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Literature and Music:

Why this academic field (still) matters

Werner Wolf

Abstract: This article by Werner Wolf, written on the occasion of his appointment as Honorary Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of Literature and Music Studies (JLMS), argues for the continued significance of literature and music studies within the contemporary humanities from both personal and transmedial-theoretical perspectives. After tracing his academic trajectory, the author compares the media-specificities of both arts: literature is predominantly hetero-referential, whereas music is fundamentally self-referential, thus limiting its narrative capacity. The essay surveys historical plurimedial syntheses and intermedial transpositions, delineates three modes of literary reference to music — thematization, ekphrasis, and formal imitation — and identifies underexplored frontiers including digital media, metareference, and comparative “implied worldview” studies, calling for scholarship beyond Western culture.

Keywords: literature and music studies; Intermediality; self-reference and hetero-reference; Implied Worldview; musicalization of literature

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摘要：本文是维尔纳·沃尔夫为其荣任《文学与音乐研究学刊》(JLMS) 荣誉主编所撰的纲领性文章，旨在从个人学术经历与跨媒介理论双重视角，论证文学与音乐研究在当代人文学术中的持续价值。作者追溯其学术历程后，系统比较两种艺术的媒介特性：文学以异指性为主，指向语言外世界；音乐以自指性为主，叙事潜能受限。文章梳理了歌曲、歌剧等历史融合形态及跨媒介转译实践，归纳文学指涉音乐的主题化、模仿描写与形式模仿三种形态，并指出数字媒介、元指涉与“隐含世界观”比较等前沿领域，呼吁超越西方中心视野。

关键词：文学与音乐研究；跨媒介性；自指与异指；隐含世界观；文学的音乐化

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The Board of the newly created Journal of Literature and Music Studies (JLMS) kindly asked me to act as an Honorary Editor-in-Chief, an honour which I gladly accepted. I take this as an occasion for asking a question fundamental to the new periodical: why do literature and music studies (still) matter? I will try to answer this question not in a strictly academic, but rather in a personal way. A lot of the ensuing reflections and references to works of both literature and music can be traced back to publications in the field by various scholars including myself, but I will refrain from giving the exact sources in order not to obscure the personal touch of my remarks and encumber them with footnotes. Nevertheless, I hope that they will have some relevance to the said academic field.

Be that as it may, some restrictions and limitations apply: as, sadly, I have almost no knowledge of Chinese literature and music, my thoughts and examples exclusively derive from Western culture. In addition, owing to my personal preferences for so-called “classical” music, this field will be the main source of musical examples, and in view of my predominant professional focus on English literature, a similar bias will be found with respect to literature in English.

Why have literature and music mattered to me personally? As this contribution has been announced as consisting of reflections of a personal nature, I may be allowed to begin with some biographical details. My first contacts with both arts were, as with so many children of my time, oral story-telling (of fairy tales) and radio-music (my parents loved operettas). To this must be added an early contact with a kind of music that shaped my later years much more than operettas, namely sacred music, in particular organ music, with which I came into contact during the weekly attendance of Catholic mass with my mother. As for literature, when I started to read and well into my years at primary school, it was comics that interested me most. My father was not happy about this, as he considered it trash, and advised me to rather read German classics. However, considering my age, this was perhaps not yet entirely appropriate. At any rate, I did not immediately follow my father’s advice but, as for texts without images, I rather developed almost

an addiction for the adventure stories of a famous late-nineteenth century author extremely popular among German boys in particular: Karl May (books that, like comics, are nowadays also discussed in academic studies). However, in the last years of my grammar school (high school) time, while I had already started to learn how to play the organ, I read all of Friedrich Schiller's plays (in German), many comedies by Molière (in French) and some Shakespeare plays (in English) – so there I was under way in the direction of literature and music studies, but as yet in separate lines. When, after the “Abitur” (final grammar school exam) it became necessary for me to decide which course of study to engage upon, my then organ teacher suggested that I should start a study of music, but my parents were of the opinion that I rather ought to study something more “serious” and with more prospects of a job. So, I studied English and French to become a grammar/high school teacher, a course of studies with an emphasis – on literature.

Yet, it was not until my post-doctoral exam at Munich University (I by then had abandoned school teaching in favour of an academic career) that I first tried to bring both areas, literature and music, into contact with each other in a scholarly way. I did so by preparing a talk on the topic “Can Stories Be Read as Music? Possibilities and Limitations of Applying Musical Metaphors to Fiction” (these reflections became one of my earliest academic essays; it was first published in 1992 and subsequently, in revised form, in my 2018 book *Selected Essays on Intermediality*). Later on, when I obtained the chair of English and general literature at the university of Graz in 1994, my inaugural lecture for this professorship was testimony to my continued and even growing interest in literature and music studies: I talked about the question (answered, of course, in the affirmative) as to whether intermediality (the contact and relations between different media) should become a new paradigm in literary studies. I chose an example from the field of literature-centred research of contacts between words and music, more precisely the role of music in Virginia Woolf's short story “The String Quartet” (the lecture was first published in 1996 and, in revised form, in the aforementioned book). Shortly after this, my friend and eminent scholar in the field of literature and music studies (or “word and music studies” as it was termed), Walter Bernhart, founded the International Association of Word and Music Studies (in 1997), of which I became a co-founder and long-term treasurer till my retirement in 2023. With Bernhart I co-edited no less than ten volumes from 1999 to 2022, seven of which in the book series *Word and Music Studies*.

As for my relationship with China, which also manifests itself in the present essay, it started with a (for me surprising) Chinese interest in one of my numerous publications in the field of literature and music studies: my book on *The Musicalization of Fiction* (1999). It was expertly translated into Chinese (and published in 2022) by Li Xuemei, who had visited me in Graz and with whom I had many hours of extremely fruitful and illuminating discussions. China also loomed large in my research when, in November 2019, I was invited to give a talk on “Literature and Music: Mapping an Intermedial Field” during the International Conference of Intermedia

Studies in Arts and Culture at the School of Arts of the University of Nanjing. As a fruit of this contact professor Li Jian and Zhou Xian offered to co-edit with me a volume on Western Texts on Intermediality: A Reader, which was recently published (2025).

All of this, I trust, gives ample proof that literature and music, both as arts and academic studies, have indeed mattered to me personally for many, many years. And they continue to do so even in my retirement.

Yet, what about the question, as to whether these studies matter beyond personal interests, that is: do they generally matter to the humanities at large and if so, why? In the eighteenth century poetry and music (together with the visual arts, notably painting) were called “sister arts”. And indeed, like siblings, they are related to each other by similarities, differences, and various contacts.

As for the similarities, literature’s most “literary” macro-genre, lyric poetry, already bears, in its name, its affinity with a musical instrument and hence with music. Poetry, and orally performed poetry in particular shares, with music rhythm (besides other repetitive structures) pitch and volume.

Yet, from a transmedial perspective, also major differences appear, notably when it comes to comparing literature with “pure”, that is, instrumental music “unalloyed” with words: literature as a verbal medium consists of signs that, to an overwhelming majority, are “hetero-referential”: they point beyond and thus to something “other” than the signifying system of language (and indeed beyond any other signifying system) at the “world outside”, while self-referentiality only plays a minor role. This role is somewhat larger in the self-referential repetition of metrical and other units in poetry than in prose, yet never reaches the extent to which it is present in music. For in music, the inverse is the case: there is much self-reference and hardly any hetero-reference. Indeed, musical compositions, when they reveal reference in the first place, are largely self-referential, while hetero-reference is the exception, and the same is true for any detailed conceptual reference in music. This is also why music has a very restricted potential of narrativity. In music, self-reference manifests itself, for instance, in the relationship between a repeated motive, theme or musical unit to its previous occurrence(s), while hetero-reference to extra-musical contents, in the rare cases where it occurs in this art, can, for instance, be perceived in aural iconicity (e.g. when music imitates rapid movement by a quick tempo) or in musical “topoi” (for instance elements of “hunting” motifs gesturing at the corresponding extra-musical activity of setting in nature).

Both the media-specific similarities and differences of the two arts, can give one answer to the question as to why literature and music studies matter: what comes into focus from a transmedial perspective, for example when comparing the narrative or metareferential capacity of each medium, can coalesce into an awareness of the identity of each art much more sharply than what would be possible from a mono-medial perspective. Indeed, as structuralism has taught us,

much of meaning emerges from difference. Yet, difference can only be perceived on the basis of a common ground, that is, on the basis not only of dissimilarity but also of similarity. This medium-awareness is one of the general benefits the comparative study of literature and music, rather than of each art alone, can yield, and this is what renders it so beneficial also in higher education.

Another general relevance of the tandem study of literature and music derives from the simple historical fact that, from times immemorial, both arts have formed plurimedial combinations in various ways, and in various genres and works. Humans, it seems, have always sung their poetry; words and music have created syntheses in songs from antiquity to Schubert, the Beatles and contemporary pop music; Shakespeare interspersed some of his plays with songs; from the wish to allow a “rebirth” of classical drama in the Renaissance, there emerged the combination of music and drama in opera, a combination which later on spawned other forms of music theatre such as the operetta and the musical. Sacred music – an important variant of combining texts with music (for, what art did not have its origins in the realm of the sacred?) – was for a long time exclusively vocal music. In fact, both literature and music cannot be considered as totally independent medial “monads”, but have evolved in medial landscapes that show various mutual influences and syntheses. It is clearly relevant to both literary studies and musicology to deal with these intermedial contacts, and moreover, their study matters for the humanities in general, for it contributes to important aspects of cultural history.

In certain historical contexts, these contacts grew even into attempts to “translate” works of one art into another. Thus, in the nineteenth-century, at a time when Shakespeare had been established as an international classic, Tchaikovsky tried to create a musical transposition of The Bard’s tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* in his eponymous “fantasy overture”. And, in the late twentieth century, at a time of literary “experimentation”, the composer and author Anthony Burgess, repeatedly experimented with the inverse case and attempted intermedial transpositions of music into literature (in his case fiction): although Burgess is well aware of the fact that such intermedial transposition, let alone the musicalization of fiction, is largely doomed to fail (he openly said so in an afterword) and can only be reached by way of approximation, his project spawned interesting results. One of them (the one which contains the afore-mentioned afterword) is an attempt to transform Beethoven’s third symphony, the “Eroica”, into a fictional biography of Napoleon, entitled *Napoleon Symphony*, another one a transposition of parts of Mozart’s late G-minor symphony into a chapter of an homage to Mozart on the occasion of the bicentenary of his death: *Mozart and the Wolf Gang*.

Yet another reason why the tandem study of literature and music matters, resides – perhaps a bit one-sidedly – in the fact that literature is a medium that can refer to all other media through concepts but also, in part, through its acoustic and structural qualities, in short: literature shows a remarkably rich spectrum of intermedial references to music (the reverse is hardly possible owing

to music's afore-mentioned difficulty with clear and detailed references to anything outside the given composition). The simplest form of literature coming into contact with music in this way is the thematization of music. It occurs whenever, in a novel, a play, or a poem music in general or individual musical genres and works are mentioned. Music may thus play an important role as a theme, as is the case in Vikram Seth's novel *An Equal Music*, an excellent and moving celebration of Western classical music and aesthetic beauty in general transmitted through the love story of two musicians, a novel which bears music already in its title (in an intertextual reference to a poem by John Donne). Analyzing the role of music in a given literary text can not only substantially contribute to the interpretation of this work and, for instance, the worldview implied in it, but can also reveal historical conceptions of music. This is, for example, the case in John Milton's poem "At a Solemn Music", in which music appears as a counterpart to the original divine harmony of God's creation before The Fall – a notion of music as harmonious, beautifully ordered sound in analogy with the order of the cosmos that has a long history. It ranges from the Pythagorean notion of the "music of the spheres" and the affiliation of music (within the quadrivium) with mathematics in the medieval order of sciences to the celebration of music in Romanticism (e.g., in S. T. Coleridge's *The Eolian Harp*) and still has its echo, albeit in a negative form, in Thomas Hardy's poem *The Darkling Thrush*, in which the bare twigs of a desolate wintry landscape at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century appear to the poem's speaker "Like strings of broken lyres". However, in our times of atonal, often experimental music that sometimes is just harsh sound, "harmony", "proportion" and "order" would no longer be ideas that one would easily associate with music. But other associations may come up in the ongoing thematization of music in, for instance, contemporary fiction, which is a rich mine for analysing them.

Besides the form of thematization (in which the verbal medium is, as it were, unaffected by what it refers to) references to music in literature can also try to imitate music to some extent, that is, adopt some kind of iconic likeness with music (of course, as far as that is possible). Such imitation can, for instance, come in the form of a partial reproduction of vocal music by quoting a song text, which, for readers familiar with the song, can by way of association make the music resound in their minds. Another form of imitating music in literature is the more or less extensive description of real or imagined musical compositions in form of a musical "ekphrasis". A locus classicus of such evocation of music in English literature occurs in E. M. Forster's novel *Howard End*. In its chapter five, central characters are shown to attend a London concert and to listen to a performance of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, an occasion for the implied author to try and render their various responses through a sequence of metaphors and images, but also musicological expressions, so that the informed reader can not only observe the characters but also mentally hear parts of Beethoven's music.

The most sophisticated form of imitating music (which may also make use of the two

previously mentioned forms of imitation) are attempts of formal imitation, either through depleting language of its referential content and focussing on its sound quality (“word music”), or through structural and imaginary content analogies. This latter device tries to shape verbal text in a way that it becomes, to some extent, similar to musical devices such as polyphony and forms such as the fugue, sonata, or theme and variations, and/or it attempts to follow the development of a composition by expressing its emotional and imaginary effects through verbal images. As examples of this formal imitation, one may also cite the afore-mentioned works by Anthony Burgess, in which the attempted intermedial transposition of musical compositions to fiction predominantly makes use of various facets of this device, besides some thematizations of music. This shows that the literary forms of intermedial reference to music, while in theory distinguished from each other, can – and often do – occur in combination. For readers interested in this particular field, I may signal that I commented extensively on forms and functions of formal imitation (as well as on its limitations) in my book on the Musicalization of Fiction.

The various forms in which literature can refer to music, combine itself with music, try to become a transposition of music, or be shown to share common, “transmedial” features with music, showcase the amazing flexibility and adaptability of this verbal art. All of this is certainly yet another reason why intermedial perspectives on literature and music matter indeed, and with it the entire academic field dealing with these perspectives.

By now, the tandem study of literature and music has a long history, at least in the Western world. Already in 1917, Oscar Walzel had published his seminal essay on the Mutual Illumination of the Arts (*Wechselseitige Erhellung der Künste*), in which he dedicated a section to what later grew into the academic field under discussion here: the relationship between music and literature. Numerous other scholars have followed since, including Calvin S. Brown, Steven Paul Scher, Albert Gier, Walter Bernhart, Lawrence Kramer and others, many of whom are published in the book series of the International Association of Word and Music Studies. In the face of a plethora of essays and books dealing with literature and music, can one really say that this academic field still matters? What can be expected from it after so many decades of intense research? My (possibly biased) answers to these questions: yes, it does still matter, and there are areas that are under-researched and from which new knowledge could be gleaned.

One of these areas is the study of new forms of literature/music combination in digital media. Another one would be a comparative, “transmedial” exploration of similarities and differences between both arts with respect to, for instance, description. Narrativity and the respective potential of both arts to transmit stories have amply been explored by now, but this is not so concerning description. For instance, in a 2007 volume on *Description in Literature and Other Media*, which I co-edited as part of the book series *Studies in Intermediality*, music only played a minor role among other arts and media.

To some extent, something similar can be said about “metareference”: this is an umbrella

term I coined in order to have a common denominator for all kinds of “metaization”, including metafiction, metadrama, metapoetry and metamusic, a field to which I myself have also contributed, for example in *Metareference across Media: Theory and Case Studies* (2009) and *Self-reference in Literature and Music* (2010). In spite of these volumes and some other research, metareference in (instrumental) music still merits further exploration, notably in comparison with literature.

Yet another fertile field for academic studies of literature and music is, in my view, the notion of “implied worldview”. Like description and metareference this is a transmedial concept. It designates an essential part of all interpretation when it comes to discussing the overall meaning mediated by a text or artefact, namely, the *Weltanschauung* underlying it. Indeed, the term “implied worldview” derives from this German word and concept; but it does not refer to “views”, opinions, or philosophies represented or alluded to, for instance, by individual literary characters. It refers rather to the views or the philosophy which one may derive from the given work in its entirety, and hence from its implied author, artist – or composer. The latter aspect, namely the application of the concept to musical compositions, has been given attention in a relatively recent book by Hermann Danuser (*Weltanschauungsmusik*, 2009), in which he deals with worldview topics such as attitudes towards human community, heroism, love, nature and religion, but a parallel focus on implied worldviews in literature and music does not exist at this date. It could offer manifold possibilities for comparative literature and music studies, both theoretically and historically.

As for history, certain cultural-historical periods such as the Baroque age, Romanticism or Modernism could be explored with some case studies. And as for theory, an interesting issue would be conditions under which a worldview analysis would make sense, for instance concerning the extension of a given work of literature or a composition. As I have argued elsewhere, even a very short poem such as Ezra Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro” (which consists of no more than two lines) offers itself to an interpretation with respect to “implied worldview”. In contrast to this, such shortness may preclude a meaningful application of the concept to music, in particular owing to the difficulty this art has with transmitting clear referential content. However, a complex and extended symphony such as Beethoven’s ninth or even (if one wants to concentrate on “pure” instrumental music) fifth symphony may offer some material along the lines of what has often been attributed to Beethoven’s music as being informed by the ideal “*per aspera ad astra*” (“through hardship to the stars”). This is a kind of basic programme that, with its optimistic implication that darkness, adversities, suffering and sadness may be overcome and a realm of light and happiness be reachable, has indeed worldview resonances. But what about short baroque instrumental minuets or even a two-page prelude, such as J.S.Bach’s *Prelude in C major* that opens the first volume of the *Wohltemperierte Klavier*? Can it meaningfully be attributed an implied worldview beyond generalities such as the expression of ordered beauty? Admittedly, it may be

heard as a correlative of a worldview that affirms and celebrates the existence of beauty and order – but would one need the complexities of the notion of implied worldview for this? What about other short compositions without the anchorage in a well-known composer’s worldview (a problematic anchorage anyway, since the personal views of a creator need not always be identical with those implied in his or her work)? Although limitations apply to musical compositions, and even if for individual musical compositions the idea of an “implied worldview” is perhaps not very helpful, using this concept in comparisons between the two arts may perhaps allow interesting insights yet again in media specificities, but also in cultural historical developments. At any rate, there is here, too, ample material showing that literature and music studies still matter, are thought-provoking, and could yield new knowledge.

As I wrote in my introductory remarks, my reflections concentrate on Western culture. The study of the relationships between literature and music may have originated in Western intermediality studies, but this is no reason why these relationships should not be explored beyond Western culture. An excellent contribution to this widening of the focus is indeed the present Journal of Literature and Music Studies (JLMS), in which essays that deal with Chinese and other Asian cultures will no doubt occupy a prominent place. In view of this, I can only congratulate the editors for having started an enterprise that promises to host interesting and much-needed scholarly research and which, last but not least, shows that literature and music studies still matter, in the Western world as well as in other parts of the world, including, notably, China.

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