

Music and Literature

Impressions and notes of an inveterate music-lover

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Abstract

The paper discusses the possible relations between music and literature and it explores the existence of musical language as such. Roman Jakobson asserts that music has its syntax and morphology, but it has lost its vocabulary, thus music turned into a universal language. Ferdinand de Saussure claims that musical language should have the same dichotomic structure as any language: the signifier always refers to the signified. But in music the signified is mainly emotional, and only to a lesser degree notional. Similarly, in literature the constitutive element is also dichotomy. These are the traces in which the author entwines his impressions and notes.

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The encounters between music and literature are so frequent and complex that any attempt to structure them seems hazardous. It is so because, starting out from the diversity of the literary and musical phenomenon, their contacts are so complex and contextual that their structuring seems, if not impossible, then at least useless. For what kind of relationship can one find between the contextual association of Molière and Lully, made on the basis that they were contemporaries, knowing that the former’s comedies were interrupted – probably on royal order – by the latter’s ballets? What about the musical “readings” of literary texts like Beethoven’s after Shakespeare and Schiller, whose overtures, *Coriolanus* and *Egmont*, were pretexts for mainly ideatic, and not so much textual arguments?

Music can be the pretext, more or less formal, of certain literary works: Thomas Mann’s *Doctor Faustus*, the *Concert de muzică de Bach* (Concert on Bach’s music) by Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, or Romain

Roland's *Jean-Cristophe* presents only a few aspects of the possible connections of music and literature.

In order to discuss the possible relations between music and literature, a dissociation must be made between the different literary genres and their possible relationship to music. The one most connected to music by its origins and forms is certainly the dramatic genre. The syncretic similitudes, but also the moments of connection in the history of the dramatic genre make these connections the most complex possible. Because one is the relationship of text and music between Shakespeare's comedies and English Renaissance music, another between Molière's comedies and Lully's music, and yet another between Beethoven's ouvertures (*Egmont* or *Coriolanus*) and the drama of Schiller or Shakespeare.

The relationship of the epic genre and music is completely different. The *Kreutzer Sonata* written by Tolstoy as a pamphlet against music, which, in the great Russian author's opinion, can disturb the man's inner balance, or, on the contrary, Mörike's *Mozart's Journey to Prague*, according to which, in the opinion of the German Romantic writer, music can bring balance and light, illustrate but two ways of the possible relationships between music and epic literature.

The connection of music and the lyric genre is yet again different, poetry being particularly connected with music. It is this special relationship that will be discussed in the following.

Certainly, all previous observations are only relatively valid in this case as well, just as the genre categories of literary works are relative themselves, as they always try to grasp pure and ideal forms.

However, the approach must start from a certainty: Is there a musical language as such? Usually described externally, and mostly in normative terms (sonata form, rondo form, etc.) or statistics, music seems to be a contextual formal language, mostly connected to a certain social convention. Seen as such, it is influenced by possible syncretisms (dance) or the fixed atavistic structures of these syncretisms (in Bach's time, the *pavana* or *badineria* did not mean a dance, but a musically structured form). From this perspective of a chain of stereotypes, of rigid categories confirmed by the whole series of compositions of the same type, music is interpreted as a communication code similar to that of elegant manners. But also to that of the subconscious. Because, to a much greater degree than other arts – decorative arts for instance – which reveal exactly the

subconscious of an age,¹ music is even more influenced by these profound levels of the human spirit. One of the explanations of this fact comes exactly from the possibilities of musical language. Having in mind the idea of the initial syncretism of music and text, Roman Jakobson said that music had its syntax and morphology, but had lost its vocabulary. This communication “deficiency” is however converted into a great advantage. Not being limited to the language of a certain ethnic group, music tends more likely to become a universally accessible language. *But*, what is equally interesting, a language in which the strata of the subconscious manifest themselves more profoundly than in other arts, while at the same time the composer also has the possibility of constructing a logical language of his own work. Bach, for instance. It has been argued that the great majority of his compositions observe the rule of the golden section. Obviously, this element was not consciously applied by the composer in his works. At the same time, the *Art of the Fugue* or the *Well-tempered Clavier* contain exercises on the technique of composition and performance. Naturally, this is a conscious choice of the composer to illustrate different theoretical problems by his work. Being convinced of the unity of his work, he signed it in his compositions by the sound value of the notes *b-a-c-h*, almost as a leitmotif. Furthermore, in “applying” this signature, one also comes closer to mysticism, as in German the word ‘bach’ means ‘fountain, source’, emphasizing that the use of the musical value of the letters of his name was more than a mere coquetry, he was aware of the “weight” of his name.

It has been said that Roman Jakobson was partly right in his statement, as each period and each composer builds up an individual “vocabulary”, made up of leitmotifs, motifs, rhythms, instrumental sonorities, which all become coherent elements of the musical discourse. And, once perceived as such by the listener, a real communication activity is achieved.²

Maybe more than in the case of most other arts – and similarly only to decorative arts – a series of stereotypes are created which, in

¹ It has been argued – without insisting too much on it however – that in the periods when clothing covered the whole body (in the 18th century or during the Victorian period) the shape of legs of furniture were meant to resemble the naked human leg.

² It often happens that a first audition of a work might seem inconclusive, and only the next auditions can open the way to the understanding of the work. And this can happen only in parallel with the listener’s becoming familiar with the work’s “vocabulary”.

music, define the various currents, authors, or periods in one author's work. But from the creative author's perspective, it is exactly the breaking of these stereotypes which raises his work beyond serial works. The introduction of new motifs, instruments, or rhythms is one of the ways. But another one is the breaking of stereotypes. For instance, Cesar Frank's *Symphony in D minor* is a coherent work in three parts, not observing the symphony's traditional structure in four parts.

Influenced by the general studies of semantics, there were also attempts to apply semantics to music – however, in my opinion, only with partially confirmed results. An inventory of procedures, put together already in the 18th century, was made absolute, reaching the level of theory, in the second half of the last century: descending chords express sadness or pain, while ascending ones, on the contrary, a dynamic attitude, happiness, joy. Syncopated rhythms express a rapid action, while ample phrases have meditative, “philosophical” connotations. The inventory of these meaningful forms is maintained at a general level, being connected more or less to a Euro-centric perspective, and being even disproved by the music of other regions, or by folklore.

Seeing any language from a dichotomic perspective (as imposed in modern linguistics by Ferdinand de Saussure), musical language should have the same dichotomic structure: the sign always refers to a signified. But in music the signified is mainly emotional, and only to a lesser degree notional. Even programmatic music, bound more closely to a literary text, is mainly emotional.

Beyond forms, one might ask oneself if music also expresses feelings. Not by one particular element, but by the composition as a whole or by the use of elements which create an emotional bond between the composer and the listener. But this bond, this suggestion of feelings, unless the composer or the listener is also the performer, is intermediated by a third person, the performer, who imposes his own reading of the musical work. And there is one more troubling thing: a live audition of a musical piece is always emotionally more charged than listening to the same piece on a CD recording, just as the presence in a concert hall results in an emotional affect superior to that of a television or radio performance. While trying to escape Steinerian theories, I think that in the moment of live audition of a musical work a complex series of factors are at work (of which not the least important ones are connected to the psychology of collectivities) which can enhance the emotive state.¹

¹ I do not think somebody can be a real music lover – no matter how impressive a collection of disks he may have – if he does not go to concerts or opera

Similar to literature where it is not the isolated words but their totality which express a feeling, in music as well, it is the totality of constitutive elements which can create an emotional state.¹

Similar to music, in literature as well (and mainly in poetry) the constitutive element is also dichotomy. The sounding aspect of the poetic text² has attracted the attention of researchers on the euphony of the poetic text. With terms reminding of the arsenal of impressionist criticism, there has much been said about the “harmony” of the verses of a certain poet, attention has been brought to the frequency of a certain sound. Sometimes it has also been observed that the repetition of a sound, usually vowel, can create sounding effects.

A problem which linguists have tried to answer is the semantic value of sounds. Starting from an old theory that language was created as a convention of sounding communication among a group of people, it has been observed that in Indo-European languages the notion of river is always denoted by words which contain the sound *fl* or *r*, and it was believed to be phonetic symbolism. But this symbolism of sounds – and first of all the symbolism of vowels – is not valid for all the families of languages, which of course does not deny its existence, but limits it to circumstantial situations.

Also in circumstantial situations, this time connected to their phonic achievements in the interaction of several sounds, effects with a semantic value can be achieved. The first two verses of the poem *Nunta Zamfirei* (Zamfira’s wedding) by George Coșbuc:

“E lung pământul,
Ba e lat” (The world is long and wide)

performances. And one last confession: have you ever felt on a concert a certain flux – not of a physical nature – through the hall? I have!

¹ Therefore, I think that the performance or audition of only a fragment of a musical work, its tearing out of the context may induce false emotional states. There is nothing more ridiculous than taking out one part of the *Symphony no. 3* of Johannes Brahms or the *Symphony no. 9* of Beethoven, both of which have become “hits”, but have lost their internal substance by their being separated from the whole.

² It has not been sufficiently emphasized yet, in my opinion – and probably because of the obsession of semiotic preoccupations dominating the second half of the 20th century – that the reading of poetry is always accompanied by its “uttering” in the mind of the reader, which makes every element of the text be necessarily received. In the case of poetry, like in that of music, “diagonal” reading is not possible.

achieves the effect of space by the fact that the first verse contains mostly closed vowels, while the second one contains mostly open vowels.

Even more complex is the relationship of speech and music, as the word and the sound are most intricately, and at the same time ambiguously, inter-related. With the terms of structuralism – which are extremely useful here – one deals with two interacting systems of communication. However, this interaction presents itself in unique forms from one work to the other, and all that can be done with them is their approximate systematization.

The pitch of vowels can create a melody in the literary text as such. It can create real contextual monodies, in most cases by the repetition of certain vowel groups, consonants only having a secondary role in it. But one can also recognize, surprisingly, the vowel harmony of a text in pure instrumental music: in Arcangelo Corelli's *Concerto per il Natale* one can recognize, for instance, in the first musical phrase of the strings the harmony of the text: *Il Natale e già qui* and the answer *E arivato il Natale*, which becomes a leitmotif of the whole composition.

When the literary text and music actually meet, one must observe that their possible interaction is extremely diverse: certain texts impose by their very content a certain musical form: Tirteus' hymns, Schiller's *Ode to Joy*, Vasile Alecsandri's *Hora unirii* (The dance of the union), the *Marseillaise* or Sándor Petöfi's *Nemzeti dal* (*Talpra Magyar...*) (National song) because of their mobilizing nature could not have converted into anything else than songs of mobilization of the masses of listeners, or possibly, into anthems. On the other side, there are situations when the text tries to adapt its structure to a previous melody, be it real or – in most cases – imaginary, in the poet's subconscious.

A special case is the variants of Eminescu's poems, in which one of the criteria of polishing these variants in the course of finishing the text can be seen to be vowel harmony.

In this text-and-music relationship a special place is taken by the lied, where music and poetry are equally important for the expression. The genre of the lied is one of the least formal ones, the composer achieves a unique synthesis each time.

A problem which, in my opinion, has not been entirely researched, is the nature of the texts preferred as matter of composition for a lied. The theory of the open work is best applied for this problem. Because, evidently, most preferred are texts with multiple ways of reading, the composer making that of his own. Usually, the texts preferred are those emotionally charged, or those which express states of

mind, and not so much the texts in which the notional weight of words merges into the text as a whole.

That things are indeed so, is also proved by Goethe's lack of understanding of the lieds composed by Schubert on his texts. This was not how the great writer imagined the intertwining of his work with music. If it came to music, he wrote a continuation – absolutely uninteresting in my opinion – to *The Magic Flute*, he thought highly of Felix Mendelssohn-Bartoldy, but his spirit defined by the limits of the Enlightenment could not understand the Romantic reception of his works.¹

By the continuous synthesis that it makes between music and text, the lied offers unique and personal forms. But the reading of the text always comes first.² The lied also becomes more profound as the understanding of the text evolves. Chronologically following the lieds composed on the verses of the same poet, for example Goethe or Eminescu, it is obvious that in time one melodic line – sometimes even exterior – changes for a much more subtle and profound one. This is evidently connected to the better understanding of the text.

Due to its formal possibilities, the lied offers the composer the possibility of expressing a variety of feelings and nuances which other kinds of intertwining of music and text can only grasp with difficulty. Hence the performer has a major role. The performer is the one who accomplishes this synthesis, and in a way he is responsible for balancing its elements. I had the chance of listening to recitals in which a singer endowed with an exceptional voice let himself be dominated by it, not being able to subordinate his vocal instrument to the accomplishment of the authentic artistic act. Let us take an example at hand for any music lover: of the performance of Schubert's same lieds by Jessie Norman, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, and Dietrich Fischer Diskau, preferable are the performances of the latter two, mentioning also that, understanding both music and text in a personal way, Diskau makes one step forward in the understanding of these musical works. This happens because these two

¹ The Romanian poet Tudor Arghezi, reinstated after 1953 as a literary model, had a very different reaction; he liked to indulge in readings all the more enciphered and intellectual; and the lied offered all these possibilities of reading.

² In the case when melody is the leading factor, then one can speak about minor pieces of art, like drawing-room ballads or light music hits. For the same verses of Eminescu both lieds and ballads were composed, as well as light music pieces. In the case of the latter two the text loses much of its importance, becoming almost a redundant element.

performers achieve a synthesis of word and music, giving equal importance to both factors.

Vocal music in general and the lied in particular starts from a sacrifice, accepted, but not unilateral, the two systems (speech and music) being assimilated into a single artistic work; but this is not only music, nor is it only speech, but both at the same time. In a way, a possible common origin is re-created infinitely, in which the sound and the expressiveness or the message are intertwined. Otherwise, several times in their history, these two have mutually strengthened each other.

This genuine synthesis which is achieved by the lied has always allowed for a complete liberty of creation for composers. It has also had a special influence over other musical genres. Because, beyond the theories that Wagner applied to the opera, it is obvious that his experience could not have been achieved without the previous existence of Schubert's lieds. During its entire existence in the 19th and 20th centuries, vocal music, regardless of its genre, has always claimed the experience and freedom of expression which the lied has accomplished all the way from the beginning of the 19th century, as its power of regeneration, coming from the freedom offered by the synthesis of music and speech into a unitary whole has always been of utmost importance for the later avatars of the phenomenon of music.