic construct involving language invites verbal decoding at the same time as it may be responded to in other ways as well. Music affects its listeners immediately, through the media of sound emitter and sound waves, just as a painting works an immediate visual effect from canvas through light waves. In literature language serves two ends: communicating in language about something and, using words, building that communication into various shapes determined by genre and other literary conventions, including graphic, orthographic, and phonic effects. The extent to which the verbal description of music is successful in a literary text must be measured not by how close the words may come to the music, since that is doomed to failure, to aporia, but by how the description functions within the literary text as part of its nature as verbal construction. In other words: music furnishes topics for communication and quarries for literary composition like any other class of phenomena, as subject to verbal communication and as object for literary composition. In this music is no different from any other phenomenon to be communicated verbally and, perhaps, be used also for ends of literary composition. As the instances referred to above demonstrate, dealing with music in literature in ways beyond mentioning specific works or types of

music meant for the reader's recognition, foregrounds – often in ways quite aesthetically suggestive – general problems inhering in the translation of non-verbal phenomena into verbal communication.

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Notes

1. Although in this case reading about a painting in a descriptive catalogue or in a text in which the painting is interpreted may be felt to be two different processes involving two different uses of language, both approaches are, arguably, identical in that they involve verbalization. That verbalization draws on verbal contexts naturalizing verbal processing according to established platforms of communication, *in casu* catalogue description and critical hermeneutics.
2. In Moniza Alvi's poem 'I Would Like to be a Dot in a Painting by Miró' the actual dot on the canvas is made symbolic of potentiality, since the persona of the poem 'reads' the dot as that which, having hypothetically attached itself to any specific colour or pattern in the rest of the painting, is the ever hesitant potential enhancer of some specific but equally elusive meaning: 'So here I am, on the edge of animation,/a dream, a dance, a fantastic construction,//A child's adventure./And nothing in this tawny sky/can get too close, or move too far away.' (France 1993: 31)
3. The field of 'melopoetics' or 'word and music studies' (for a brief critical discussion of terminology, cf. Wolf 1999: 39) has been growing rapidly since the first conference in 1988 of what was to become the *International Association for Word and Music Studies*, with Calvin S. Brown's

Music and Literature: A Comparison of the Arts from 1948 generally considered the seminal work, needing, it seems, the end-of-the-century poststructuralist theoretical climate favouring interdisciplinarity to have full effect. Research contributions have, more or less, recognised Steven Paul Scher's division of the field into 'Music in Literature,' 'Literature in Music,' and 'Music and Literature' areas, each approaching word and music studies from the respective vantage points indicated in the headings (1984). The typology has been challenged and refined by, among others, Werner Wolf (in Wolf 1999). Whereas the main effort on the part of this development of 'word and music studies' has been to trace in detail and depth ways in which (literary) texts have been modelled on music, my point in the present essay is that intermediality or transmediality is in principle problematic. The problem is resolved when we recognize that music has its own 'language' and so has literature (with the difference that literature as 'language' also makes use of language). Thus, even radically experimental verbal representations of music in literature aiming at recreating musical constructions with mimetic or affective purposes override the issue of transmedial aporia by relating productively to the literary-aesthetic context and are consequently valid primarily in terms of structural/thematic and/or affective qualities within the domain of the literary.

4. Cf. Brown 1972 for the preludes opus 28 (109) and for the two nocturnes of opus. 55 (155), which are not here referred to by the consecutive numbering of most collections.
5. Letter of 6 August 1919. William E. Grim, however, has suggested that "Although Joyce was an excellent singer and quite knowledgeable about music in general, his remarks concerning the fugal structure of the "Sirens" episode are either mistaken or disingenuous. Clearly, there is no musical notation in the "Sirens" episode, nor is there anything in the text of the episode to suggest the fuga per canonem. The fuga per canonem is not the same thing as the fugue, but is actually fifteenth-century terminology for the canon, which while a strict imitative contrapuntal form like the fugue, has different harmonic requirements than the fugue." (244-5)
6. It is, therefore, very much to the present point that even such an empirically devoted scholar as Zack Bowen, whose project is to identify as fully as possible musical allusion in Joyce's work, finds it necessary to sketch an overall hermeneutic framework: "Just as the line between

mood and structure is nearly impossible to draw, so too the demarcation between structure and theme. In my opinion the structure of *Ulysses* hinges upon its main theme, which like that of Joyce's earlier work is, simply, consubstantiality. Before discussing the use of music *per se* in developing this central theme of themes, it might be useful to delineate the scope and meaning of the communal-existence motif in the novel." (1975: 54)

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