

Winfried Eckel. *Ut musica poesis: Die Literatur der Moderne aus dem Geist der Musik*. Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2015, 453 pp.

The relationship between music, literature, and the visual arts is a subject of debate with a long and rather entangled history. Understandably, the three art forms are often valued unequally, as the comparison usually aims at finding the ideal artistic expression. But even so, an attitude still stands out, one that may be called “musical exceptionalism,” according to which music is not just the best among its peers, but essentially of a different nature and hence belongs to a higher realm.

Such elevation can be found from the classical tradition (such as the Pythagorean view that music represents rationality) to more recent eras. But the Enlightenment period is a radical break: since then serious efforts have been made to establish music’s independence from other arts through emphasizing the infinite, the emotional, and the irrational, all of which resonate with the aesthetic of the sublime, and become signposts of absolute music.

And yet the striving for musical independence also forms the basis of a body of music-inspired literature, which is the subject of Winfried Eckel’s *Ut musica poesis: Die Literatur der Moderne aus dem Geist der Musik*.

The book opens with a comprehensive survey of the differentiation and (re) integration of the arts, followed by insightful analyses of E. T. A. Hoffmann’s *Kreisleriana* and *Prinzessin Brambilla*, Percy Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, Stéphane Mallarmé’s poetry, the avant-gardist *Lautpoesie* and Thomas Mann’s *Doktor Faustus*. It is true that they cover a very wide spectrum, but Eckel justifies the configuration by showing their common poetic denominations that are

antithetical to crucial qualities of traditional literature and the visual arts: (1) a departure from mimesis, which Wassily Kandinsky advocates by treating words as an inner sound that represents invisible, dematerialized objects (p. 341); and (2) a profound distrust or an endless deferral of (de)finite meaning, which happens to be what polarizes Hoffmann and Wagner.

Viewed individually, the case studies are all expertly written, but Eckel’s most noteworthy contribution to the field is to show their musical connections. Under the rubric of the distrust of meaning-making, it is not difficult to fathom the link between figures as divergent as Hoffmann, Shelley, authors of *Lautpoesie*, and Mann.

Although these abstract and indefinite qualities are usually expected in poetry, the best examples are to be found in the novel: Eckel thoroughly shows how counterpoint serves as a common “structural principle” for Hoffmann and Mann that relativizes different perspectives (p. 202) and provides a source of irony (p. 201). In the case of the latter, it also creates polysemy, ultimately causing disintegration of meanings (p. 399). By intention or not, it is ingenious to begin a book with the *reintegration* of the arts and conclude it with the *disintegration* of meaning.

However, it was in the context of Beethoven’s instrumental music that Hoffmann mentioned “contrapuntal interweavings” (p. 202), at a time when the general musical taste was already drifting away from the “old-fashioned” polyphony of Johann Sebastian Bach to the new *Empfindsamkeit*, which better describes Beethoven’s instrumental music. As Bach is only mentioned in passing in three footnotes, I wish Eckel had written more about the (in)compatibility of Bach’s musical language with narrative structure, especially when we consider the intriguing fact that Mann has Wendell Kretzschmar

point out in *Doktor Faustus* Beethoven's possibly problematic relationship to Bach, while Mann himself considers Bach no real polyphonist (p. 391).

Perusing Eckel's examples, one is also struck by an interesting difference: some writers (such as Mallarmé) inspire music more than being inspired by it, while others are to the contrary (such as Mann). In the case of the latter, the preposition "aus" in the German subtitle is most

appropriate: this is a literature born *out of* the spirit of absolute music, which is analogous to Arnold Böcklin's self-portrait, where the painter listens to death's violin while he paints. In this sense, one can perhaps coin another motto: *Ex musica poesis*.

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