What Can Music Do to a Poem?  
New Intermedial Perspectives of Literary Studies  
[2008]

In the light of the central concern of this conference, i.e., to identify priorities of research in present-day English Studies, I would like to draw attention to developments which can be observed in many quarters and which are characterized by an intentional overstepping the boundaries of what we are inclined to call ‘literature’. Intermedia Studies – which I am going to talk about – address issues which arise when at least two communicative media interact, or when more than one communicative medium contributes to the object under inspection. In the history of studying such objects it has traditionally been literature which was considered the basic medium from whose vantage point the other media were seen and to which other media were usually compared. Thus, Comparative Literature Studies is the forerunner of Intermedia Studies. But for various reasons – including the methodological limitations connected with the comparative method, or the decline of ‘literature’ as the unquestioned ‘master art’ – the focus has shifted, and now literature has to compete with other, very powerful media for leadership in the concert of the arts, and this is where Intermedia Studies find their place. The new developments are a true challenge to Literary Studies, and – to mention one initiative – the University of Graz, Austria, has recently set up a Faculty Program, within the university’s Development Plan, which is called “Intermediality Program” and reflects these new trends both in teaching and research.

The present paper sets out to throw some light on the mentioned shift and change of emphasis by looking at one particular area of intermedia research, namely the interaction of literature and music in the form of text and music relationships in songs. Song criticism, of course, has a venerable tradition: ever since the beginning of European art song in the wake of Humanist ideas during the Renaissance period, song has been a familiar subject of reflection, as it has been a particularly lively field of creative activity. From the very beginning in the late 16th century, critics have been concerned with the relation-
ship which the music of a song can have to the words of the underlying poem, in particular, in which way the music reflects textual meaning (see Bernhart 1985). This interest in the iconic quality of music was already the concern of the earliest composers of art songs, and it has as an obvious premise that, in the combination of words and music, the words dominate: they are there first, to be illustrated by the music. In such compositions music tries to ‘redouble’ what the words are saying, and there are various, more or less sophisticated aspects of the text that in this way can be mirrored by the music. The simplest form is ‘word painting’, or ‘word illustration’, which, e.g., makes the melody go up when the text talks about the sun rising, or go down when it talks about hell, etc. By its very nature, music lends itself best for illustrating motions and sounds (onomatopoeia). Also, as a simple mimetic method, the ‘tone’ or ‘mood’ of the music can reflect the ‘tone’ or ‘general affect’ of the text (merriness, sadness, martial attitudes, religious attitudes, etc.). On a more sophisticated level, the music may attempt to use its expressive means to reflect more differentiated and subtle emotional states (such as anger, dejection, exuberance, sublimity, and many others). Such practices, referring to internal, emotional states, are forms of ‘word expression’ (in contrast to mere ‘word illustration’ of external, perceptual conditions) and represent cases of what is called ‘expressive mimesis’. The intention of expressive mimesis can lead to careful psychological readings of texts through music and are usually triggered by ‘pathogeneous texts’, i.e., texts which are substantially concerned with emotional, ‘passionate’ states. (By contrast, what can be called ‘logogeneous texts’, which primarily concentrate on thoughts, ideas and reflections, lend themselves far less readily to expressive mimesis and produce less intimate links of words and music in songs.) A further step up on the interpretive ladder, the music can go beyond the mere ‘redoubling’ of what the text is saying and can become an independent agent of reflection; it is usually a more elaborate instrumental accompaniment of the singing voice (most commonly the piano) that is able to perform this function of generating additional meaning in the song. (This is a practice which Robert Schumann is generally accredited with having introduced, e.g., when in his famous song “Die beiden Grenadiere” the piano postlude makes a deeply ironical comment on what has been said.) It was only at a very late stage in the development of European art song that the music became a full exegetic factor and was able to perform sophisticated individual acts of signification. The term ‘exegetic’ implies that here the music is still closely concerned with what the text says.