# INTRODUCTION

> "...il y a de bizarre, et même d'inquiétant, dans le fait d'une inspiration de seconde main, cherchée dans les œuvres d'autrui, et cherchée dans un art dont les buts et les moyens sont très différents de ceux qui charactérisent l'art poétique. Est-ce vraiment légitime? Est-ce vraiment utile et fécond?" [Étienne Souriau, *La poésie française et la peinture* (London 1966), p. 6]

> "...there is something odd, and even disturbing, in second-hand inspiration, sought in the works of someone else, and sought in an art form of which the aims and the means are very different from those which characterize poetry. Is this really legitimate? Is this truly useful and fruitful?"

There are various ways in which one art form can fruitfully relate to another. Coexistence is much more frequent—and apparently much less disturbing for an audience—than the declared attempt at a "transformation" or new representation in another sign system. Does this "second-hand inspiration," as Souriau called it, constitute a genuine creative act? To overemphasize what seems to be his question: is there a risk that the "representation of a representation" might suck the blood and life force from the first work, or come out as a merely derivative, bloodless response? What do artists mean when they say that the new work can be cherished alone, but fully understood and appreciated only in light of the earlier work on which it reflects?

When composing his piano cycle *Gaspard de la nuit*, Ravel not only chose for his three pieces the titles of three of Aloysius Bertrand's poems from the cycle by that name, but actually reprinted each poem on the page facing the beginning of the musical piece that refers to it. While Ravel's music is no doubt beautiful and self-sufficient when appreciated without knowledge of the literary source (as is usually the case in today's concert practice), the listeners' insight into the depth of the musical message increases dramatically once the music is comprehended in light of the poem.

Let me briefly recall the central piece, *Gibet*. Bertrand, in asking us to witness the death of a hanged man, draws our attention to two facets of a transitional space. On the one hand, there is the very moment between life and death; the two framing verses clearly stake out this ground. The question that pervades all six stanzas of his poem asks after the origin and nature of a sound—a sound that, after having been suspected to come from the man himself or from the insects that surround his head, turns out to be the tolling of the death-knell. At the beginning, the lyrical "I" is wondering whether the sound may be the sigh of the hanged man; there may still be life. But the end speaks unequivocally of a carcass, a corpse. The entire poem can thus be read as an unfolding of the moment between almost-no-life and definite death. On the other hand, Bertrand elicits, in the four central stanzas, the interaction between the living and the not-quite-dead. Significantly, the creatures proposed as possible sources of the puzzling sound are not animals whom a man could look in the eye, but insects—representatives of transition. Cricket, fly, beetle, and spider all relate to the hanged man in ways that evolve from the innocuously insensitive to the downright morose. Ravel captures many of the nuances expressed through Bertrand's poem in his piano piece. As in the poem, the tolling of the bell is the unifying feature. The tolling never pauses and never changes its pitch. Its rhythm, however, makes it clear that all is not in order here. Against this incessant sounding of the death-knell, Ravel proceeds to lay out his melodic material which, in four ever more emotionally loaded steps, moves further and further away from any meaningful relationship to the central scene and the dignity we expect in the context of a death-knell. In the image drawn by Bertrand, this musical development corresponds with the increasingly disrespectful way in which the creatures of transitional space relate to the hanged man. There are many further connections to an extra-musical stimulus in Ravel's piano piece; the listener gains access to its full depth only when appreciating it as a transmedialization of Bertrand's poem.[1]

This, then, is by no means a matter of a vaguely impressionistic "program," but a case of a transformation of a message—in content and form, imagery and suggested symbolic signification—from one medium into another. For this phenomenon we seem to lack a specific term; I will make a case for calling it *musical ekphrasis*. Not surprisingly, given the

[1]For a full discussion of this piece, see my study *Images and Ideas in Modern French Piano Music: The Extra-Musical Subtext in Piano Works by Ravel, Debussy, and Messiaen* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1997), pp. 192-203.

lack of a distinctive term, no methodology seems to have been developed that would allow us to differentiate within what I will argue is a unified and highly sophisticated genre, or to define the genre within the larger fields in which it is situated.

These fields can be imagined as surrounding musical ekphrasis, linked to it at various points of interaction or by way of the questions asked in aesthetic theory about assumptions underlying all of them. (In the graphic overview given below I single out two of music's sister arts—painting and literature—to stand for what is of course a much richer texture of interactions, including not only other forms of visual art but also dance and mime as well as many hybrid forms of artistic expression.)[2]

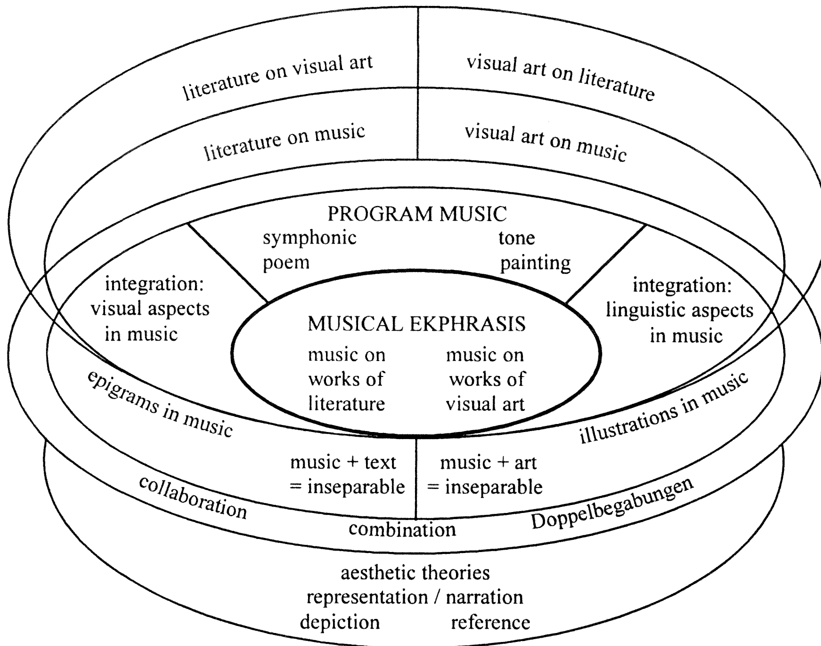


**FIGURE 1**: Musical ekphrasis, its adjoining fields, and the supporting aesthetic theories

[2]See the fascinating "international anthology of poems on dance," edited in 1989 by Alkis Raftis under the title, *Danse et poésie*, which mentions a poem by Sappho and several texts from the 12th, 15th, and 16th centuries before turning to the more prolific past two hundred years.

Among the possible pairings between two art forms that express themselves in different sign systems (verbal, pictorial, sonic, kinetic, etc.), the relationship between words and images is the one that is most widely explored. And in fact, the most securely established terminology is found in a field that has experienced a significant revival in recent years: *ekphrasis* or, more particularly, ekphrastic poetry: poems inspired by paintings or other works of visual art, including etchings and drawings, sculptures and architecture, photographs, films, etc. The field is amazingly broad and varied both historically and geographically, especially when understood in the wider sense implied in the German word "Bildgedicht" (which should correctly be translated as "poem on an image" but is often inaccurately rendered as "ekphrasis"). In his three-volume study, *Das Bildgedicht*, the German scholar of the genre, Gisbert Kranz, lists 5764 authors of poetry referring to works of visual art. His 1500-page bibliography references altogether fifty thousand poems on visual art, covering thirty-five languages and twenty-eight centuries (from Homer to our days)! [3]

*Ekphrasis* denotes a more narrowly defined genre, and since it is this specific meaning that will concern us here, it seems worth going back to the word's etymological root. As Fritz Graf in his essay "Ekphrasis: Die Entstehung der Gattung in der Antike" (Ekphrasis: The Origin of the Genre in Antiquity) reminds us, *phrazein* refers to a particular use of speech and means "to show, to make known or explicit," while *ekphrazein* is a more intensive version of the same verb meaning "to show very clearly, to make completely clear." In antiquity, the term ekphrasis was used almost exclusively as a form of rhetorical exercise, not as a genre of its own; Greek rhetorical books define *ekphrasis* as "a descriptive text which places the matter communicated clearly and distinctly before our eyes."[4] What is clumsily rendered in English as "placing clearly and distinctly

[3]Gisbert Kranz, *Das Bildgedicht* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1987), vol, III, p. 325. Although Kranz defines the term more widely than is common today, including poems that reflect impressions of the painter's style or entire œuvre rather than only transformations of individual works, his list is intriguing. The authors he indexes encompass, by language: Greek 140, Latin 421, Italian 480, Spanish 399, French 391, Rumanian 86, Portuguese 76, Catalonian 18, German 1525, English 1122, Dutch 417, Swedish 176, Norwegian 132, Danish 60, Polish 119, Russian 54, Czech 43, Serbo-Croatian 18, Hungarian 49, plus 38 from 16 other languages.

[4]Fritz Graf, "Ekphrasis: Die Entstehung der Gattung in der Antike," in Gottfried Boehm and Helmut Pfotenhauer, eds., *Beschreibungskunst—Kunstbeschreibung: Ekphrasis von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1995), pp. 141-155: p. 144.

before the eyes" corresponds to the untranslatable Greek word *enargeia*, Latin *perspicuitas*, German *Anschaulichkeit*—a quality that could at best be described as somewhere between 'visually tangible' and 'sensually evocative.' *Ekphrasis,* then, was originally understood as a rhetorical device capable of rendering something clearly and evocatively. Only in late antiquity was the term expanded to refer to the literary practice of verbally representing sculptures and paintings.

The musical equivalent of *ekphrasis* is a much more recent phenomenon. Moreover, the first examples of the budding new genre were mostly not distinguished from the broader category of "program music." Such generous grouping affected composers as well as listeners and scholars. Composers, particularly at the beginning of the twentieth century when "program music" was gaining a bad reputation in comparison to "absolute" or "pure" music, often obfuscated their full intent in the hope to be taken seriously. Such concealment happened not only with programs of the more general kind (one is reminded of Mahler's withdrawing his poetic outlines for his symphonies), but also and particularly in the case of music based on extant works of art. Thus Schoenberg originally denied that his *Pelleas und Melisande* was more than only vaguely inspired by the topic of Maeterlinck's symbolist drama, acknowledging only decades later how exact a "transformation" he had actually tried to achieve here.[5] The fact that listeners and scholars were discouraged from making a distinction between the two categories—program music and musical ekphrasis—resulted in a considerable delay between the first occurrence of the phenomenon of musical ekphrasis and its proper recognition.

This study attempts to answer the question what it may mean if composers claim to be inspired by a poem or painting, a drama or sculpture, to such a degree that they set out to transform the essence of this art work's features and message, including their personal reaction to it, into their own medium: the musical language.

I expect to find as many responses to the challenge of interartistic transformation as there are works in the genre. Thus, while my investigations will be guided by the search for a methodological framework within which all such transpositions find their place, I admit that my fascination with the variety of approaches taken and solutions developed overrides my interest in the grid on which I may eventually lay them out.

[5]See Arnold Schoenberg, "The Relationship to the Text," *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, Leonard Stein, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 141-145.

In part I, a first chapter is devoted to the attempt to map the territory within which, as my diagram has shown, I see musical ekphrasis situated. I begin by recapitulating the major theories that have been developed with regard to the literary genre from which I have borrowed the name, with the aim of later exploring the logical parallels to the corresponding musical genre. This takes me to a brief overview of questions asked by aestheticians about the applicability and specific meaning of the terms "representation" and "narration" in the arts. While the bulk of extant studies examines these questions with regard to literature and the visual arts, I will show to what extent similar statements can meaningfully be made about music. I then turn to program music, charting its development from its beginnings to the late-19th-century borderline forms that prepare the ground for the birth of musical ekphrasis. (I will claim that we are dealing here with what amounts to the birth of a new musical species, which will henceforth coexist with those already well developed. For all I can see, program music proper is alive and well, and has by no means merely transmuted into the more specific form.) Having thus delineated the boundary between two often confounded genres, I proceed to retrace other segments of the area around the unified body of works I will undertake to study, differentiating musical works that transform a work of literature or art from other close relationships between the adjacent art forms, particularly collaboration, setting, and integration.

In a second chapter, I offer a brief overview of the variations in ekphrastic stance, the categories of which I develop in three steps. I begin with alternative scenes from a (fictional) narrative, progress through some examples of ekphrastic poetry, and conclude each section with brief remarks establishing the link to a corresponding stance in musical ekphrasis. The concluding third chapter of part I places musical ekphrasis into yet another context: that of its reverse, literature and painting on music.

The three main parts of my study deal, respectively, with *musical transformations of poems and dramas* (II), *musical compositions explicitly based on works of pictorial art* (III), and *multiple ekphrastic processes involving music as the essential instigator* (IV). For the analytical approach employed when dealing with the individual compositions, I join Robert Hatten (whose interpretive study on Beethoven's late style weds a larger meaning-oriented goal with detailed analysis) in believing that the semantic, metaphoric, and otherwise referential pointers will be found primarily in the foreground, among the highly individualized surface

features of the works.[6] My analytical procedures, varied as they will have to be, will thus not privilege harmonic and voice-leading structure. Instead I will focus on identifying composers' expressive means, modes, and motivations. Furthermore, despite the temptation to adopt a ready-made terminology, I have chosen not to phrase any of my analytical or methodological remarks in the language of semiotics. However, my thinking has no doubt been influenced to some extent by Wilson Coker's and David Lidov's account of musical gesture, Vladimir Karbusicky's theory of musical semantics, and Gino Stefani's investigation of musical codes.[7]

On the basis of this collection of case studies, I hope to prepare the ground for a future methodology of "musical ekphrasis," to which I will return in part V.

Historically, the scope of my study has a natural boundary at one end: the emergence of compositions qualifying as musical equivalents of ekphrasis shortly before the turn of the century. The boundary at the other end is an open one. While I will include a few examples from recent decades, the main focus will be on the first three quarters of the twentieth century, with the case studies that form the main body of this work spanning the time from 1895-1980. And while the various aspects of intersemiotic transposition upon which I will touch are certainly conceivable in other ethnic traditions as well, the in-depth analyses in this study will concentrate on what has been defined as the Modernist movement and its expansion into and beyond World War II, a movement that centered around poets, musicians, and painters of the Western classical tradition.

[6]Robert S. Hatten, *Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994). I concur with Hatten when he stresses that a Schenkerian view of structure is inadequate to account for the expressive significance of marked features in the foreground, or for the dialectics of thematic discourse (p. 133).

[7]Wilson Coker, *Music and Meaning: A Theoretical Introduction to Musical Aesthetics* (New York: Free Press, 1972); David Lidov, "Mind and Body in Music," *Semiotica* 66/1, pp. 69-97; Vladimir Karbusicky, *Grundriß der musikalischen Semantik* (Darmstadt 1986); Gino Stefani, *Il segno della musica: saggi de semiotica musicale* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1987).