

MLA 2017 ROUND TABLE

“Music in Literature: Navigating Intermedial and Interdisciplinary Boundaries”

Position paper

Trespass On

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But I shall not deal with metaphors until the difficulty of the subject compels me.

Donald Francis Tovey

Music in Literature is an unhappy member of Steven Paul Scher’s triumvirate of musicoliterary relations: “literature in music,” “literature and music,” and “music in literature” (192). Unhappy for a paradoxical reason. The field of word and music studies (WMS) once evolved from comparative literature. It was pioneered by literary scholars, such as Calvin S. Brown and Scher himself. Some people would say it is still dominated by literature experts, although the bias is said to be overcome (Wolf, “Intermediality” 14-15). Yet even amended and corrected several times by Werner Wolf (“Musicalized”⁵², *Musicalization* 70, “Intermediality” 28), Scher’s typological triad still holds its center of attraction in “literature *and* music,” with both “music in literature” and “literature in music” placed graphically aside ([Fig. 1](#)). By this I do not mean that plurimediality, as Wolf re-terms Scher’s symbiosis of “literature and music” in opera and songs (“Intermediality” 21), is the most popular subject among members of our International Association for Word and Music Studies (WMA). The association’s book series does contain a substantial proportion of papers on plurimediality, but on average, essays concerned with *Literature in Music* still approximate to their legitimate one-third of the series’ overall content ([Table 1](#)). What bothers me is the relaxing “and” conjunction—in Scher’s category (Music and Literature) less than in the field’s name (Word and Music). The “and” secures a politically correct and clashless coexistence of the arts, media, and academic backgrounds, so that literary

critics and musicologists should tolerate each other's limitations in trades not initially theirs. In exchange, we get a pass to the other side of the intermedial and interdisciplinary border, on condition that we stay within a neutral zone, agreed upon as the common territory. Trespassing thus legalized, the melocentric trajectory "towards the condition of music" (Pater 86) is taken by the literature-trained word and music scholars, of whom many, including Brown and Scher, gradually shift their interests away from Music in Literature to Literature and Music, Literature in Music, and sometimes—to stick a Peter Kivy tag (97)—"Music Alone."

This move away from the constraints of literary studies is liberating, as the crossed boundaries are tangible. Both music and literature are actually present, not just described or implied. The field with an "and" is safe, but its interest rate goes down due to what Shklovsky (11) would call *habituation*. Compared with the conjunction "and," the preposition "in"—as in "Music in Literature"—promises penetration, neither literal nor legal, perhaps even rape, but a breakthrough too. The "in" in question is more difficult than "and," especially after Wolf's comprehensive effort in theorizing and historicizing "musicalized fiction." Few systematic attempts, *ex post* Wolf, have been made to push Music in Literature forward (cf. Shockley; Petermann). It seems that Music in Literature has become considered a dead end of word and music scholarship, and that Wolf effectively reached that end in 1999, when just the *first* WMS volume was published. My shamelessly approximate statistics shows that the only case for Music in Literature to hit the mark above 50 per cent of a WMS volume's content (Fig. 2) was the volume commemorating Brown, due to the reprint of Brown's own rarities. Music in Literature feels somewhat self-repetitive: has the study of it ever taken us much further than routinely admitting that "[t]he temporal simultaneity of melodic lines which can be achieved in music

cannot be applied literally to a narrative” (Arroyas 95)? A reason for the apparent boringness of *Music in Literature* is a reputed but illusionary exhaustion of its theory from Scher to/by Wolf.

Wolf’s systematic typological and semiotic thinking—in *The Musicalization of Fiction* and beyond—is indispensable. To the study of *Music in Literature*, he has done what Genette had to narratology. Furthermore, his achievement is seminal. It is a point of departure rather than a conclusive closure. In terms of boundaries, there are some that he is explicitly reluctant to transgress. One of them is *metaphor*, the other is *response*.

Wolf’s general distrust of metaphors, such as those deployed in what he calls “imaginary content analogy” mode of intracompositional musico-literary intermediality (*Musicalization* 63), exemplifies all humanists’ secret longing for positive, objective, and scientific knowledge. Metaphors have been advocated from within WMS on several occasions—e.g. by Lawrence Kramer, Eric Prieto, and Frédérique Arroyas. Prieto, most straightforwardly, welcomes application and elaborative study of “loose metaphors” in interart scholarship, since they are important manifestations of the general metaphoricity of knowledge and language. He favors bold analogies provoking “cognitive dissonance” and “transcending both music and literature in a search for more general mediating principles” (58) outside the limits of iconic resemblances and one-to-one correspondences. Before Prieto, Arroyas theorizes how such metaphors may form the reader’s conceptual blending of music and literature, in which their “difference, the fact that the musical theme is a specific set of notes, whereas the literary theme has no predetermined material but rather is gleaned from the narrative content, simply does not enter the analogical space” (90). A decade earlier, Kramer famously suggests “tandem readings” of literary and musical works, whose “deep-structural convergences” may suffice even in lack of “manifest analogies” between them (161). For WMS as a “normal science,” such Prieto’s “guidelines” and

Kramer's "liaisons" proved to be too "dangerous," since firmer grounds were required. Hence the virtuosic dissection of Huxley from Gide on the basis of Wolf's formulated criteria for "musicalized fiction" (*Musicalization* 82), a splendid example of musico-literary boundaries formalized and established within a literary work. However, if readers and/or/as critics (cf. Arroyas 85) are not that theoretically precise in weighing musical references and structural analogies, can music be experienced from fiction? If metaphors are, as Lakoff and Johnson suggested, really what we "live by," the metaphorical transgression of boundaries in the recipient's "embodied mind" (cf. Varela, Thomson and Rosch) may be far more real than the literal presence of music being played around the corner. Kramer, who relies on Austin's performativity, Prieto, who draws from Nelson Goodman's aesthetics, and Arroyas, who cites Max Black's theory of metaphor and Turner and Fauconnier's conceptual blending, prefer those to Lakoff and Johnson's declaration of the omnipresence of metaphor. Yet they all indicate the same reader-conscious direction first hinted in Scher's rudimentary insight that the "artistically organized words" of his "verbal music" "relate to music only inasmuch as they strive to suggest the experience or effects of music" (26).

That exactly is the second subject of Wolf's skepticism, and the area he intentionally chooses not to challenge. Better than anyone, Wolf is aware that "the individual reader, his decoding capabilities, his frames of reference and particularly his knowledge and conception of music play an important role in the reception of musicalized texts." Yet in 1999, he is reluctant to account for "these readerly factors," since they "are to a large extent subjective," and "no empirical research has been done so far in the field of musical associations in reader response" (*Musicalization* 72). This is where a boundary grows into a wall, but no empirical research available does not mean empirical research impossible. By 1999, the field of empirical aesthetics

had secured itself a history of some twenty years, an international association (IGEL: International Society for Empirical Study of Literature and Media), a journal (*SSOL*), conferences, essay collections, *et cetera* (Kreuz and MacNealy xvi). The psychology of music, too, had already “come of age” (Sloboda 97-115). A common ground for looking into the reader’s and the listener’s experience is established—yet not many bother to draw the connection.

Methodologically, the developing scientific, philosophical, and narratological tools await being used for studying Music in Literature, now open to much more disciplines than intermediality scholars were initially ready to visit. Neuroscience and experimental psychology share data with the philosophy of the mind and the “second-generation” cognitive literary theory (Kukkonen and Caracciolo 264-65; cf. Fludernik; Herman; Bernaerts et al; Caracciolo; Popova), with the studies in musical narrativity (Hauer 190; cf. Overy and Molnar-Szakasc; Walsh; Klein and Reyland), there appears more to say about the musical aspects of reading. It is the recipient in whom the true connection between words and music lies, so focusing on Music in Literature, we might pay attention to the aspects of musical experience that the “embodied reader” (Kukkonen 371) can gain from reading fiction.

I am in fact quite happy with the current untrendiness of Music in Literature in WMS. Here at the MLA, where literature people flock, Music in Literature is marginal, too, despite all the interdisciplinarity involved in modern language studies after the New Criticism. This round table is a tiny bubble on the surface of this convention. That Anthony Appiah has included it into the presidential theme illustrates the integral interest in marginality and minority cultivated ever since the Cultural Turn in the arts and humanities. Indeed, marginal questions very few people ever ask are the only ones worth answering. This may be a good time to trespass on.

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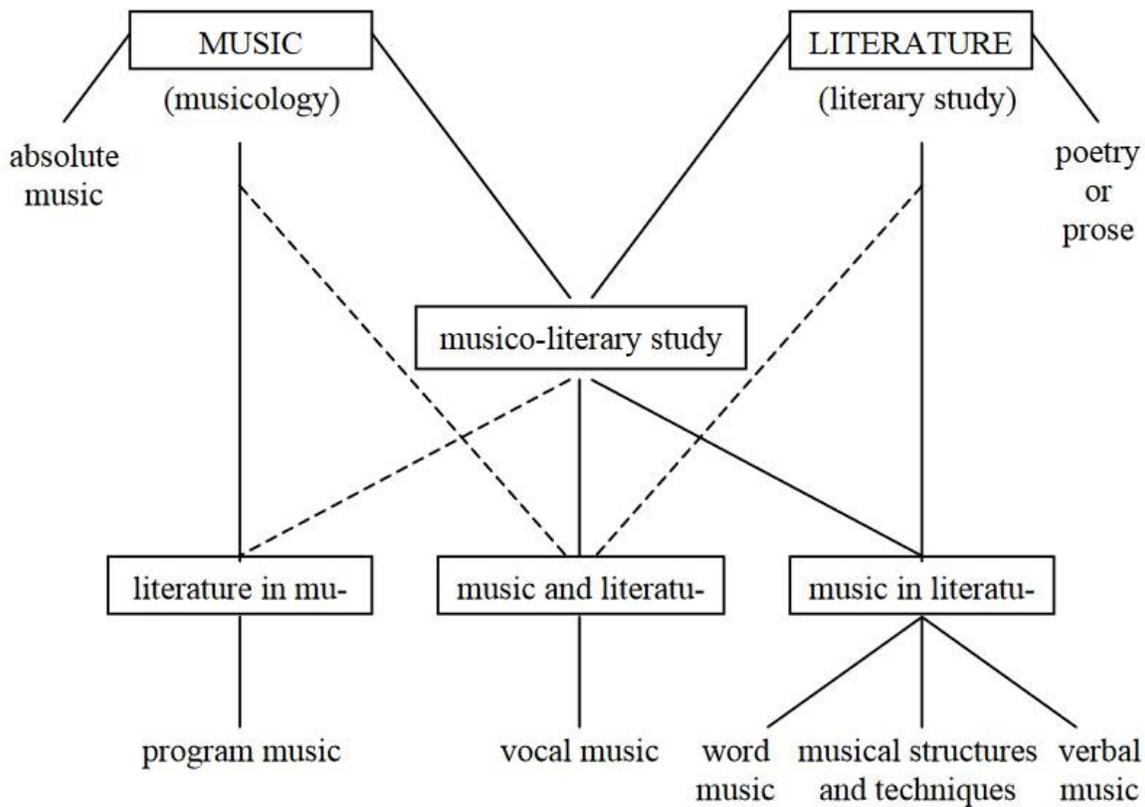


Fig. 1. Scher's diagram of musico-literary relations.

Table 1. Approximate distribution of music-in-literature studies across the volumes of Rodopi/Brill Word and Music Studies book series.

| <u>WMS volume</u> # (YEAR)TITLE SINGLE AUTHOR, if any (COLLECTION/MONOGRAPH) | <u>Total number of chapters</u> (excl. editorial intros/prefaces) | <u>Number of chapters with a music-in- literature focus</u> CENTRAL+PASSING=TOTAL (NOTE) | <u>Proportion of music-in- literature chapters, ~%</u> |
|--|---|--|--|
| 1 (1999) <i>Defining the Field</i> | 18 | 4+1=5 | 28 |
| 2 (2000) <i>Musico-poetics in Perspective [...]</i> | 17 | 5+5=10 (all by C.S.Brown) | 59 |
| 3 (2001) <i>Essays on the Song Cycle and on Defining the Field</i> | 12 | 3+0=3 | 25 |
| 4 (2002) <i>[...] on Cultural Identity and the Musical Stage</i> | 18 | 4+0=4 | 22 |
| 5 (2004) <i>Essays on Literature and Music</i> Steven Paul Scher (collection) | 29 | 7+4=11 | 38 |
| 6 (2005) <i>Opera and the Novel: The Case of Henry James</i> Michael Halliwell (monograph) | 1 | 0 | - |
| 7 (2005) <i>[...] on Music and the Spoken Word and on Surveying the Field</i> | 9 | 2+0=2 | 22 |
| 8 (2006) <i>Selected Essays on Opera</i> Ulrich Weisstein | 15 | 0 (all on opera <i>as</i> literature, not music <i>in</i> literature) | 0 |
| 9 (2008) <i>[...] on Word/Music Adaptation and on Surveying the Field</i> | 12 | 1+1=2 | 17 |
| 10 (2008) <i>The Gaze of the Listener</i> Regula Hohl Trillini (monograph) | 1 | 1 | - |
| 11 (2010) <i>Self-Reference in Literature and Other Media</i> | 9 | 1+0=1 | 11 |
| 12 (2011) <i>[...] on Performativity and on Surveying the Field</i> | 17 | 7+0=7 (2 of 7 are on <i>performance</i> of poetry) | 41 |
| 13 (2014) <i>On Voice</i> | 14 | 4+0=4 | 29 |
| 14 (2015) <i>Essays on Literature and Music</i> Walter Bernhart (collection) | 37 | 7+0=7 (all on prosody/metrics in poetry) | 19 |
| 15 (2016) <i>Silence and Absence in Literature and Music</i> | 14 | 4+1=5 | 36 |
| TOTAL | 194 | 62 | 32 |



Fig. 2. Presence of Music-in-Literature Essays in the WMS volumes (2 monographs excluded).