

The Relationship To The Text

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This essay was written in 1912, and it uses the masculine gendered pronoun to refer to all people — A.C.

THERE are relatively few people who are capable of understanding (purely in terms of music) what music has to say. The assumption that a piece of music must summon up *images* of one sort or another (and that if these are absent the piece of music has not been understood or is worthless) is as widespread as only the false and banal¹ can be. Nobody expects such a thing from any other art, but rather contents himself with the effects of its material, although in the other arts the material-subject (the represented object) automatically presents itself to the limited power of comprehension of the intellectually mediocre. Since music as such lacks a material-subject, some look beyond its effects for purely formal beauty, others for poetic procedures. Even Schopenhauer,² who at first says something really exhaustive about the essence of music in his wonderful thought:

‘The composer reveals the innermost essence of the world and utters the most profound wisdom in a language which his reason does not understand, just as a magnetic somnambulist gives disclosures about things which she has no idea of when awake’

— even he loses himself later when he tries to translate details of this language (which the reason does not understand) into our terms. It must, however, be clear to him that in this translation into the terms of human language (which is abstraction, reduction to the recognizable) the essential, the language of

the world (which ought perhaps to remain incomprehensible and only perceptible) is lost. But even so he is justified in this procedure, since after all it is his aim as a philosopher to represent the essence of the world, its unsurveyable wealth, in terms of concepts whose poverty is all too easily seen through. And Wagner³ too, when he wanted to give the average man an indirect notion of what he as a musician had looked upon directly, did right to attach programs to Beethoven’s symphonies.

Such a procedure becomes disastrous when it becomes general usage. Then its meaning becomes perverted to the opposite: one tries to recognize events and feelings in music as if they must be *there*. On the contrary — in the case of Wagner it is as follows: the impression of the ‘essence of the world’ received through music becomes productive in him and stimulates him to a poetic transformation in the material of a further art. But the events and feelings which appear in this transformation were not contained in the *music*, but are merely the material which the poet uses — only because so direct, unpolluted and pure a mode of expression is denied to poetry, which is an art still bound to subject-matter.

The capacity of pure perception is extremely rare, and only to be met with in men of high calibre. This explains why professional arbiters (or ‘critics’) become embarrassed by certain difficulties. That our scores become harder and harder to read, that the

¹*banal*: so lacking in originality as to be obvious and boring.

²Arthur Schopenhauer [1788–1860]: German philosopher best known for his book, *The World as Will and Representation*. Strongly influenced by Eastern philosophy, and had a strong influence on Richard Wagner, Nietzsche, and others.

³Richard Wagner [1813–1883] German composer and polemicist, known for his operas such as *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger*.

relatively few performances pass by so quickly, that often even the most sensitive, purest man can receive only fleeting impressions — all this makes it impossible for the critic (who must report and judge, but who is usually incapable of imagining alive a musical score) to do his duty even with that degree of honesty upon which he might perhaps decide — if it would do *him* no harm. Absolutely helpless he stands in the face of purely musical effect, and therefore he prefers to write about music which is somehow connected with a text: about program music, songs, operas, etc. One could almost excuse him for it, when one observes that operatic conductors (from whom one would like to find out something about the *music* of a new opera) prattle almost exclusively about the libretto, or the theatrical effectiveness, or the performers. Indeed, since musicians have acquired culture and think they have to demonstrate this by avoiding shop-talk, there are scarcely any musicians with whom one can talk about music. But Wagner (whom they like to cite so much as an example) wrote a tremendous amount about purely musical matters — and I am sure he would unconditionally repudiate these consequences of his misunderstood efforts.

Therefore, it is nothing but a comfortable way out of this dilemma when a music critic writes that a composer's composition does not do justice to the words of the poet. The 'scope of this newspaper' (which is always most limited in space just when necessary evidence *should* be brought in) is always most willing to help out the lack of ideas, and the artist is pronounced guilty because of 'lack of evidence'. But the evidence for such assertions, when it is once brought out, is rather evidence for the contrary, since it merely shows how somebody would make music who does not know how to — how accordingly music ought in no case to look if it has been composed by an *artist*. This is even true when a composer writes criticisms. Even if he is a *good* composer. For in the moment when he writes criticisms, he is not a composer, not *musically inspired*. If he were inspired, he would not *describe* how the piece ought to be composed, but would compose it himself. This is quicker and even easier for one who can do it, and is more convincing.

In reality, such judgements come from the most banal notion possible, from a conventional scheme according to which a certain dynamic level and speed in the music must correspond to certain occurrences in the poem and must run exactly parallel to them. Quite aside from the fact that *this* parallelism, or one even more profound, can also be present when externally the opposite seems to be presented — that, for example, a tender thought can be expressed by a quick and violent theme because the following violence will develop from it more organically — quite aside from this, such a scheme is already to be rejected because it is conventional; because it would lead to making music into a language which 'composes and thinks' for every man. And its use by critics leads to manifestations like an article which I once read somewhere, 'Faults of Declamation in Wagner', in which someone showed how he would have composed certain passages — if Wagner had not beaten him to it.

A few years ago I was deeply ashamed when I discovered in several Schubert songs, well-known to me, that I had absolutely no idea what was going on in the poems on which they were based. But when I had read the poems it became clear to me that I had gained absolutely *nothing* for the understanding of the songs, since the poems did not make it necessary for me to change my conception of the musical interpretation in the slightest degree. On the contrary, it appeared that, without knowing the poem, I had grasped the content, the *real* content, perhaps even more profoundly than if I had clung to the surface of the thoughts expressed in words. For me, even more decisive than this experience was the fact that, inspired by the *sound* of the first words of the text, I had composed many of my songs straight through to the end, without troubling myself in the slightest about the continuation of the poetic events, without even grasping them in the ecstasy of composing, and that only days later I thought of looking back to see just what was the *real* poetic content of my song. It then turned out, to my greatest astonishment, that I had never done greater justice to the poet than when, guided by my first direct contact with the sound of the beginning, I divined everything that obviously had to follow this first sound

with inevitability.

Thence it became clear to me that the work of art is like every other complete organism. It is so homogeneous in its composition that in every little detail it reveals its truest, innermost essence.

When one cuts into any part of the human body, the same thing always comes out — blood. When one hears a verse of a poem, a measure of a composition, one is in a position to comprehend the whole. Even so, a word, a glance, a gesture, the gait, even the color of the hair, are sufficient to reveal the personality of a human being. So I had completely understood the Schubert songs, together with their poems, from the music alone, and the poems of Stefan George from their sound alone, with a perfection that by analysis and synthesis could hardly have been attained, but certainly not surpassed. However, such impressions usually address themselves to the intellect later on, and demand that it prepare them for general applicability, that it dissect and sort them, that it measure and test them, and resolve into details what we possess as a whole. And even artistic creation often goes this roundabout way before it arrives at the real conception.

When Karl Kraus⁴ calls language the mother of thought, and Wassily Kandinsky⁵ and Oskar Kokoschka⁶ paint pictures the objective theme of which is hardly more than an excuse to improvise in colours and forms and to express themselves as only the musician expressed himself until now, these are symptoms of a gradually expanding knowledge of the true nature of art. And with great joy I read Kandinsky's book *On the Spiritual in Art*, in which

the road for painting is pointed out and the hope is aroused that those who ask about the text, about the subject-matter, will soon ask no more.

Then there will become clear what was already made clear in another instance. No one doubts that a poet who works with historical material may move with the greatest freedom, and that a painter, if he still wanted to paint historical pictures today, would not have to compete with a history professor. One has to hold to what a work of art intends to offer, and not to what is merely its intrinsic cause. Furthermore, in all music composed to poetry, the exactitude of the reproduction of the events is as irrelevant to the artistic value as is the resemblance of a portrait to its model; after all, no one can check on this resemblance any longer after a hundred years, while the artistic effect still remains. And it does not remain because, as the Impressionists perhaps believe, a real man (that is, the one who is apparently represented) speaks to us, but because the artist does so — he who has expressed himself here, he whom the portrait must resemble in a higher reality. When one has perceived this, it is also easy to understand that the outward correspondence between music and text, as exhibited in declamation, tempo and dynamics, has but little to do with the inward correspondence, and belongs to the same stage of primitive imitation of nature as the copying of a model. Apparent superficial divergences can be necessary because of parallelism on a higher level. Therefore, the judgement on the basis of the text is just as reliable as the judgement of albumen⁷ according to the characteristics of carbon.⁸

⁴Karl Kraus [1874–1936]: Austrian writer and journalist, known as a satirist, essayist, aphorist, playwright and poet. He directed his satire at the press, German culture, and German and Austrian politics.

⁵Wassily Kandinsky [1866–1944] an influential Russian painter and art theorist. He is credited with painting one of the first purely abstract works.

⁶Oskar Kokoschka [1886–1980] Austrian artist, poet and playwright best known for his intense expressionistic portraits and landscapes.

⁷*albumen*: egg white, or the protein contained in it.

⁸*carbon*: a nonmetal that has two main forms (diamond and graphite) and occurs in impure form in charcoal, soot, and coal.