

Variations of Ekphrastic Stance

In part I of this study, I discussed the attitude a poet may assume when responding in words to a work of visual art. In that context I introduced what are to my mind the five important categories: transposition, supplementation, association, interpretation, and playfulness. To these I now return, with the aim to show that the distinction made in the sister domain is equally relevant in the field of musical ekphrasis.

Transposition

In ekphrastic transposition, a poet recreates not only the contents but also, and significantly so, pertinent aspects of the form in which the primary work of art was cast. Examples for this category include Kranz's *Blindensturz* after Brueghel's *The Parable of the Blind* and Tanzberg's *bildnis rudolfs des zweiten* after Arcimboldi's *Vertumno*. Four of the compositions examined in this study may be described as falling into this category: Hindemith's *Hérodiade*, Klebe's *Zwitschermaschine*, Schoenberg's *Pelleas und Melisande*, and Carter's *Concerto for Orchestra*.

Hindemith's compositional solution is the most literal in this group. It can in this respect be compared with Tanzberg's poetic transformation of Arcimboldi's baroque painting of Rudolph II, whereby both painter and poet find ingenious ways to depict the emperor with the help of components that reveal themselves as fruits and crops. While the mocking pose evident in the above pair is, of course, absent in Hindemith's response to Mallarmé, other details allow a comparison. With regard to the external features of the artistic presentation, Hindemith successfully recasts the French poet's language into melodic phrases distributed among orchestral instruments. In doing so, he creates a truly stunning analog of medium, telling the story of the confused young woman in a "language" that emulates one important aspect of that used by Mallarmé. In terms of content, Mallarmé's portrayal of the frigid princess is of a person who is as mannered as she is tragic; similarly, Hindemith uses many extreme registers and intervals, thus depicting the protagonist as

decidedly high-strung. At the same time, his play with textures beautifully captures Hérodiade's lonesomeness and distress.

Klebe's *Zwitschermaschine*, especially when compared with Davies's and Schuller's sister compositions, also goes beyond a representation of the visual contents and includes references to the work's design. While his two international colleagues reacted exclusively to the disturbing message conveyed in Klee's depiction, Klebe took notice of the details through which this message was conveyed, and set himself the task to reproduce the four bird heads with their very different expressions as well as the wire that connects them so pitifully.

In Schoenberg's *Pelleas und Melisande*, the ekphrastic transposition focuses on the device of motivic transformation, by which the composer achieves a close musical correspondence to the psychological transformation conveyed in Maeterlinck's drama. Just as the *dramatis personae* change under each other's influence, so also do the musical entities that represent each of them assume ever-new forms whose intervallic, rhythmic, and timbral attributes reflect the origin of each transformation.

Finally, Elliott Carter's *Concerto for Orchestra* seems to owe all details of its structure, texture, instrumentation, and tonal language to a abstract idea that predated the first germ in a way very similar to that in which Saint-John Perse's epic poem *Vents* grew out of a primordial, quasi-mythological cell. As a result, Carter designs four instrumental groups, four aggregates of harmonic material, four large-scale rhythms, and four characteristic developments of rhythm, pulse, and tempo to transpose Perse's four sections, four narrative strands, the four "voices" in which the poem speaks, and the four quests pursued by the poet's seekers.

Supplementation

In ekphrastic supplementation, a poet adds to the visual representation any of the innumerable non-spatial dimensions that a painter or sculptor may imply, but cannot realize directly. These include sensory experiences, where words may describe sound, smell, taste, and touch, which images can only suggest but not make explicit. Supplementation may also allow a poet to read postures as arrested gestures and infer a possible "before" and "after" that would enclose the captured moment. Words can also attribute complex chains of thoughts and nuances of feelings to the depicted characters, where the painter's brush has to limit

itself to more general suggestions. The examples of this category that I mentioned earlier are Wilbur's *L'Étoile* on Degas's *Ballet: L'Étoile* and Gabriela Mistral's *El pensador* on Rodin's sculpture, *Le penseur*. Among the musical works investigated above, three relate to their models in ways corresponding to these poems: Hindemith's *Nobilissima Visione* on Giotto's frescoes at Santa Croce in Florence, Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* on Mallarmé's Symbolist poem, and Loeffler's *Mort de Tintagiles* on Maeterlinck's marionette play.

Hindemith's composition is arresting in the degree to which it uses means and aspects not available to the visual artist to create a work that Giotto would have recognized as true to his spirit. The fact that he can, without straining our notion of Saint Francis in the least, supplement music is particularly fortuitous. The composer's representation of the little brother of Assisi relies primarily on the saint's devotion to joyous singing, expressed in his much-documented love for the songs of the French troubadours and trouvères and his most beautiful artistic creation, the *Cantico di frate Sole*. Giotto's frescoes of Saint Francis touch their beholder deeply as they capture his modest yet blissfully radiant personality. Yet the devoted artist has no means of giving us the songs through which Francis expresses his deep inner joy, the heavenly music he hears and to which he dances with his improvised violin, and his praise of Creation, which he leaves as his poetic testament. On all this, the music dwells; here it excels.

Debussy's *Après-midi d'un faune* also supplements music: the faun's flute, of which the poet can only speak but which he cannot make us hear. In addition, the composer can make manifest another aspect of which the verbal medium can only speak, the ambiguity experienced by the protagonist, between doubt and vain self-assurance on the one hand and between his amorous pursuits and his aesthetic ambitions on the other. The effect of Debussy's supplementation is particularly strong since he recreates the structural proportions in Mallarmé's poem so directly.

In his supplementation of Maeterlinck's Symbolist drama about the doomed little boy, Loeffler focuses on many aspects that the theatrical setting does not permit to show. Most obvious are the composer's solutions to dwell on aspects the dramatist only refers to indirectly. Where the dialogues in *La mort de Tintagiles* imply the great affection that unites Tintagiles and his motherly, protective sister, Ygraine, Loeffler allows his listeners actually to experience the sad sweetness of the siblings' threatened intimacy. Where Maeterlinck's staging suggests that hours of

night-time have passed between one scene and the next, the composer invites the audience to witness this sleep, this time which is low in dramatic intensity but full of potential for a musical rendering. Loeffler even complements Maeterlinck's angle where the dramatist had to choose between one of two options of scenic presentation. While Maeterlinck presents the doomed victims from the outside—the siblings in their moment of greatest threat are not shown but implied through the words of the queen's attendants, and the spectators eyes do not witness the dying Tintagiles but his helpless sister's agony—the composer's attention remains firmly and compassionately with the protagonists.

Association

Ekphrasis by association does not render exactly what the eyes see (in a visual image or on the printed page of a literary work), but takes the inspiration provided by the creator of the primary work of art and spins off new thoughts or old mental or emotional connections. In part I of this study, I also discussed two poetic responses to paintings that fall into this category: Rafael Alberti's *Giotto* on Giotto's frescoes of Saint Francis of Assisi and James Kirkup's *Forgetful Angel* on Paul Klee's drawing, *Vergeßlicher Engel*. Three of the musical works that I have explored above similarly take their inspiration from another artist's work without replicating details of content or form.

In Martinů's composition on *La mort de Tintagiles*, this is particularly obvious. The composer makes no discernible attempt to portray either the protagonists or the psychological development of Maeterlinck's drama; nothing in the music even points to the number of characters or the structural layout in five acts. Instead, Martinů takes his lead from the two contrasting and competing forces that he sees at play, which he represents with two motifs epitomizing Life (in myriad, ever-changing, yet always recognizable shapes) and Death (never significantly varied, reminiscent of the death motifs of two of his compatriots).

When Respighi renders in music an imaginary triptych of Botticelli paintings, he transmedializes not so much the scene or story visible in the three depictions, but instead the associations he himself has, and which he hopes in turn to incite in his audience. Thus the title of the first of the chosen canvases, *Primavera*, reminds him of Vivaldi's music under the same heading; the mythological scene with Venus in the center evokes

thoughts of Ficino's theories about allegory, which he finds musically epitomized in a hymn to spring and idealized love. He takes the backdrop of the depicted scene to suggest a bucolic context, and the movement of the three Graces reminds him of Renaissance dances. In Botticelli's *Nascita di Venere*, Respighi notes the recurrence of the main characters in another neoplatonically inspired allegory, this time a representation of Homer's second *Hymn to Aphrodite*, and reacts by recalling conspicuous features of the Renaissance music he introduced in his "Primavera" movement. In response to Botticelli's *Adorazione dei Magi*, he feels reminded of a late-Gregorian hymn that hails the coming of the Savior, as well as of a popular Italian Christmas song. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, his very arrangement of the three independent paintings into a *trattico botticelliano* betrays his own associations, which create an overarching message that neither the painter, nor his contemporaries, nor possibly any of today's art appreciators would have perceived were it not for this composer's musically couched interpretation.

Honegger and Claudel's oratorio, *La danse des morts*, inspired by Holbein's Basel woodcut series about the Dance of Death, associates specific sections of the biblical books of Ezekiel and Job to depictions that could also be read as a unique example of an age-old folk tradition, one that was no doubt largely innocent of the visions and spiritual struggles of these prophets. As a result of this first mental connection, the two twentieth-century interpreters take the artist's depictions, which contain a frame based on biblical imagery from the Creation to the Last Judgment around an array of encounters between death and his clients, as a point of departure for their innovative reading. In the oratorio's text and music, the not-quite-so-pious sequence of scenes with the beckoning skeleton are rendered, in a single movement, as a dance of the reassembled bones who raucously sing French folk melodies and revolutionary songs against a voice that reminds them monotonously that they are not flesh but essentially spirit—a thought quite contrary to that expressed in Holbein's genre etchings. The remaining movements, and thus by far the larger portion of the composition, is reserved for various kinds of reflections about death and, most prominently, for Man's direct conversation with God. This encounter, not foregrounded in the visual stimuli but grown out of the Claudel and Honegger's associations, prompts the composer to base his work on musical signifiers timbres—the thunder of God's presence, the angels' trombones, the solo voice accompanied by a violin obbligato in the style of a Bach aria—that shift the focus from a (spirited, often even

facetious) representation of the widespread fear of untimely death to that of a deeply spiritual struggle in the tradition of sacred music.

Interpretation

The borderline between this kind of association and ekphrastic interpretation is permeable. In the latter, the transmedializing artist uses not intimations of a personal nature, but rather associations known to and shared by all three parties: the creator of the original work, the responding artist, and the community of appreciators. These allegedly familiar implications include knowledge as to the historical, legendary, or literary background of the scene or story, which is believed to form part of a cultural framework within which all participating parties are embedded. A second type of interpretive ekphrasis highlights not the reading of the subject matter but that of the representation. In this case, the poet can characteristically be observed to respond to the choices the artist has made with regard to the means of representation, more than to the contents of the representation or the structure in which it is cast. Among the ekphrastic poems I sampled at the outset of this investigation, Yeats's *Leda and the Swan* on the copy of a lost Michelangelo by that title exemplifies the first and Irving Feldman's "*Se Aprovechan*" on one of the etchings in Goya's series, *Desastres de la guerra*, the second case. Of the symphonic compositions I chose for this study, three can be said to rely on interpretation of one or the other kind: the two musical transformations of Chagall's *Jerusalem Windows* and Schoenberg's sextet on Dehmel's poem, *Verklärte Nacht*.

John McCabe bases his composition, *The Chagall Windows*, firmly on the biblical story about Jacob, his twelve sons who became the founding fathers of the Tribes of Israel, and the words of blessing with which they are characterized—in Genesis by the patriarch himself and in Deuteronomy through Moses's reiteration and reminder. The composer obviously saw no need to remind us of the details of those biblical passages; he can rightly expect that they belong to the heritage shared by Chagall, the appreciators of his windows in Jerusalem, and the audience most likely to listen to this kind of symphonic music. On the basis of this assumption, McCabe can portray the characters, their idiosyncratic virtues and vices, and their affinities and polarities. As in other cases of musical ekphrasis, the composition leads us to comprehend facets we had not seen

before. Yet in this case these are not so much—or at least not exclusively—facets about the primary work of art (Chagall's stained-glass windows), but aspects of the subject matter depicted in both the visual and the sonic medium. For example, McCabe's decision with regard to the overall structure, which divides the twelve brothers not into the FOUR groups of THREE evident in Chagall's synagogue, but into THREE groups of FOUR, neither interprets nor necessarily contradicts the artist, but suggests the existence of another dimension hidden in the same story.

Jacob Gilboa's musical response to the same work of art, *The Twenty Jerusalem Windows by Chagall*, is significantly different not only in compositional detail but above all in ekphrastic attitude. While the Israeli even more than the Englishman has reason to rely on his audience's familiarity with the subject matter, he decides to remind his listeners by way of sung or spoken utterances of key words in each blessing. In contrast to McCabe he does not transcend the portrayals of the twelve individuals to make significant statements about their interrelationship. Gilboa's main interest is not to engage Chagall's reading of the biblical story; he is fascinated by the artist's medium. To this he responds with enthusiasm. Rather than about men and tribes, his message is about the play of light falling through colored glass and the relation between detail and overall effect.

While *Verklärte Nacht* is not in every respect a typical example of the attitude I am discussing at this point, I group it here since it contains a few significant elements that, as much as they can be explained by reference to any abstract category, seem to owe their existence to the recreating artist's interpretive stance. At first, this seems odd. Dehmel's poem does not take its story and characters from a pool of pre-existing material; the conflict, its background, and its suggested solution, while certainly not unique, arise from the poet's imagination and should therefore not, or so one would think, be open to "correction" by another artist. And yet that is what the composer seems to undertake, as becomes obvious when we read Schoenberg's compositional choices in light of the signification he himself establishes for them. To be sure, there is much direct and therefore relatively unsurprising correspondence: the well-known five musical sections to match as many poetic ones as well as the interrelated motifs for the woman's ever-similar worries pitted against the ever-different melodic entities for the man's independent thoughts. Beyond this, however, there are consequential issues on which Schoenberg, it seems, begs to differ. In contrast to Dehmel, who wraps both protagonists along with their surroundings into the comforting enclosure of "Zwei Menschen ...,"

suggesting a common purpose and fate that we, with the benefit of hindsight, know he developed further in his novel in verse, Schoenberg's music claims that the two belong to entirely different frames. While the poem's two halves, of sixteen lines each, emphasize the woman's confession while structurally blending the man's response into the narrator's observations, the music's half-way mark, powerfully corroborated by a caesura and a subsequent harmonic shift, present the woman's section as interned whereas the man's speech begins self-confidently and freely. And while Dehmel spaces the narrator's lines in such a way that his three paragraphs decrease in weight and, helped by the repetitiveness of their wording, lose themselves into a mere backdrop to the direct speech, Schoenberg's corresponding musical sections grow in extension, in motivic density, and for a while even in polyphonic complexity, as if the composer wanted to propose a climactic synthesis beyond the two direct utterances that Dehmel's understated, gently open ending clearly discourages.

Playfulness

Finally, as in ekphrastic poetry, the playful stance is the easiest to recognize also in musical transmedializations. In a mode very similar to Gerhard Rühm's numeric "poem" on Brancusi's *Endless Column*, Paul de Vree's syllabic recreation of Jean Tinguely's honky-tonk contraptions, and Ivo Vroom's *hommage à mondriaan* on Piet Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*, Peter Maxwell Davies and Gunther Schuller focus on the humor in Klee's depiction and react with wit and (musical) humor. Among the many delightful details in both compositions I will here just recall the rebellion of the indomitable birds in Davies's work and the sad but nonetheless comical way in which Schuller makes us witness, in the context of a piece based on a twelve-tone row, how the crank operator grows tired, the motion consequently slows down, and the mechanical bird song becomes ever flatter until it is very much out of tune.

Musical Ekphrasis and the Benefit of the Given Topic

“...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?”¹

In his *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*,² Hegel ponders the position of the creative artist in classical art and compares it with the approach typical for the modern artist. While Hegel, when speaking of “modern,” would necessarily have referred to denizens of the eighteenth century, many of his observations still ring true today when applied to the heirs of the post-classical aesthetics on which the philosopher commented more than one and a half centuries ago.

One of the points Hegel regards as focal in the distinction concerns the question why creative artists of his time were so keen to invent their own topics and contents, rather than relying on given subject matter as classical artists had customarily done. “The Greek artists,” he establishes,

obtained their material from the national religion in which what was taken over from the East by the Greeks had already begun to be reshaped. Phidias took his Zeus from Homer, and even the tragedians did not invent the fundamental material which they represented. Similarly, the Christian artists too, Dante and Raphael, only gave shape to what was already present in the creeds and in religious ideas.³

¹Translation of Étienne Souriau, *La poésie française et la peinture* (London 1966), p. 6.

²The title for the English translation of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* (first published in German posthumously in 1835; recent edition Stuttgart: Reclam, 1980) exists in two versions. I will be quoting from the translation by T.M. Knox, *Hegel’s Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). An earlier translation appeared under the title *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, trans. F.P.B. Osmaston (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1920). The chapter from which I am excerpting appears in Part II: “Development of the Ideal into the Particular Forms of Art,” where it is Section II: “The Classical Form of Art.”

³*Hegel’s Aesthetics*, p. 439.

Hegel believes that when, as in classical art, “the content is determinate and the free shape is determined by the content itself,” a dual advantage is achieved: “the artist’s mere caprice is excluded”; instead the artist will “concentrate himself on the task of shaping the external artistic appearance in a way congruent to such content.”⁴ As a result, the philosopher claims,

the artist’s relation to this objectively established material is freer because he does not enter himself into the process of its generation and parturition, nor does he remain caught in a pressure to obtain genuine meanings for art; on the contrary, an absolute content for art confronts him; he adopts it and freely reproduces it out of his own resources.⁵

These observations seem exceedingly pertinent to the question posed, by Étienne Souriau and other skeptics arguing for self-realization as the preeminent goal of the Romantic artist, about the validity of “second-hand inspiration.”

In this light, the genre of ekphrasis—whether taken in the original, narrower sense or defined more broadly and thus encompassing musical as well as choreographic ekphrasis—constitutes a special case of the classical approach to artistic expression. Composers, rather than writing so-called absolute music or program music on the basis of scenarios determined by their own imagination, take the content they set out to express and shape from a pre-existing source. Instead of struggling to find *what* they want to express, they concentrate fully on the *how* of the realization.

This does not, as I have shown in much detail, prevent the responding artist—in this case the composer—from generating and shaping meaning. In fact, each of the five categories described above as “variations of ekphrastic stance” imply a different degree, and kind, of meaning-creating relationship between the two representations of the shared contents. Especially where aspects of the composer’s transmedialization seem to reflect on the poet’s or painter’s interpretation or his/her choice of the style and details of representation, the “secondary” creation is likely to exhibit a greater complexity of statements regarding both content and aesthetics than a possible “primary” presentation of a subject matter.

⁴*Hegel’s Aesthetics*, pp. 439-440.

⁵*Hegel’s Aesthetics*, p. 439.

Significantly though, by far the majority of the scenes and stories that inform the content underlying the works investigated in this study did not originate with the poets or painters to whose representation the composers respond. On the contrary, most of them fall, directly or indirectly, into one of the categories Hegel mentions as sources that would ideally guarantee the desired freedom from “mere caprice.” Such sources include, above all, myths and legends, fairy-tales and fables, events from a shared historical or religious past, and the stories representing a nation’s or region’s lore or folk wisdom.

Were one to classify the subject matters depicted and narrated by the painters and poets—and, subsequently, the composers—in this study and link them to one of the sources suggested by Hegel, one could arrive at the following distribution and grading.

- The myths of classical antiquity inform two of Botticelli’s paintings (*La primavera* and *La nascita di Venere*) as well as Mallarmé’s *Après-midi d’un faune*. Moreover, Perse’s *Vents* can be read as a modern myth.⁶
- Christian legends contribute the subject matter for Giotto’s frescoes about the life of Saint Francis of Assisi as well as, much more indirectly, for Mallarmé’s take on the story of Saint John the Baptist in *Hérodiade*. Maeterlinck’s dramas, *Pelleas und Melisande* and *La mort de Tintagiles*, are fashioned after medieval legends in the style of those around King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table.
- The Torah and the Christian Bible respectively provide the source for Chagall’s *Jerusalem Windows* about the Twelve Sons of Jacob or the Twelve Tribes or Israel and for the framing images in Holbein’s woodcut series on the theme of the Dance of Death (as well as for much of Claudel’s text that mediates between Holbein and Honegger).
- Popular regional lore supplies the images for the central round-dance of humans meeting death in Holbein’s depictions (as well as for the French songs in Claudel/Honegger).

⁶As researchers of the so-called modern myth observe, “modernist myth-making does not retreat from modernity, but projects a mode of being for the future which the past could serve to define.” M.Bell/P.Poellner, eds., *Myth and the Making of Modernity: The Problem of Grounding in Early Twentieth-century Literature* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), jacket.

- Klee's *Zwitschermaschine*, while undoubtedly about a modern problem, is fashioned in many respects as a visually presented fable. (The "machine" with its crude, hand-operated crank is, after all, a rather archaic contraption.)
- Only Dehmel's poem about the two adulterous lovers and the child they are expecting, while certainly a timeless topic, does not seem to draw on any directly or even indirectly pre-existing source.

While the characteristic attitude of classical painting and poetry, as Hegel shows us, is to develop "given materials and mythological ideas [...] cheerfully in the free play of art,"⁷ musical ekphrasis can be described as a further step in the same direction: as the expression of composers intent on applying their skills and imaginative powers to themes and topics they encounter in the representation of fellow artists, but which are in themselves timeless and universal.

⁷Hegel's *Aesthetics*, p. 440.