Rosetta Tones: The Score as Hieroglyph

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The first half of the nineteenth century produced a significant handful of scores based on the same visual model understood to govern Egyptian hieroglyphics both before and after the deciphering of the Rosetta Stone in 1825. The sources of this practice include the abandonment of figured bass, the growing commerce in printed scores, and the rise of the ‘work’ as the musical object par excellence. Equally influential was the conjectural history linking the rise of civilization with the development of writing systems. This project involved an ideologically charged polarization of glyphic and alphabetical writing. Hieroglyphs were understood as a middle term between nature and spirit, the sensuous and the conceptual, the pictorial and the phonetic. The same understanding sometimes extended to scores, which, like hieroglyphs, could be deciphered only by closing the necessary gap between symbol and meaning. With music this deciphering necessarily took the form of a passage from silence to sound. Making this passage required the action not only of a thinking subject but of an embodied one, a subject who interprets the symbol by animating it acoustically – giving life, as Liszt remarked, to the “still, lifeless notes” on the page.

Musical scores are fictitious pictographs. They look, that is, like arrays of marks – pictograms – that signify by resemblance, marks that picture what they mean. Scores look the way Egyptian hieroglyphics must have looked before the translation of the Rosetta stone. They look the way hieroglyphics still do look to most of us, who can’t read the inscriptions that the man who deciphered them, Jean-François Champollion, called “a complex system, a writing simultaneously figurative, symbolic, and phonetic, in the same text, the same phrase, I would almost say in the same word” (1828: I/375). Scores can look this way even to musicians, not just to those who don’t read music. The small grace notes, the graceful slurs, the carefully angled beams – all suggest the pictorial representation of sound, and at the same time a representation of the sound’s expressive value; the pictograph incorporates an ideograph. But of course scores are actually not like this at all, are they? Scores are code. If we continue the comparison to linguistic writing systems, we read scores phonetically, not symbolically. Don’t we?

Well, yes. But also no.
Pictograms are signs full of absence, pictures only to a minimal degree. They depend on a wide gap, an ellipsis, between the shape of the signifier and the content of the signified. Just think of the little figures that tell you what restroom to go to in any airport, and you'll get the point immediately. Pictograms are reduced symbols; pictographic representation is defective in principle. The opposite was generally supposed to be true of alphabetic writing until Saussure came along with the idea that there are no positive terms in language. Prior to that, phonetic signification by letters was understood to be complete, and in practice, Saussure or not, it is still treated as if that were so. Most linguists, moreover, still think that pictograms alone cannot make up a complete writing system. Writing must refer to language, not to what language signifies.

In this respect scores are indeed more like pictographic than like alphabetic writing. Of course scores obviously do refer to musical sounds. The sounds stand to scores as speech stands to writing. But scores are always defective in their representation of music. And precisely that defectiveness may encourage the use of pictographic supplements, as much as it does of verbal supplements such as *espressivo* or *appassionato* or *nicht schleppend*! As Schenker observed in his edition of Beethoven's piano sonatas, clues to both structure and performance may lie in the visual display of musical information (cf. 1923/1975: I/xif.). So it is worth looking into the possibilities that scores, at least some of them, have a genuine resemblance to pictographs – and, historically speaking, to those other fictitious pictographs that have had the strongest hold on the European imagination since the eighteenth century: Egyptian hieroglyphs.

The first half of the nineteenth century produced a significant handful of scores with a strong hieroglyphic element. Unlike Baroque eye-music, these hieroglyphic passages primarily depict the music they help to notate, not what music depicts. Or rather, as I suggested at the outset, such passages incorporate a depiction of the music's expressive value into a depiction of its sound. Unlike ordinary tone painting, which is a form of mimetic reference, musical pictographs refer not to scenes or objects but to the process of referring to such things. In other words, the pictographs or hieroglyphs are typically as much or more about the problem and process of mediation than they are about the things mediated. These musical hieroglyphs compose what Walter Benjamin called a “perfecting mimesis”: their visual form is “an imitation whose most hidden core is an intimation”1 of how things should sound (qtd. Hansen 2012: 190). Their inscription in a score expands the ever-present gap between symbol

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1 “[…] ein Nachmachen, dessen verborgenstes Innere ein Vormachen ist”; translation modified.