Metaphor and Methodology in Word and Music Studies

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As the field of word and music studies matures, its major exponents, led notably by Steven Paul Scher and Lawrence Kramer, have become increasingly concerned with defining the larger interpretive objectives of the field. This paper examines a set of considerations that, it is hoped, will help word and music critics to formulate, achieve, and explain their objectives by reconsidering the kinds of knowledge that can be generated by the comparative study of music and literature. At the heart of my inquiry is the problem of metaphoricity. Some have argued that continued progress in the field will depend on our ability to locate non-metaphorical criteria of musicality and literariness that could be applied directly to works from the other art. I argue, to the contrary, that this kind of search for absolutes is bound to fail: all attempts to apply concepts from one art to objects from the other are inherently metaphorical in nature. Rather, then, than trying to overcome metaphoricity itself, critics should focus on elucidating the underlying significance of such metaphors. This, I believe, is the primary task of word and music criticism: to decode these metaphors by first seeking out the “deep structures” (Kramer) common to both arts and then situating them in relation to their “larger cultural context” (Scher). Only then will it be possible to articulate the ultimate goals of word and music criticism, which should, I believe, involve explaining the relations between music and literature in terms of a general theory of human expression.

The title for this section of the conference proceedings – “Defining the Field: In Honor of Steven Paul Scher” – seems to me to contain an instructive paradox. On the one hand, these essays have been collected to honor Professor Scher, whose theoretical writings and professional activism have helped make it possible to conceive of word and music studies as a discrete field, complete with its own vocabulary, sub-disciplines, and scholarly society. And yet, as the first part of the title indicates, we are still here, more than thirty years after Scher first began writing about it (and more than fifty years after Calvin S. Brown made his first tentative efforts to delineate its boundaries), in the process of ‘defining the field’. So, in a sense, this volume honors one of the founding fathers of a discipline that hasn’t yet been founded. This foundational paradox, it seems to me, poses a number of problems whose implications need to be thought through carefully. Presumably, a viable field of scholarly endeavor must seek to do more than continually define and re-define itself, and so we must ask: what is it about word and music studies that makes the very definition of the field such a problem? Will there ever
be a time when we can agree upon the basic parameters of our field and focus our energies on questions of broader significance? And what are the questions of greatest significance for us? Are there any, for example, that would be of interest to scholars and readers outside of our field, those with no particular interest in ‘defining’ the relations between music and literature?

I, of course, am not the only one to worry about questions of this kind. Indeed, as the field of word and music studies matures, questions about the larger significance of our work have begun to impose themselves with increasing urgency. This, for example, is one of the principle issues addressed by Scher in his contribution to the Graz conference (cf. Scher, “Melopoetics”). Lawrence Kramer has also emphasized the importance of focusing on this issue. And just about all the recent studies I have read on the relations between music and literature at least mention the need for this kind of larger perspective. The problem is that they don’t always have a very clear idea of how to go about achieving that perspective, which, no doubt, is why Scher writes of the need to “energize” the field and to seek a place for it in “the larger enterprise of contemporary criticism and theory” (“Melopoetics” 10). With these pressing needs in mind, I would like to propose a few guidelines that I have found helpful in orienting my work and that will hopefully provide food for thought as we, as a group, try to formulate more precisely what the larger objectives of the field should be and how we can go about attaining them. I will present these guidelines first as a list, and then take them up one-by-one, in order to attempt a justification of their pertinence and usefulness.

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1 I should point out, before going any further, that these remarks are adapted from a book I have just completed on the literary use of musical models (see References). Since that study focuses primarily on literary texts, many of the examples and formulations used in this essay are skewed to the perspective of what Scher calls “music in literature”. That said, most of what I have to say should apply equally well, with the appropriate adjustments, to the interpretive problems facing those working on the presence of “literature in music”. There are, however, a number of problems specific to the study of genres like song and opera (i.e. “music and literature”, where the two are combined) that I won’t be able to address here.