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Musical Metaphors as Intermedial References

Abstract: Musical metaphors in literature are more than just ornamental language devices. They convey the aesthetic values, cultural associations, and emotional resonance of music, investing the narrative with new layers of meaning. This study explores the unique attributes of musical metaphors, demonstrating how they can challenge the linearity of text, infuse abstract notions with sensory qualities, create order or disorder, and evoke complex emotions. Through a close analysis of examples from literature, including Proust, Salinger, Kundera, and Morrison, among others, this research illustrates the multifaceted richness of musical metaphors and their role in shaping our understanding of literary works and intermediality. By examining how musical metaphors interact with the textual context, we can uncover the ways in which they influence the reader's experience, evoke emotions, and convey cultural significance. This study sheds new light on the significance of musical metaphors in literature, revealing their capacity to transform, subvert, and enrich the narrative.

Keywords: Music, metaphor, intermedial reference, musical ekphrasis, intertextuality

There are abundant references to music in literature, where they play various functions – plot detail, structural element, characterization, and cultural marker. References to music in fiction can be defined as musical *ekphrasis*, as intertext, or as intermedial reference;[1] each of these terms emphasizes different qualities of the musical reference. As musical *ekphrasis*, music brings its aesthetic values to the text – rhythm, (implied) sound, emotion, and beauty: "Attention is paid to the musical subject matter or point of the text or to the rhythm and tunefulness of its delivery."[2] Intertext highlights the mutual influence of text and music. The reading experience is influenced by the ideas conveyed by the music and at the same time may change the way that music is understood. According to Rajewsky, intermedial reference combines the two, though she defines intertextuality in a relatively narrow manner: the text (what Rajewsky calls the "given media-product") "*thematizes, evokes, or imitates* elements or structures of another, conventionally distinct medi-

1 Goehr 2010, Kristeva 1986, and Rajewsky 2005, respectively.

2 Goehr 2010, 389.

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um through the use of its own media-specific means."[3] Intermedial reference thus "opens up additional layers of meaning which are produced specifically by this referencing."[4]

The inherent difficulty of representing music in words, including dependence on readers' prior knowledge and the need to avoid professional vocabulary (think of Kretzschmar's lectures in Mann's *Doctor Faustus*), often lead writers to employ metaphors to describe music. In this way even fictional music (such as Leverkühn's *Lamentation*) can be brought to (some) life in the story.

But what if no music is "heard" in the fictional world and the music belongs exclusively to the textual stratum of the literary work, as a metaphor? In other words: if *ekphrasis* requires "one work to re-present another in some significant way,"[5] then is it significant enough for music to serve as the source (vehicle) of a metaphor?

For example, here is Virginia Woolf in *To the Lighthouse:*

> Every throb of this pulse seemed, as he walked away, to enclose her and her husband, and to give to each that solace which *two different notes, one high, one low, struck together*, seem to give each other as they combine.[6]

No music is played in the quote. Is there intermediality? We will return to this passage later.

The scholarship distinguishes diegetic music (music heard or played by a character, etc.) from non-diegetic music, as when a story is structured like a sonata, a rondo, or a fugue.[7] In most of these studies, however, the critic drew attention to the music-like form because music was already present in the narrative diegetically.[8] We have not found any previous treatment of music as the vehicle of a metaphor.

We argue that musical metaphors convey connotations and evoke ideas and aesthetic values derived from the music they refer to, even though no music is "heard" in the portrayed world. This observation is supported by Rajewsky's notion that intermedial references stress the "as-if" character of literary texts, the

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3 Rajewsky 2005, 53, emphasis ours.

4 Rajewsky 2005, 53.

5 Goehr 2010, 400.

6 Woolf 1989, 39, emphasis ours.

7 The concept came originally from film studies, where "non-diegetic" relates to musical accompaniment.

8 Examples are numerous. Mann's *Tonio Kröger* is considered to have the structure of a sonata, and Hildesheimer's *Tynset* of a rondo. See Bacilius 1981; Haas Stanley 1981.

"illusion-forming quality inherent in them."[9] The literary text "cannot *use* or genuinely *reproduce* elements or structures of a different medial system through its own media-specific means; it can only *evoke* or *imitate* them. Consequently, an intermedial reference can only generate an *illusion* of another medium's specific practices."[10] It does not matter if the evocative word or phrase is a straightforward description [a violin *playing*], the tenor of a metaphor [a *weeping* violin]; or its vehicle [a baby crying *like an off-key violin*]. In all these phrases, only words are actually present; the violin is mute.

The writer's lexical choices arouse certain schemes in readers and supplement and qualify the words according to the readers' previous experiences and the textual context.[11] The choice of a specific metaphor influences how readers grasp the text; it constructs the portrayed world in a certain manner and generates meanings that derive from the mode of representation.[12] In every metaphor there is a complex interaction between vehicle and tenor. Readers isolate specific qualities that the vehicle and tenor share, while playing down other qualities that are irrelevant in the given context. This may require some prior knowledge on their part. When using a musical metaphor, the writer must count on readers' acquaintance with certain works, composers, instruments, styles, and terminology. At the same time, if a specific work is mentioned the metaphor may also affect readers' response to the music itself; as in any intertextual reference, the influence is mutual (and see below, the discussions of Proust and Wagner and of Kundera and Bach).

Cognitive research supports our contention that metaphors can stir up feelings and memories more strongly than literal language can, and even approach the force of actual sensory perception. Although we have not located any studies of musical metaphors, fMRI research of non-auditory metaphors supports our argument. Lacey, Randall, and Sathian (2012) showed that when people read textural metaphors (e.g., "a rough day") the somatosensory cortex is activated; this proves that the comprehension of metaphors is grounded in perception. Citron and Goldberg (2014) compared taste metaphors (e.g., "look sweetly") with literal language ("look kindly") and found that "metaphorical sentences are more emotionally engaging than their literal counterparts" (the title of their paper). Pomp et al. (2018) showed similar results for olfactory metaphors.

9 Rajewsky 2005, 54.

10 Rajewsky 2005, 55 (emphasis in original). Rajewsky distinguishes intermedial reference from intertext.

11 See Semino 1997, 124, 161.

12 See Ingarden 1973, 255–275; Lakoff/Johnson 1980; Tzur, 1987; Semino, 1997.

Musical metaphors can change the meaning of what is heard in the story. When Proust's Saint-Loup describes air-raid sirens as the *Ride of the Valkyries*, he reveals his political and aesthetic views:

> "And then the sirens, could they have been more Wagnerian, and what could be more appropriate as a salute to the arrival of the Germans? – it might have been the national anthem, with the Crown Prince and the Princesses in the imperial box, the *Wacht am Rhein*; one had to ask oneself whether they were indeed pilots and not Valkyries who were sailing upwards." He [Saint-Loup] seemed to be delighted with this comparison of the pilots to Valkyries and went on to explain it on purely musical grounds: "That's it, the music of the sirens was a 'Ride of the Valkyries'! There's no doubt about it, the Germans have to arrive before you can hear Wagner in Paris."[13]

A world war looms over Europe; those German airplanes are bombing Paris. But Saint-Loup welcomes them out of admiration for the Germans and for Wagner in particular. The musical metaphor invests the deliberately irritating sound of sirens with sublime artistic value and neutralizes its meaning. The pro-German Saint-Loup deletes the gap between the enemy's bombers and the sirens meant to protect him against them by turning the sirens into music – indeed, perhaps the "most German" music of all. The aestheticization of the sounds of war, which turns nationalism and fascism into "beauty," exemplifies Walter Benjamin's "introduction of aesthetics into political life."[14]

At the same time, the intermedial reference influences how we hear Wagner's music. The famous "Ride" evokes the idea of flight by means of the opening tremolo that ascends and descends registers, as well as through the rapid arpeggiations; the "gallop" rhythm suggests horses, while the trumpet calls give the scene a military atmosphere. The Valkyries return from the battlefield; Saint-Loup's metaphor underlines the splendor and glory of the music by comparing it to a "national anthem." But Proust's readers remember the horrors of World War I, maybe the least glorious of all wars. They feel the irony (and may already know that Saint-Loup himself will be killed in combat). Listening to the "Ride" after reading Proust, we may well think of the way heroism leads to death rather than glory. A similar violent association was employed by Francis Ford Coppola in the unforgettable scene of the deadly air raid – this time by helicopters – in *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola 1979). Note that Saint-Loup and Marcel do not hear any music, but only the raucous sirens.

Proust's metaphor turns noise into music and remains in the realm of sound. In the following passage from *The Catcher in the Rye,* the tenor of the metaphor is

13 Proust 2000, 84. Wagner, Act III Scene 1.

14 Benjamin 1969, 241.

strictly visual. Young Holden Caulfield is about to be with a prostitute for the first time in his life:

> I read this book once. [...] He said, in this one part, that a women's body is like a violin and all, and that it takes a terrific musician to play it right. It was a very corny book – I realize that – but I couldn't get that violin stuff out of my mind anyway. In a way, that's why I sort of wanted to get some practice in, in case I ever get married. Caulfield and his Magic Violin, boy. It's corny, I realize, but it isn't *too* corny.[15]

The comparison of a female body to a violin is, indeed, banal. It is based on the shape of the instrument, not on its function.[16] Nevertheless, Holden hopes to learn "to play it right," concretizing the metaphor and bringing the instrument's function into the picture. Touching the female body is analogous to playing the instrument; but more than that, musical performance – especially on the violin – is an emblem of the virtuosity that the 16-year-old Holden dreams of achieving. The misogynistic objectification is also banal, but is appropriate to the character of the eager teenager.

What makes musical metaphors unique and worthy of interpretation?

Musical metaphors convey the qualities of music and its cultural associations. Music is, of course, sound. The comparison of sexual intercourse with a musical performance (as in *Catcher*) is a form of synesthesia, a blending of sensory modalities. But music is also an art form, and as such bears its own significance (as opposed to noise and natural occurring sounds). As we saw in the passage from Proust, the sound of sirens gained new meaning from the analogy to Wagner's music.

Unlike Proust, Salinger does not refer to a specific work. Musical metaphors may refer to different aspects of music, from specific pieces to general characteristics such as harmony or polyphony, and to basic qualities like pitch, rhythm, and volume.

Writers can call up polyphony to convey harmonic or disharmonic relation between sounds and other phenomena. "A symphony of cries" or "a choir of creaks" represents the experience of the listener surrounded by noises, but such images also bypass the linearity of language by representing the simultaneity of the event described: in other words, without turning the chord into an arpeggio... Paradoxically, the metaphor itself is part of a linear sentence. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, a chord expresses harmony:

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15 Salinger 1964, 93.

16 A similar metaphor – though visual, not verbal – is the basis for Man Ray's photograph "Le Violon d'Ingres," 1924.

> He drew forth a phrase from his treasure and spoke it softly to himself:
> – A day of dappled seaborne clouds.
> The phrase and the day and the scene harmonized in a chord.[17]

No music is heard here or even hinted at. The chord represents a perfect harmony, even though – as Joyce knew very well – musical chords may be dissonant. Nevertheless, they always combine multiple notes into a single experience.

Music is an organized phenomenon. It has rules, divisions, meter, etc. A musical metaphor may invest its tenor with new ways of organization, new relations between things. When Woolf compares a married couple to "two different notes, one high, one low, struck together" she applies the musical relation to husband and wife. The "solace" this idea brings to Mrs. Ramsey comes from the implied harmony between the two tones in a chord, their well-coordinated function.

In sharp contrast, in Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* music stands for strict dictatorship:

> People have always aspired to an idyll, a garden where nightingales sing, a realm of harmony where the world does not rise up as a stranger against man nor man against other men, where the world and all its people are molded from a single stock, [...] where every man is a note in a magnificent Bach fugue and anyone who refuses his note is a mere black dot, useless and meaningless, easily caught and squashed between the fingers like an insect.[18]
>
> This [1968] is the period commonly referred to as the Prague Spring: the men guarding the idyll had to go around removing microphones from private dwellings, the borders were opened, and notes began abandoning the score of Bach's grand fugue and singing their own lines. The spirit was unbelievable. A real carnival!"[19]

Kundera relates to a concrete work – Bach's "grand fugue" – probably the fugue in G minor, BWV 542 (authors often choose well-known works that readers may recognize). This fugue may have various connotations, most of them positive, but here it represents imposed order and forced harmony. How can a fugue stand for contradictory ideas? The answer lies in the texture of a fugue. In a fugue, all the voices use the same thematic material consecutively; that is why fugue texture is called "imitative." The different voices are considered to be independent and equal, in contrast to the homophonic hierarchy that privileges the upper voice over the lower accompaniment. Thus, a fugue can represent democracy. But imitation and repetition may also express uniformity. Kundera draws on the fact that all the voices in a fugue repeat each other in a strictly controlled sequence

17 Joyce 1996, 189.
18 Kundera 1980, 8.
19 Kundera 1980, 14.

to make the fugue represent dictatorship and forced order.[20] He chose "Bach's grand fugue" to emphasize the power of the oppressive political regime. During the Prague Spring the forced harmony was ruptured and the many different tunes represented freedom. So, the same music can represent different and even contrasting ideas, but the textual context tells readers which aspects of the metaphor are dominant and how they should supplement the scheme "fugue."

Music can arouse many contrasting emotions, restraint and enthusiasm, order and chaos. Another duality is the tension between abstraction and concreteness. Music is an abstract art form because it is intangible and usually lacks semantic content. On the other hand, music is a physical, sensory phenomenon, whereas words are abstract signifiers. Due to this duality music can sometimes concretize an abstract idea, as for Kundera; in other contexts, it can spiritualize a concrete subject, such as food. Here is an example from *Adam Resurrected* by Israeli writer Yoram Kaniuk: "Pierre Lotti's mousse is inspired poetry. Like [a] solemn mass, or Monteverdi."[21] Playing on the assonance of "mousse" and "mass," Kaniuk grants the chef a sublime artistry.

Music usually lacks semantic content, but as an art form it can communicate. Karel Čapek may have stretched that capacity too far. A Czech orchestra conductor visiting Liverpool overhears a couple in conversation. He doesn't know English, but he understands what he hears via a musical interpretation:

> Believe me, this was not an amorous conversation, a musician can recognize that. A lover's attempts at persuasion have quite a different cadence and don't sound so tense – a conversation between lovers is a deep cello, but this was a high-pitched double bass, played in presto rubato, in a single key, as if the man were repeating the same phrase over and over again. I began to feel rather alarmed: whatever the man was proposing was something evil. […] I must tell you that I don't believe in hunches, but I do believe in music. When I listened to those two voices that night, I knew with absolute certainty that the bass was persuading the clarinet to take part in some appalling act. […] I had heard it, and hearing words is better than understanding them. I knew that preparations had been made for a crime of some sort, and I knew what sort of crime it was. I could tell by the horror those two voices conveyed: it was in the timbre of those voices, in the cadence, the tempo, the intervals, the rests – you see, music is precise, more precise than speech.[22]

The story ends with a newspaper headline that reads "murder." But more than the precision of music as language, the story attests to a musical metaphor's ability to convey two parallel layers of the scene: the sound of the speaking voices, stripped

20 On the multiple meanings of the fugue form, see Greenberg 2018.

21 Kaniuk 1971, 94.

22 Čapek 1994, 277–78.

of the original semantic content, and the meaning attached to them by the listener. This duality is, of course, a basic quality of any metaphor, which is constructed of two components, vehicle and tenor.

The impact of the musical metaphor is influenced by both the vehicle and the tenor – by the music and what it represents. Musical metaphors may be used to map non-musical sounds, like Proust's sirens; non-auditory objects, like Kaniuk's mousse and Salinger's female body; or abstract notions such as dictatorship. Another example of non-musical sounds can be found in Tony Morrison's *Home.* A Korean War veteran suffering from post-trauma recalls the sounds of the battlefield:

> The begging, the howling for help he could not hear clearly until an F-51 dropped its load on the enemies' nest. In the post-blast silence the pleas wafted like the sound of a cheap cello coming from a chute of cattle smelling their blood-soaked future.[23]

Comparing the cries of injured soldiers to the lowing of cattle – equating the battlefield with a slaughterhouse – is a dead metaphor. Morrison revitalizes it by comparing the howls – human and animal – to "the sound of a cheap cello." This second metaphoric layer is not necessary to illustrate the sound, but it conveys additional meanings. Music is manmade, and so is war and the suffering it causes; but the comparison is ironic, because there is no beauty or transcendent feelings in the sound of the injured soldiers' cries. And the cello is "cheap," implying the worthlessness of human lives on the battlefield.

Morrison does not mention a specific work. In fact, authors do not always need a masterpiece: sometimes only an instrument or single chord is required. In Israeli writer Nathan Shaham's *The Rosendorf Quartet*, the German-Jewish violinist Kurt Rosendorf is on a ship that is bringing him from Germany to Palestine in 1936.[24]

> The sky is clear, golden blue. Only the sea is somber, in Prussian blue: dark, as if last night's storm is still seething in its depths. Foamless waves lap against the sides of the ship. The engine plays a chord in E-flat major. It goes well with the color blue, which is the color of yearning for the absolute. The Masonic key of friendship.[25]

The sound of an engine is not music but noise. Even if Rosendorf the violinist filtered it in his musical mind and singled out three notes – E-flat, G, and B-flat – the sounds are accidental, a random by-product of the engine's operation. The

23 Morrison 2012, 98.

24 The Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra (then the Palestine Orchestra) was founded in 1936 and recruited Jewish musicians dismissed from German orchestras under Nazism.

25 Shaham 1991.

metaphor turns that noise into music and endows it with meaning. Furthermore, the key – E-flat major – is not random. As the narrator (or maybe Rosendorf's inner monologue) tells us, it is "the Masonic key of friendship." E-flat major has three flats, which look like 3 *b*'s, and that makes it important for Freemasonry.[26] Remember that the ship is taking the Jewish Rosendorf away from Nazi Germany (where Freemasons were also persecuted). By means of the metaphor, a mechanical noise – a sensory quality – turns into meaningful music, which, thanks to the careful choice of vehicle, in turn carries abstract ideas.

The special attributes of music imbue musical metaphors with significance. They may be used to challenge the linearity of the text, through the polyphony inherent to many kinds of music; they can infuse abstract notions with sensory qualities; create order or disorder; and much more. This essay has illustrated the multidimensional richness of musical metaphors and has shown that their analysis can enhance our understanding of both literary works and intermediality.

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26 The number 3 and the letter B are Masonic symbols. B represents the Hebrew letter *Beth* that stands for "house" [*baith*].

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