On the Meaning of ‘Musical’ in Proust

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Steven Paul Scher invites us to consider more rigorously the sense that we give to the term ‘musical’ in literary criticism. It is clear that Proust’s use of the term does not allow for the establishment of any precise, provable parallels between music and literature; but perhaps this does not mean it is not rigorous. In writing of the distinguishing characteristic of music itself, Proust sets up a recognisable structure of musicality, which is not that of the music itself (it cannot be, for meaningful structure, according to Proust, is an inherently unmusical function), but rather that of the way music should be perceived. Music is not accessible to analysis; like paradise, like time, perhaps like the essence of all art, it can only be appreciated by the conscious mind as something already lost. The structure of the musical in literature is not an imitation of music; rather, it is the pattern of the way we arrive at that sense of loss. This pattern is visible, not only in Proust’s descriptions of musical works, but also in his application of the adjective ‘musical’ to certain aspects of the work of the fictional writer Bergotte. One could say, then, that Proust’s use of ‘musical’ is aesthetically but not scientifically rigorous; it offers a perspective that complements (and need not compete with) the more formal and positive approach suggested by Scher.

At the third International Conference on Word and Music Studies, Walter Bernhart spoke of Steven Paul Scher’s continuing scepticism. One of the tonic effects of that scepticism is to expose the shaky ground beneath critical commonplaces. Scher does this wonderfully in his article, “How meaningful is ‘musical’ in literary criticism?” He lays bare the powerful and, in many ways, apparently irrational compulsion which leads critics to apply the label ‘musical’ to various aspects of literature. For example, nothing is more common than to describe the general sound or the effect of a poem as ‘musical’; but, says Scher, such descriptions are based on an analogy whose inscrutable nature makes it inaccessible to rigorous critical enquiry.

The overall acoustic effect of poetry is very different from that of music. And while certain similar emotions or moods may be evoked both by a piece of literature and by a musical composition, this resemblance does not entitle us to describe the evocation contained in the literary work in musical terms. In the case of the acoustic and evocative responses, therefore, no direct connection between the two arts can be substantiated, and any association with the art of music is illusory. (56)

1 Cf. Bernhart’s essay in this volume.
Indeed, Scher establishes irrefutably that very few of the traditional critical uses of the term ‘musical’ as applied to literature have any solid, provable, scientific basis. Three series of reflections might proceed from that point: 1) a search for solid, provable, scientific ways to use the word – Scher begins this in his article; 2) an examination of the motives of academics in using the term so persistently despite its shakiness; 3) an investigation of the aesthetic validity of unprovable and unscientific uses of the term ‘musical’ in literature; in other words, of whether there are points at which the inscrutable analogy becomes theoretically interesting or important, in spite of its inscrutability. This third series of reflections seems to me closely related to Eric Prieto’s rehabilitation of the metaphorical in our methodology\(^2\). Since Marcel Proust pursued further than most the assertion of the rights, in aesthetics, of the unprovable, the unscientific, the inscrutable and the metaphorical, I thought it would be worth seeing how far \textit{À la recherche du temps perdu} can take us with the third series of reflections.

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In his article, Scher suggests that the term ‘musical’ could and should be used, in scholarly discussions of literature, in what he calls the “structural” sense (56). More specifically, there is one type of structural analogy that would indubitably justify calling a literary work ‘musical’: “literary techniques which can be proven […] to be […] analogous to certain techniques in actual music” (56). These would be what Eric Prieto calls “formal analogies” between the two arts: analogies that are, so to speak, physically present in the literary and musical texts and whose existence can therefore be proved. It is fair to say that in this sense, Proust’s literature is not musical. There is no significant evidence of such techniques, either in \textit{À la recherche du temps perdu} itself, or in what one might call the fictional literature within the work. Jean-Jacques Nattiez, in his excellent book \textit{Proust as Musician}, has gone over this ground. “Yielding to a classic temptation in comparative studies of music and literature, critics have sought to trace

\(^2\) Cf. Prieto’s essay in this volume.