Sound, Image, Word

1. Absolute music and program music

The fashion of cultural studies might prompt the scholar of literature to venture a comparative study of several different branches of the arts. Making statements concerning the different arts is both tempting and risky. It is hardly easy to have a thorough knowledge of any individual branch of the arts, and perhaps wellnigh impossible to know two or more well enough to be able to hazard any broad comparative claims. Interpretations of paintings or works of music which draw on methods or concepts from literary theory often end up betraying a lack of expertise. Any study of inter-medial works must take into consideration that the different forms of art rely on different sign systems, and their manners of producing meaning are not the same. Even the identity or "identifiability" is not the same in the different branches of the arts. There is a single *Mona Lisa*, and there are laws which specify how many castings can be considered "originals." In the case of a work of music, the authenticity, as it were, of an individual recording or performance is measured by factors determined by very distinctive interpretive systems, as is true in the case of productions and performances of works for the theater and translations of literary texts.

A critic or theorist who suggests a parallel between two branches of the arts arguably disregards the principles and processes and even the traditions of two different kinds of artistic material. She aims to shed light on two different phenomena, but often fails to establish any persuasive qualification of either. As an example, I cite a description of a painting by Hungarian painter Bertalan Székely entitled *Landscape*, which dates from the late 1850s (95x66 cm., Hungarian National Gallery): "The light of the moon, which is peeking out from behind the clouds, casts light across the

landscape, which has been painted with broad, expressive brushstrokes and which conjures the mood of the music of [Edvard] Grieg and the poetry of [Nikolaus] Lenau" (Bakó 1982, 14-15). I find similarly arbitrary and haphazard a characterization by Hungarian literary theorist István Király of the poem "Szegény anyám csak egy dalt zongorázik" ("My poor mother plays only one piece on the piano") from the 1910 collection of poems *A szegény kisgyermek panaszai* (*Laments of a Poor Little Child*) by Hungarian novelist, essayist, and poet Dezső Kosztolányi. Király makes the following contention: "a new type of conflict has appeared in the arts: the contradiction between individual and role. This is one of the reasons why *Pagliacci*, a mediocre, belated romantic opera by Ruggero Leoncavallo, became a major success at the end of the last century. It was one of the first compositions which touched on this conflict. And Dezső Kosztolányi was one of the first people in Hungary to give voice to this" (Király 1986, 165). This comparison seems to rest on abstract generalization, and it very clearly shows that Király did not take into consideration any of the premises of semiotics when venturing a comparison of a work of literature and a work of music. The comparison, which clearly was intended to shed some light on Kosztolányi's poetry, was perhaps justified in Király's view by the fact that the poem in question refers to a work of music. The reference, however, seems far too superficial to warrant Király's conceptual generalization. His contention reveals nothing essential, neither about the work of literature nor about the work of music. Really, it is merely the libretto for the opera (which Király characterizes with the commonplace "romantic"), which was written by Leoncavallo, which serves as a pretext for the comparison, but it reveals nothing about the text by Kosztolányi. For instance, it does not touch on how the last two lines of the poem raise kitsch to the level of fine art:

> And the bad countryside dance tips and taps,
> And aches and is deep, like a Chopin waltz.

Overstated comparisons of works of literature and works of fine art create similar problems. Király draws a forced comparison between the fine arts and literature when he contends, as an attempted description of Kosztolányi's poem "Szeptemberi áhítat" ("September Rapture") that its structure "is not linear, built on sequence, but is a-linear and based on montage, as in Cubist paintings." Similarly, one could object to his contention that Kosztolányi's experimental, at times parodic novel Dölt betűvel (available in English translation by Bernard Adams), is "demonic" and therefore "bears affinities with the anti-civilizational restlessness of Duchamp, who painted a moustache on the Mona Lisa." Presumably, the foundation for this comparison of two works, which were composed at roughly the same time and are strikingly different, is a notion of some shared inspiration or prompting which motivated the two artists, and yet the comparison sheds no light on the artistic processes of interpretation involved. For instance, Király fails to note (and his comparison fails to address) the fact that in the case of Duchamp, the composition is perhaps most persuasively understood as a gesture of mockery directed at uninformed admiration for a so-called masterpiece.

Many authors use expressions referring to other branches of the arts so vaguely that the references remain incomprehensibly vague. One thinks, for instance, of ambiguous or hazy statements concerning the alleged musicality of poetry. Király offers another example from the scholarship on Hungarian literature. He associates polyphony with "multiplicity of meaning," "complexity," and "contradictoriness," though polyphony in fact refers, at least as a precise term in the scholarship on music, to simultaneous voices in a composition which are all of equal prominence and which evolve in interrelated melodic lines. If one were to use this term to refer to a work of literature, it might at most be suitable for works of text which are heard simultaneously, for instance Michel Butor's 1965 stereophonic etude 6,*810,000 litres d'eau par seconde*. In her book on nineteenth-century Hungarian painting, Júlia Szabó

makes a similarly vague inter-arts comparison when she contends that László Paál "used not only the delicate naturalist lyricism of Barbizon and the religious-pantheistic view of nature in his personal vision, but also serious and taciturn Hungarian ballads." I could mention examples found in the writings of authors more prominent internationally. Theodor Adorno claimed that Wagner developed "the analogy to impressionistic painting" (1985, 60). Adorno makes this contention as little more than a proclamation the actual plausibility or foundation of which is so questionable that it remains incomprehensible, even though Adorno himself had an education in music.

Even well-established scholars make the mistake of borrowing second-hand information concerning branches of the arts with which they are not necessarily adequately familiar. Let me offer two examples. Friedrich A. Kittler, who in his major study *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* showed himself an expert on the importance of media, made the following assertion concerning the phonograph: "In Germany, Edison won over Bismarck and Brahms, who by recording one of his Hungarian rhapsodies "freed it from the whimsical interpretations of the conductors of the future" (78, 1999). First, from the theoretical point of view, one could raise the objection that the composer's interpretation of a work need not necessarily be regarded as someone excluding further interpretations. Similarly important, however, if one listens to the phonograph cylinder recording of the *First Hungarian Dance* (not rhapsody) in question, which was made in or around 1889 and which is less than 50 seconds long, one can hardly hear any music at all. This is true of the recording used by Kittler, which was released in 1998 by Fono Enterprise as part of the series entitled the Piano Library and which was restored to the highest possible quality possible using the most modern technology. Furthermore, late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century conductors could hardly have been familiar with the recording in the first place. Thus, this bit of second-hand information in Kittler's dis-

cussion hardly has as real relevance to the reception history of the work in question.

I take my second example from a work by German musicologist Carl Dahlhaus. Dahlhaus refers to Walter Pater's (alleged) contention that "poetry secretly wishes to become music." The often misquoted or misleadingly paraphrased citation from Pater's essay "The School of Giorgione," which was published in *Fortnightly Review* in 1877 and then in the 1888 third edition of the collection of Pater's essays entitled *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, in fact is as follows: "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music." Clearly, Pater's statement echoes similar ideas expressed by German Romantics. Pater often traveled to Germany and he read German. He may well have read Richard Wagner's 1857 "Open Letter on Liszt's Symphonic Poems," one of the fundamental premises of which is "music is the highest redeeming [erlösende] art" (Wagner 1888, 191).

It also often happens in the secondary literature that someone knowledgeable about literary history puts this history in parentheses, as it were, for a moment and draws on personal impressions which are difficult to substantiate when referring to another branch of the arts. Kappanyos offers a discussion of T. S. Eliot's 1922 poem *The Waste Land* in which he makes the following contention: "There are some superb works of art which do not represent any movement, era, or other thing which could be represented by a work of art." This statement, which seems a bit vague or ambivalent, is intended to provide a foundation for the following view: "Mozart's oeuvre, for instance, belongs to universal human culture, independent, as it were, of time and place. If we listen to his music, we do not really think of Salzburg, Vienna, or the Baroque. Wagner's oeuvre is similarly superb, but it is very strongly tied to end-of-the-century Munich, and assessments of it change drastically, depending on time and place" (Kappanyos 2001, 110). It would not be difficult for a historian to propose an opposing view. Interpretations of the classical music of Vienna (including

the works of Mozart), which was a counterreaction to the Baroque, changed fundamentally in the latter half of the twentieth century, more so, indeed, than interpretations of Wagner's oeuvre, where one might well argue the principle of continuity in interpretation prevailed more palpably. Sound recordings of Wagner's works, after all, have been in almost continuous production since they were composed, whereas in the case of Mozart, efforts had to be made in the twentieth century to revive the modes of performance of the late eighteenth century, which were almost forgotten in the nineteenth century, in which attitudes towards art associated with Romanticism prevailed. Given this difference between the reception histories of the oeuvres of the two composers, the fact that the first performances of *Tristan and Isolde* (1865), *The Meistersingers of Nuremberg* (1868), and the first two parts of the tetralogy (1869 and 1870) were indeed performed in Munich seems little more than a matter of historical detail. Wagner's legacy (and reception history) is far more closely tied to the Bayreuth Festival Theatre.

The (questionable) opposition of Mozart, whose oeuvre is allegedly independent of time and place, and Wagner, whose oeuvre allegedly is not, does not really touch very much on Kappanyos' interpretation of "The Waste Land." More significant are the two citations in the poem taken from *Tristan and Isolde* (lines 31-34 and 42 of Eliot's poem). In the first act of the opera, a young sailor's voice is heard with no orchestral accompaniment:

> Frisch weht der Wind
> der heimat zu:
> Mein irisch Kind
> Wo weilest du?

In the first scene of the third act, Tristan has been wounded, and Kurwenal watches over him as he sleeps. Kurwenal asks the

shepherd to watch the horizon and to play a merry tune with his pipe if he sees sails. The shepherd's reply comes:

Öd' und leer das Meer!

According to Kappanyos, "the two citations from Wagner indicate the two extreme points in a love story, excitement full of expectation and disillusioned emptiness" (2001, 208-209). This contention seems at odds not only with the music of the opera, but also with the very plot. The reference to the "emptiness" of the sea in the third act amplifies the excruciating anticipation with which the wounded Tristan waits for Isolde. There is no mention nor implication of disillusionment. Isolde does indeed arrive, and after Tristan dies, she too parts from this world. The first citation is from a part of the Opera which precedes the very beginning of the relationship between the two title characters, and the second is expressive of an emotional intense scene. Moreover, the citations are two of many references to the works of Wagner. The mention of the Starnbergersee and drowning in the first and fourth sections of the poem seem to allude to the death of King Ludwig II of Bavaria, who was one of Wagner's most important supporters, and the lines "Weiallala leia / Wallala leialala" in the third section refer to the song of the Rhine maidens in the tetralogy. In 1912, Eliot's French friend Jean Verdenal recommended both compositions to Eliot. Concerning the Ring cycle, Eliot wrote, "every time the drama becomes clearer and the obscure parts gain in meaning." Regarding *Tristan and Isolde*, he wrote "it creates a state of delirium that almost throws one to the ground" (1988, 28).

I am not suggesting that one should draw, on the basis of these and other examples, the conclusion that there is no basis for any discussion of the relationships between sound, literature, and music. One hardly need cite evidence of the intertwining of the history of poetry and music. There are innumerable examples. As noted by conductor Nikolaus Harnoncourt, for instance, in

the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, musical compositions which belonged to the genre of the "funeral" or the "tombeau" followed the pattern of "the rhetorically properly constructed funeral oration" (1988, 132). Furthermore, "in the Baroque era, music essentially was considered a speech proclaimed," and Johann Sebastian Bach "constructed his works following the rules of rhetoric – the only music for him was the 'spoken address'" (2002, 114, 63). Jean-Baptiste Dubos, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Johann Gottfried Herder contended that music derived from language. Composer Jean-Philippe Rameau, in contrast, like the Pythagoreanists, contended that music was a matter of proportions, though it is perhaps worth noting that, alongside the dances of his suites, several of his compositions for harpsicord contain works which could be considered program music after a fashion, for instance "Les soupirs," "L'Indifférente," "La poule," and "Les sauvages." In the following century, the opposition between program music and so-called absolute music was raised again. One view put the alleged affinities shared by the two branches of the arts in the foreground, while the other noted the alleged distance between them. Music critic and aesthete Eduard Hanslick contended that the texts of songs were interchangeable, a view which was shared in the mid-twentieth century by Susanne K. Langer, who went so far as to claim that, "When a composer puts a poem to music, he annihilates the poem and makes a song" (Langer 1953, 153). In support of this view, one could note that Franz Schubert's song cycle *Winterreise*, the arguably mediocre nature of the texts notwithstanding, is still as much a masterpiece as Schubert's "Erlkönig" or "Über allen Gipfeln," which use the texts of poems by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

The Romantics replaced the principle of "ut pictura poesis" with "ut musica poesis," drawing the latter from the notion according to which, in the words of Kierkegaard, "for just as the voice is the disclosure of inwardness incommensurable with the exterior, so the ear is the instrument that apprehends this inwardness,

hearing the sense by which it is appropriated" (Kierkegaard 1978, 3). Many significant works of literature were arguably composed with this notion in mind, including for instance Johann Karl Philipp Moritz's *Andreas Hartknopf* (1786), Jean Paul's prose narrative *Hesperus* (1795), works by Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder (who grew up, as it were, on the presentations of the great scholar of music Johann Nikolaus Forkel), and of course the stories of E. T. A. Hoffmann and Hungarian poet Dániel Berzsenyi's "Poétai harmonisztika" ("Poetic Harmonistics"), which, as Berzsenyi himself noted, was inspired by Jean Paul. As Dahlhaus wrote, "in a somewhat paradoxical manner, the discovery that music – instrumental music with neither object nor concept – was a kind of language beyond language found expression in language: in poetry" (Dahlhaus 2004, 70).

This ostensible opposition, however, frays once one recalls that, in contrast with Rameau and Rousseau, the most prominent representatives of German Romanticism, did not think in terms of mutually exclusive concepts. In 1798, Friedrich Schlegel made the following contention: "There are some who think it odd or even laughable when musicians speak about the thoughts which can be found in their works, and one often notices that they have more thoughts in their music than there are about their music. However, someone who has a sense for the marvelous affinities between all art and the sciences at least will not assess this question from the flat perspective of so-called naturalness or regard music merely as the language of the senses, but rather will recognize that all purely instrumental music in a certain manner tends towards philosophy. Must not purely instrumental music create its own text? And is not its theme developed, confirmed, varied, and contrasted, just as is the object of a sequence of philosophical speculation?" (Schlegel 1980: 257-258).

Richard Wagner also linked music and philosophy. Dahlhaus notes that it was Wagner who introduced the term "absolute music," and he was also of the view that in his later years Wagner

came ever closer to realizing this ideal: "in contrast with what he wrote in 1851 in *Opera and Drama*, according to which music is the tool of expression and drama is the goal of expression, now in the spirit of Schopenhauer's premise the music expresses what is essential, and this essence is merely reflected in the linguistic and theatrical appearance" (Dahlhaus 2004, 139). As Wagner himself made clear in several of his late writings, he increasingly came to regard music as primary. Perhaps the most familiar instance is found in his 1872 essay "On the Term Music Drama," in which Wagner refers to his own compositions as "deeds of music made visible" (Wagner 1872).

At fifteen years of age, Wilhelm Furtwängler, who would later rise to fame as a composer and one of the world's most renowned conductors, thought that Wagner subordinated his music to the drama, and in a letter to Bertel von Hildebrand, who was an impassioned believer in Wagner's concept of absolute music, he wrote that "Wagner was never a real artist" (Furtwängler 1964, 3). He gradually realized, however, that the development of Wagner's oeuvre ran parallel with the move beyond the opposition between program music and what Wagner referred to as absolute music. In 1936, Furtwängler expressed his appreciation for Wagner in the following words: "in my early youth, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven were my guiding stars. I came to learn Wagner later, and the better I knew him as a musician the more I admired and loved him (Furtwängler 1996, 133). Two years later, Furtwängler wrote in a similar vein: "Wagner was and will remain a unique composer, he had no real precursor or successor. His music is not the music of the pure musician, and his poetry is not the poetry of the pure artist of the word (Furtwängler 1955, 100-101). Wagner can be heard in recordings of performances conducted by Furtwängler as a composer who, in his works, approached absolute music. Karl Straube, a superb organist who performed in the 1937 Bayreuth productions of the *Ring*, felt that the performances of Wagner's

operas under Furtwängler's baton did indeed approach absolute music. In one of his letters, he wrote that "[Furtwängler] conducts these great works by Wagner as if they were symphonies" (Mutz 1997, 62). This interpretation harmonizes well with a remark made by Wagner himself in 1881, according to which, after *Parsifal*, he only wanted to write "one-movement symphonies," i.e. music without text (Wagner 1983, 338).

2. National Tradition and Universal Music

Does the art of Wagner embody innovation or a gesture towards the preservation of values? Furtwängler believed that Wagner's legacy raised questions concerning the relationship between local and international values, for instance in *Meistersingers* and *Tristan*. In the twenty-first century, this question seems increasingly important, since unification (or globalization) is increasingly a factor in every more spheres, and it leaves its mark not simply in economic life but also in the natural sciences. It is increasingly a self-evidence cliché to contend that "the so-called hard sciences, like physics, chemistry, and molecular biology, have become one-hundred percent globalized. In other words, there is no need to discover in Budapest what has already been discovered in Berkeley or Stockholm" (Náray-Szabó 2007, 1458). As literary historian Miller noted, "It does not matter where I am so long as I have a computer connected to the Internet" (Miller 1999, 17). This is a relevant statement in part because it comes from a scholar who began his career as a representative of what at the time was called criticism of consciousness, which was phenomenological in its inclinations, later became a prominent representative of deconstruction, and then finally was an advocate of cultural studies. It would be too soon, at the moment, to try to determine exactly what influences the changes ushered in by the internet will have for the arts and the branches of the sciences which deal with the arts.

Should one speak of national and/or European art? The question, raised in this form, may seem a bit dated, or at least suggests an approach centered around the preservation of value. Instead of phrasing the opposition in terms of "and/or," one could use "neither/nor." At the beginning of the twenty-first century, after all, in the era of so-called post-colonialism, when a visitor to some major public art collections is likely to find masks from Africa and Oceania, it seems precarious to continue to insist on a Eurocentric stance. Furthermore, in the case of Hungarian art and literature, mention of national tradition has been customarily made primarily in historical moments of crisis. After the Versailles Peace Treaties in the wake of the First World War (and more narrowly the Treaty of Trianon, which defined the new borders of the independent state of Hungary), Dezső Kosztolányi contributed an article to a volume of essays entitled *Vérző Magyarország* (*Hungary Bleeding*) in which he insisted on the cultural unity of the Carpathian Basin, i.e. the geographical region which had formed the territory of the medieval Kingdom of Hungary and the borders of Hungary within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy between 1867 and 1918. In 1939, the threat of National Socialism prompted prominent music historian and pedagogue Tibor Gerevich and composer Zoltán Kodály to draw a sharp distinction between Hungarian music and the fine arts and German music and fine arts. There is hardly any consensus that the changes which are taking place in the world around us today threaten national cultures. In 2005, a collection of essays was published entitled *Mi a magyar*, which might be translated as "what does it mean to be a Hungarian" or "what makes one Hungarian?" Originally, the title was going to be "Mi a magyar ma," ("what does it mean to be a Hungarian today") but the publisher decided to omit the last word, "ma" ("today"). When the collection was published, one of my colleagues (a literary historian) commented that in his assessment, the question was not entirely relevant anymore. One could contend, however, that the study of the relationship between local and international

cultural values is relevant at a time when globalization (or homogeneity) is increasingly prevalent in a growing number of spheres.

The text which accompanies Paul Cézanne's painting *Card Players* (1890-92) in the Courtauld Institute in London has an interesting citation from Cézanne. "More than anything else," the painter wrote, "I love the appearance of people who have grown old without being severed from their old customs." When Martin Heidegger was invited to Berlin to teach at the university in 1933, he wrote a text to which he gave the title "Composing Landscapes: Why Do We Remain in the Countryside?" In the text, he refers to the voices of the landscape: "I hear what the mountains and the forests and the peasant farmsteads are saying" (Heidegger 1983, 12). Heidegger gave this as his explanation for why he was rejecting the offer in Berlin. Both Cézanne's and Heidegger's statements stand in stark contrast with the process of cultural unification, which is clearly closely tied to the increasingly customary nature of the almost continuous change of place. Both the painter and the philosopher suggest that only local cultures can be said to have memories.

Heinrich Wölfflin, the author of works like *Renaissance and Baroque* (1888), Fundamental *Terms of Art History* (1915), *Italy and the German Sense of Form* (1931), and other major works, once attempted to interpret the art of Europe on the basis of an opposition between northern Europe and southern Europe. Many scholars were critical of his assessment of the style of the prominent representatives of German *Geistesgeschichte*, but his notion of a significant contrast between northern and southern Europe came up again in the latter half of the twentieth century, for instance in the work *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition* (1975).

In general, I would throw into question the notion that emphasis on local values is little more than part of the legacy of Romanticism and, more narrowly, German Romanticism, which embraced the value of "couleur locale." Virginia Woolf saw a "tremendous breach of tradition" between the Greeks of Antiquity