Intermediality Revisited

Reflections on Word and Music Relations
in the Context of a General Typology of Intermediality

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Dedicated to Steven Paul Scher
on the occasion of his sixty-fifth birthday

The essay continues Steven Paul Scher’s well-known and influential typological reflections on the field of word and music relations, which he has devised since the late 1960s, and tries to rechart this field in order to accommodate developments which have since occurred: the rise of intermedia studies in general and, in particular, of musico-literary perspectives that do not merely focus on ‘intracompositional’ phenomena, which can be observed exclusively within given works, but also ‘extracompositional’ relations, which occur between works transmitted in different media. Word and music relations are here seen as part of the wider field of intermediality, of which a general typology is proposed. It is a partial reconceptualization of a previous typology in the light of ongoing research. Former discussions of intermedia or interart relations have tended to focus on what I call ‘intracompositional intermediality’ or ‘intermediality in the narrow sense’ and on its subforms: ‘plurimediality’, and ‘intermedial reference’ through ‘thematization’ and ‘imitation’ of other media. As distinct from this approach, my typological revisiting of intermediality starts from a broader sense of the term, which also includes ‘extracompositional’ intermediality and its subforms ‘transmediality’ and ‘intermedial transposition’. All forms discussed are shown to be of relevance for word and music studies. The essay concludes with some perspectives of research that go beyond typological concerns.

1. Introduction: the multiplicity of the objects of word and music studies

and of intermedial relations in general as a typological challenge

Four years after the first conference of the International Association for Word and Music Studies (WMA) held at Graz, Austria, the third conference, held at Sydney, still dedicated one of its two sections to the topic: “Word and Music Studies: Defining the Field”. The repeated choice of this topic is not due to a lack of imagination on the part of the conference organizers but points to the fact that the field of word and music
studies still requires general reflections about its delimitation. This does not so much apply to its outer limits, which are relatively easy to define: all phenomena that involve music in whatever form as well as words, verbal texts or literature are legitimate objects of word and music studies. What is less easy to describe and consequently requires our attention is the internal structure of this wide field. In fact, the past few decades, including the as yet short history of the WMA, have revealed an extraordinary multiplicity of research objects that are all affiliated in different ways to word and music studies.

Traditionally, musico-literary research was carried out by literary critics and consequently had a strong literary bias. The most common type of this early research was dedicated to collecting evidence of references to, or occurrences of, music in individual literary works, and to elucidating their uses and functions. The history of musico-literary ‘interart studies’ proper started with Calvin S. Brown’s seminal comparative study on Music and Literature, which focussed on structural analogies between the two arts. In the wake of Brown, to whom the second volume of Word and Music Studies was dedicated (cf. Cupers/Weisstein), a growing number of researchers have cultivated our field. One of the most outstanding scholars among these is Steven Paul Scher, whom it was a pleasure to honour at the Sydney conference. Scher’s first contributions to the field of word and music studies, his research on verbal music (cf. Verbal Music and “Notes Toward a Theory of Verbal Music”), were still literature-centred, but recently word and music studies have opened up to more general subjects, represented, for example, by John Neubauer’s explorations of the possible narrativity of music. In this process of opening up, the former quasi monopoly of literary scholars was relativized by the work of musicologists such as Lawrence Kramer, who was not only a pioneer in the area of a “Musical Narratology” but has also studied “common purposes, effects or values” of music and literature in their historical contexts, applying the method of a “tandem reading of musical and literary works” (“Dangerous Liaisons” 159; cf. also 161). Among the most recent contributions to our field by musicologists one may also mention the research of the host of the Sydney conference, Michael Halliwell, on the transposition of Patrick White’s classic Australian novel Voss into an