Some Reflections on Literary Genres and Music
[1999]

This paper considers how the investigation of instrumental music may benefit from applying findings of literary genre theory within the framework of a traditional comparatist and structuralist methodology. The focus is on a possible 'narrative' quality of instrumental music, an issue which is discussed from the viewpoint, first, of 'mediacy of presentation'/'diegesis' and 'voice' and, then, of 'story'/'organized successions' and 'discourse emphasis'. Results show that only marginal forms of instrumental music can meaningfully be called 'narrative' in an established literary and non-metaphorical sense, and that music shares its presentational mode far more directly with the lyric genre of literature. The paper concludes by suggesting possible links between theoretical and historical/cultural considerations and makes the observation, to be pursued in further research, that in the 19th century, in all genres and media discussed, some controlling subject or 'authentic personality' plays a dominant role, while in the 20th century the tendency is towards more autonomous, depersonalized forms of discourse and presentational modes.

In view of Steven Scher’s well-known distinction between major areas of interest in Word and Music Studies (cf. 1984: 14) my reflections belong to the area of ‘literature in music’: I will try to apply some of the findings of literary theory and criticism to music. Since it is the objective of my considerations to test the applicability of some of the concepts of literary genre theory that have been developed in a structuralist context to music, my method is that of finding parallels between the two fields of observation by comparative analysis, i.e., ‘Comparative Arts’ in the traditional sense. However, I hope my reflections will also show that a theoretical discussion of literary genres – and I will confine myself here to the lyric and the narrative modes – may open up a view on more general aesthetic issues and their manifestations in the historical process, and thus, at the same time, may transcend the purely ‘literary’ perspective and envisage a cultural context. My discussion of possible ‘lyric’ and ‘narrative’ qualities of music – the implication being instrumental music – aims primarily at investigating, on a theoretical, comparative basis, the adequacy or inadequacy of the use of some basic literary terms in music criticism and, in addition, at increasing our awareness of the cultural relevance of such an investigation.
To start off, there seems to be a general agreement among critics that instrumental music is not basically of a narrative nature. If we take as one of the defining qualities of narrative – following Franz K. Stanzel’s widely accepted *Theory of Narrative* – the mediacy of presentation, it will be little questioned that instrumental music is not obviously characterized by such a diegetic disposition. As John Neubauer has phrased it, “instrumental music cannot alternate between showing and telling, cannot speak in first or third person, distinguish between external and internal narrators, speak in indirect and free indirect discourse, distinguish between public and private voices, narrate or focalize on different levels” (1997: 118f.). All this is undoubtedly true; however, it should be added that, although instrumental music cannot ‘alternate between showing and telling’, it can ‘show’ very well. In fact, it generally performs a pure act of ‘showing’. And although instrumental music cannot ‘speak in first or third person’, it emphatically does speak in the first person. (The best-known statement confirming this position was made by W. H. Auden in his opening address at the 1968 Salzburg Festival, where he compared the different arts in grammatical terms and thus characterized music: “All musical statements [...] are intransitive, in the First Person, singular or plural, and in the Present Indicative.” 1968: 27)

What I am implying is that instrumental music, although it does not have access to the great variety of forms of presentation which narrative has, is generally characterized by one form of presentation which we also find in narrative and, according to Stanzel, gives ‘the illusion of immediacy’, when the narrative agency withholds from the scene and is no longer conspicuous on the surface of the discourse. But the submerged narrative instance remains active on the level of “the process of production (the genetic deep structure)” (1979/1984: 147) as a shaping agency or force. This form of presentation is not a traditional narrative practice but is frequently used in modernist fiction, mostly in the form of the interior monologue; it finds its purest expression in what has been labeled the ‘camera-eye technique’ which is applied, e.g., in the *nouveau roman*

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1 See Stanzel 1979/1984, chapter 1: “Mediacy of presentation as the generic characteristic of narration”.

2 “Diégésis is pure narrative [...] in contrast to the mimesis of dramatic representation” (Genette 1983/1988: 18).

3 “In this case the mediacy of presentation is characteristically obscured by the reader’s illusion that he is witnessing the action directly” (Stanzel 1979/1984: 146f.).