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Musical Ekphrasis and the Prospects of Intermedial Research*

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Abstract. Amid the expansion of analytical approaches in modern art history analytics, musicologists are increasingly turning to the concept of “intermediality”. As distinguished from the concept of “intertextuality” in art history contexts (Aage Hansen-Löve, Ivan Ilyin), “intermediality” characterises an approach to the analysis of different “media” combined in one text. A special case of intermediality is “musical ekphrasis” as developed in the works of Siglind Bruhn. Referring to the sequence of actions proposed by Bruhn, the relationships between different media in the space of one text are systematised on the example of *Frieses*, a musical compositions for violin and electronics by Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho. The analysis reveals an associative mechanism of a two-stage interaction: from Johann Sebastian Bach’s *Chaconne* for solo violin (the starting point) to Odilon Redon’s *Frieses* and Maurits Escher’s engravings and further to Baroque era genres (“carillon, passacaglia, ground bass and chaconne,” according to the composer). The key concept is the “frieze” as a pictorial work that has the ability to unfold in time. “Frieze” as a concept (and not a specific work) turns out to be an “umbrella term” for different types of deployment that establish between them a plurality of manifestations within a unified conceptual framework.

Keywords: analysis, intermediality, musical ekphrasis, Kaija Saariaho, frieze

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Музыкальный экфрасис и перспективы интермедиального исследования

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Аннотация. На волне процесса расширения аналитических подходов в современной искусствоведческой аналитике музыковеды всё чаще обращаются к понятию «интермедиальности». Отделившись от понятия «интертекстуальность» (Оге Ханзен-Лёве, Иван Ильин), «интермедиальность» постепенно вошла в число тех искусствоведческих инструментов, которые позволяют анализировать сочетание разных «медиа» в одном тексте. Частным случаем интермедиальности оказывается «музыкальный экфрасис», разработанный в трудах Зиглинд Брюн. Через последовательность действий, предложенную Брюн, осуществляется возможность систематизировать отношения разных медиа в пространстве одного текста на примере скрипичного произведения финского композитора Кайи Саариахо «Фризы». Авторское пояснение раскрывает ассоциативный механизм двухэтапного взаимодействия: от скрипичной Чаконы Иоганна Себастьяна Баха (исходная точка) — к «Фризам» Одилона Редона и гравюрам Маурица Эшера и далее к жанрам эпохи барокко («карильон, граунд, пассакалья и чакона», по словам композитора). Ключевым оказывается понятие «фриза» как живописного произведения, обладающего способностью разворачиваться во времени. «Фриз» как концепция (а не конкретное произведение) оказывается «зонтичным термином» («umbrella term») для разных типов развёртывания, устанавливая между ними множественность воплощений в рамках единства концепции.

Ключевые слова: анализ, интермедиальность, музыкальный экфрасис, Кайя Саариахо, фриз

Introduction

The contemporary field of analytical methods as applied in art history demonstrates a tendency towards continuous expansion. This expansion occurs not merely because the necessity to seek analytical approaches is inextricably linked to the specificity of particular objects, such as contemporary music. Similar approaches are simultaneously applied in relation to music from past epochs, including repertoire that ostensibly seems to have been thoroughly studied. For example, John Koslovsky, head of the Dutch Society for Music Theory, presented a paper at the EUROMAC 9 conference in Strasbourg (2017) on the topic: “Tristan and the Act of Musical Analysis: Conflicts, Limits, Possibilities.” [1, p. 233] The scholar develops

the idea that the introduction to Wagner’s opera *Tristan und Isolde* has become a field in which different theoretical approaches collide, from which he selects and analyses three: (1) the post-Riemannian analytical approach of Horst Scharschuch; (2) the historical-stylistic analysis of Jacques Chailley; (3) the Schenkerian analysis of William Mitchell. One of the essential ideas of the report consists in the problem of “refocusing” analysis, the complementary interaction of certain tendencies, and the enrichment of knowledge about an object through a plurality of approaches. Such an approach becomes necessary in works where the principles underlying different art forms intersect in the same space. Thus, contemporary discussions of musical art exhibit a general

tendency towards *intermediality* which requires the application of new analytical tools and approaches from researchers. Therefore, the present work task sets out to evaluate some of the key ideas related to intermediality.

On the Concept of Intermediality

Although the concept of “intermediality” was introduced into literary studies in 1812 by Samuel Coleridge, it only started to be generally applied during the second half of the 20th century. In 1965, representatives of the *Fluxus* movement began to refer to this phenomenon. *Fluxus* theorist Ken Friedman identifies one of the signs of new art as “intermedia”, referring to the absence of frames and boundaries between different types of art. Subsequently, the term “intermediality” (English *inter* + *media/art* = *intermedia/interart*) was consolidated by the German-Austrian scholar Aage A. Hansen-Löve. [2]

Some researchers note that “intermediality” has inherited the problems of the long-known and widely discussed concept of “interaction of the arts”. The principles of intermedial analysis were developed on the basis of the theory of intertextuality (Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva) and were further developed in the works of George Levinton, Bernhard Waldenfels, Edmund Husserl, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The concept of intermediality began to appear in the terminology of philosophy, philology and art history at a time when the “text” had become one of the leading concepts in the humanities. By “text” was understood not only literary writing, but all semiotic, semantically significant systems that contain coherent information, thus creating the possibility of speaking about “cultural texts” and “artistic texts.” In parallel, the concepts of “style,” “method” and “direction” have tended to be replaced by the general concept of “discourse.” The main attention of the researchers turned out to be focused on identifying the interaction

of various “voices,” “languages,” “codes,” “text units,” etc. However, the expansive concept of text is not always fruitful for art-historical analysis, since it equalises the rights of all semiotic systems in one way or another. A more fruitful approach turns out to involve the analysis of differences between phenomena that are indeed semiotic, but nonetheless distinct in their specific characteristics. Against this background, the concept of “media,” as proposed by the famous Russian philosopher Ivan Ilyin, may be more productive. “This polysemous term,” explains Ilyin, “refers not only to the actual linguistic means of expression and thoughts and feelings, but also to any sign systems in which some message is encoded. From a semiotic point of view, they are all equal means of transmitting information, whether it be the words of a writer, the colour, shadow and line of an artist, the sounds (and notes as a means of recording them) of a musician, the organisation of volumes by a sculptor and architect, and, finally, the arrangement of the visual sequence on a screen surface — all of this collectively represents those media organised in each corresponding art form according to their own set of rules or code that constitutes the specific language of each art.” “Taken together,” Ilyin concludes his definition, “these languages form the ‘big language’ of the culture of any specific historical period.” [3, p. 8] Thus, “media” are defined as channels of artistic communication between the languages of different types of art. It is here that the distinction between the concepts of “intertextuality” and “intermediality” is made, which appears to be methodologically significant.

The art of the 20th century, especially during its second half, demonstrates a steady tendency towards the appearance of music based not only on literary descriptions, but on pictorial (visual-arts), sculptural, and architectural works: the first part of the triptych *Three Places in New England* by Charles Ives (based on the bas-

relief in memory of Robert Shaw in Boston); *Trittico botticelliano* by Ottorino Respighi; *Frescoes by Piero della Francesca* by Bohuslav Martinů; *Timbres, espace, mouvement* by Henri Dutilleux after Van Gogh, *Mathis der Maler* by Paul Hindemith. The list continues to grow rapidly: composers of the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries are actively expanding the area of musical content. For example, the contemporary French composer Hugues Dufourt (b. 1943) has written a whole series of compositions based on paintings (his focus includes Rembrandt, Tiepolo, Titian, Chardon, Van Gogh, Jackson Pollock, Goya), while Tristan Murail sometimes combines several sources of different origins in one composition.

Musical Ekphrasis on the Example of Sieglind Bruhn

It appears that today there exist such forms of interaction between adjacent arts that ought to be distinguished as a separate category, for which purpose the concept of “ekphrasis” may prove helpful. This term is practically unknown to musicologists, being more commonly used by literary scholars. For example, Umberto Eco in his book *To Say Almost the Same: Essays About Translation* defines ekphrasis as “the description of a work of visual art, whether sculpture or painting.” [4, p. 249]. Eco notes that we are more accustomed to the translation of text into visual text (a film adaptation of a book, for example), whereas ekphrasis, on the contrary, assumes the translation of visual text into literary (or poetic) text. Thus, ekphrasis may be defined as a detailed description of any art (painting, sculpture, music) that has the capability of transmitting an accurate idea of what it describes. The main thing in ekphrasis is “the ability to make visible.” [Ibid.]

In this context, the question arises as to whether a piece of music makes another piece of art “visible”? This issue was examined in detail in a monograph by the American musicologist

Sieglind Bruhn. Her major work, entitled *Musical Ekphrasis: Composers Responding to Poetry and Painting*, [5] which was published in 2000, is so far the only comprehensive study of musical ekphrasis.

Defining “musical ekphrasis” as “... a case of transformation of a work — its content and form, imagery and language of expression — ... I will designate it as *musical ekphrasis*,” [Ibid., p. 16] the scholar provides a corresponding diagram (see Scheme 1). [Ibid., p. 17]

The foundation of the scheme consists of reliance upon two types of musical ekphrasis: literary and visual-arts. At the base are positioned aesthetic theories (theories of art), from which stem the methods of ekphrastic description. Musical ekphrasis itself is placed at the centre, and various aspects interact with it. Other types of ekphrasis (non-musical) adjoin these connections.

In relation to musical-visual-arts ekphrasis, Bruhn offers an analysis of a musical work from the point of view of the following aspects:

- 1) description and context — inherent or acquired meanings of musical expressive means;
- 2) means of musical transmedialisation (musical mediation) — rhythm, pitch, intervals and lines, contours, timbres, the general and the particular, structure and structural designations, allusions and quotations;
- 3) variants of ekphrasis — transfer, addition, association, interpretation, free associative play.

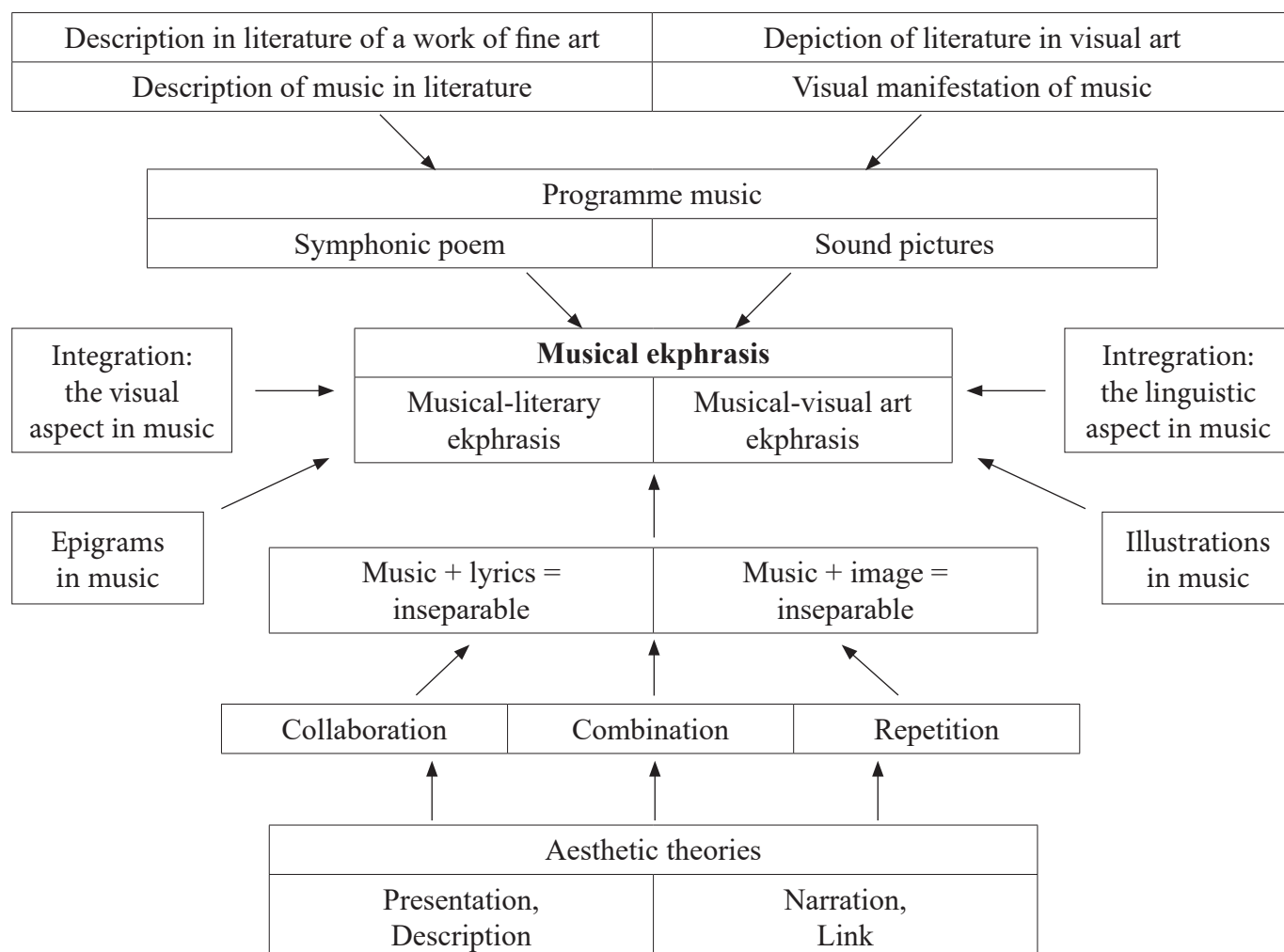
While this scheme can of course be supplemented and examined critically, the very idea of detailing the relationships within related arts seems potentially fruitful.

Kaija Saariaho's *Frises* from the Perspective of Intermedial Analysis

Let's consider an example from contemporary compositional practice.

Kaija Saariaho is a world-famous composer of classical (academic) music. At the basis

Scheme 1. Interaction of Arts in the Process of Ekphrasis
According to the Book by Sieglind Bruhn



of her musical pieces, we often find both literary¹ and pictorial works: among the compositions she created not so long ago there is a piece for solo violin entitled *Frises*. A paraphrasing of the author's commentary on this piece is given below:

According to the composer, *Frises* arose as a response to a request from the violinist Richard Schmukler, who told the composer about his idea to combine different works around Bach's Second Partita for solo violin, especially around the final movement, the *Chaconne*. The violinist

¹ Literary works have often served as the starting impulse for Saariaho's composition of music. The first major orchestral piece (with electronics) *Verblendungen* ("Blindings," 1984) was inspired by the novel *Die Blendung* by Elias Canetti; the piece *Laconisme d'aile* ("Laconicism of the Wing," 1982) for solo flute was based on the poems of Saint-John Perse. The violin concerto *Graal Théâtre* was based on a collection of stories by Florence Delay and Jacques Roubaud. This list of literary impulses in Saariaho's work is not exhaustive: in the orchestral work *Du Cristal... à la fumée* ("From crystal... to smoke," 1989) she used the book by the French writer Henri Atlan *Between the crystal and the smoke*.

requested the composition of a piece that could be performed after Bach's *Chaconne* and begin with the sound that ends this part of the Second Partita — the sound of "D". The piece has four parts. In each of them, she focused on one of the historical ostinato variation forms, starting from the carillon, passacaglia, basso ostinato and chaconne. Four variations on a theme, harmonic process, or other musical parameter emerged.

To expand the ideas and possibilities of the instrument, Saariaho added electronics to the piece. Each part has different processing according to its character. In general, and in accordance with the text, the prepared musical materials are used by the musician himself throughout the performance. These materials culminate in real-time transformations of violin sounds. The composer's stated goal was to create a richly textured work for violin in four very different and independent parts. The first movement, "Frise jaune" has the form of a prelude, a "flexible improvisation around a constant *D*, coloured by harmonics and the electronic part consisting of bell sounds." This part is also inspired by the idea of the "carillon," a continuous melodic variation.

The second movement, "Frise de fleurs," is based on the harmony created on a ground bass (basso ostinato). Here, the chord progressions are gradually enriched in order to achieve a free lyrical development.

The third part, "Pavage," is inspired by the transformations of the source material through a "mathematical process where a frieze is a filling of a line or a band by a geometric figure without holes or overflow, like the paving." However, the composer states that she doesn't use exact symmetry "as with the cobblestones of a patterned ground" but rather creates a "continual metamorphosis,

in the spirit of some MC Escher's images, though less consistently." Saariaho describes the last part "Frise grise" as "like a strange procession, solemn, fragile, but at the same time solved." The idea of passacaglia is "realised with slow triplets, the constant accompaniment of the left hand pizzicati on three strings, while the melody is evolving on the fourth which is not part of the accompaniment." The thematic material is described as evolving "descending slowly from *E* — the highest string — to *G* — the fourth string. The music finally reaches the initial *D* in double stop which take us back to the beginning of the piece." The composer states that the names of the pieces are "inspired not only by the mathematical ideas mentioned, but also by the friezes of Odilon Redon, which I recently saw at an exhibition dedicated to his work; especially the Yellow Frieze, the Flower Frieze and the Grey Frieze."²

The commentary provided here outlines in detail the driving impulses of this music as perceived by the composer herself. Some of them have the character of various kinds of intra-musical associations: this is the unification of music into a single text with Bach's *Chaconne* through the sound of "D", and a dialogue with baroque genres — carillon, ground bass, passacaglia and chaconne. All this detail in itself represents a vast space for interpreting the intertext. However, two intermedial ideas attract special attention: an appeal to the paintings of the French artist Odilon Redon and a reference to the images of the Dutch artist Maurits Escher.

Based on the necessity of initial analysis of different semiotic systems — visual-arts and musical — let us turn to the visual-arts, primarily because it had a generative significance for the music (judging by the titles of the pieces in the cycle).

² Kaia Saariaho. *Frises*. URL: <https://saariaho.org/works/frises> (accessed: 31.07.2025).

The French artist Odilon Redon is probably less known than Claude Monet, another of Saariaho's favourite inspirations.³ Redon is distinguished by an interest in mysticism, a balance on the edge of the abstract and figurative, and a particular preference for oriental motifs. The referenced friezes, which were made to decorate the house of Baron Robert de Domecy (1867–1946), are discussed as being among the most radical in terms of their proximity to abstract writing. The image contains only details of plant motifs in the context of a colour scheme reminiscent of Japanese screens (Ils. 1, 2, 3).



Il. 1. Odilon Redon. *Yellow frieze*



Il. 2. Odilon Redon. *Flower frieze*



Il. 3. Odilon Redon. *Grey frieze*

Saariaho's interest specifically in friezes can be explained by the fact that a frieze is such a form of painting where *temporal unfolding* takes place. We do not contemplate a frieze in its entirety all at one moment, but rather we trace it with our eyes — that is, the frieze occupies a certain intermediate place between a painting and a piece of music from the point of view of spatio-temporal patterns. Saariaho is not alone in her interest in this type of painting:

Harrison Birtwistle has composed a *Slow Frieze*, as well as a piece *Pulse shadows*, in which four of the 18 parts are referred to as “friezes”. Tiepolo's friezes became the basis for Dufourt's orchestral pieces entitled *L'Asie* and *L'Afrique*. Indeed, this is not the first time that Saariaho has turned to a frieze: her *Water Lily* quartet is addressed to a version of Monet's painting that has a strongly horizontally elongated frieze-like structure.

The three friezes on which Saariaho builds her composition can be considered as the *structural basis* of her musical compositions. That is, we can conduct a parallel analysis of the visual-arts basis and the musical composition and then interpret the resulting results. In this context, what is of interest is not so much the plot twists, but rather the structural features. Since a frieze is a decorative composition in the form of a ribbon or strip, its content can be classified as ornaments or pictorial images. Looking at the frieze genre itself, we can note their exceptional diversity — from the geometric rigour of *Art Deco* and functionalism to the incredible plasticity of *Art Nouveau*. The basic structural idea of a frieze (or border) can vary from repetition to plot figuration, combining to one degree or another with variability. One can imagine a kind of mediation scale: if Tiepolo's friezes are essentially paintings stretched along the edge of the ceiling with a minimum number of repetitions of motifs, then antique friezes are a simple ornament with an infinite number of repetitions of a simple motif.

And here, quite predictably, a space for analogies emerges. At a basic level, an analogy occurs between musical notation and abstract painting; further, one can imagine analogies with thematic and textural elements, as well as those based on the laws of colour. Saariaho's

³ Monet's painting *Water Lilies* became the starting point for Saariaho's string quartet of the same name.

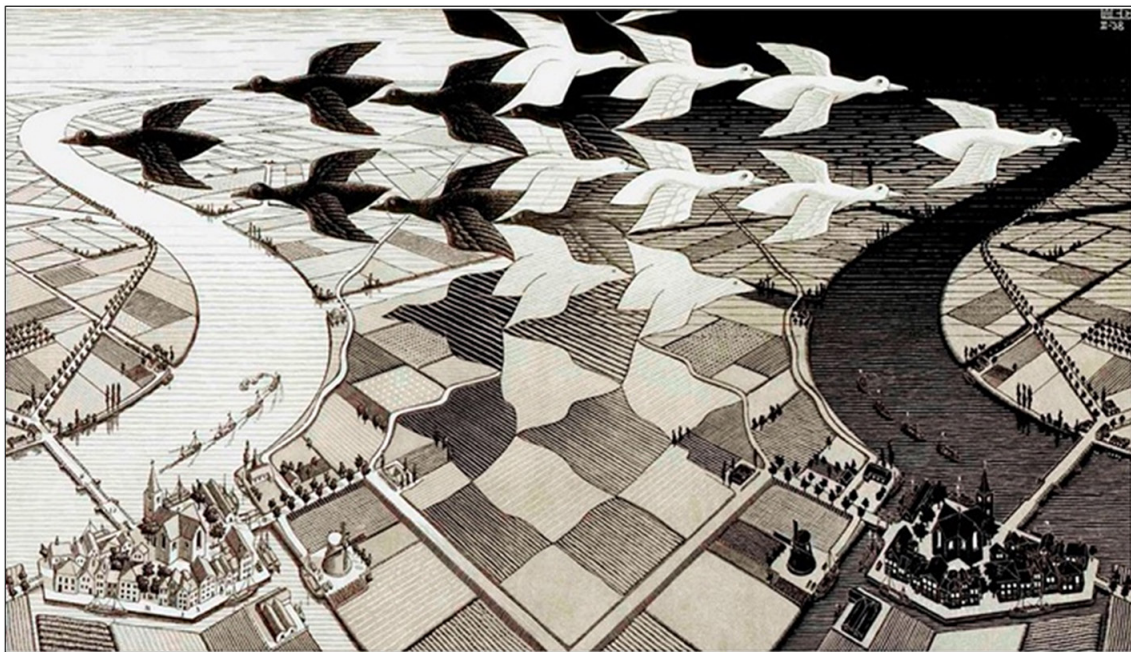
work features of all these analogical strategies. The analogies between music and painting form a *translation area* in which the zone of structural correspondences can be determined. The frieze obviously refers us to a *pattern*, which has a deep meaning: the very term “pattern” (one of the meanings is “ornament”) makes music and design related. Here, the repeating figures of the ground, passacaglia and chaconne can also refer to the idea of an ornament (or frieze). In this connection, Redon’s friezes give the composer the possibility of more strict or more free variation (the floral frieze, for example, contains a pattern, while in the grey frieze, a pattern is barely discernible).

Escher’s drawings offer a somewhat different concept. If we try to connect the word “paving” mentioned by Saariaho with Escher’s images, we can assume the following (Il. 4).

At the heart of this “paving” we find the concept of slow transformation: our eye does not have time to notice how the tiles turn into birds and vice versa. The fact that they are also organised into an ornament gives the image a special charm and reveals a “space of

transition” from geometric ornament to the whimsical figurativeness of the bird’s contours. Smooth, gradual changes literally transform the straight into the curved, which finds reflection in the musical text through small deformations of the original motif. The magic of this process, which consists in the connection that arises between seemingly opposites, inspired Douglas Hofstadter to write his famous work, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid* which was the subject of György Ligeti’s fascination in the last period of his creativity. [6]

If we interpret the result that emerged in Saariaho’s music, the following picture arises: the starting point being Bach’s *Chaconne*, whose constructive principles initiated an association with visual friezes, which in turn resonated with Saariaho’s visit to Redon’s exhibition. Subsequently, Redon’s friezes became the subject of ekphrasis in Saariaho’s pieces, where each frieze gave the music its individual character: the “Yellow Frieze” with its predominance of background over contour was reflected in a unified sounding continuum formed around the note *D*



Il. 4. Maurits Escher. *Day and Night*

(which is itself perceived as a “variation on the tonality” of Bach’s *Chaconne* and a “reflection” of the bells spectrum in the “carillon”); the “Floral Frieze” based on a ground bass (basso ostinato) embodies the idea of ornamental “figurativeness”; “paving” demonstrates the mobility of this “figurativeness” along with the possibilities of its transformation; and finally, the “Grey Frieze” definitively “disembodies” the frieze as strict ornament, translating it into the plane of processuality. Thus “frieze” as a concept (and not a specific work) turns out to be an *umbrella term* for different types of deployment that establish between them a plurality of embodiments within a unified conceptual framework. If we judge this from Bruhn’s point of view, then we are inclined to favour the *interpretation* of the composer’s version based on structural and substantive associations.

However, the correspondences here may not only be structural. Another type of analogy possible in musical and pictorial ekphrasis is based on the psychology of our perception. And here we can, to some extent, rely on some of the ideas of Paul Klee, who was not only an artist, but also a professional musician. Klee uniquely succeeded in synthesising the experience of visual and sound arts like no other, creating the foundation for experiments in transmitting visual images through sounds and vice versa, becoming the first to declare that both music and painting appeared to him as *temporal* arts. Building upon this revolutionary insight, Klee developed aesthetic principles that could be applied to both art forms, with his theory grounded in understanding the static and dynamic elements of painting and their mutual balancing and interaction. Klee conceived of the line as something intrinsically valuable and logically connected to space, articulating this through his fundamental principle: “A point, becoming movement and line, requires time. The same applies equally

to the transformation of line into plane. And the same is required in the transition of planes into space <...> the moving point, creating a line, creates form. Form is not a result, but genesis. Art exists according to the same laws as the entire universe...” [7, p. 33] Therefore, even the line that we see at the beginning of the *Pedagogical Sketches* is balanced and partly symmetrical. Its leading element is movement: “The work of art arose from movement, is itself a fixed movement and is perceived by the movement of the eye muscles... Movement lies at the basis of all becoming.” [Ibid., p. 35] It is at this point that the intersection of music and painting becomes especially obvious. Their analogy feeds not only the transition of painting into music, but also the possibility of freeing oneself from the “arrow of time” that exists in music. This allows the implementation of the strategy of “unintentional wandering” in music. Let us note that Saariaho mentions a procession: “‘*Grey Frieze*’ is like a strange procession...”

If we follow Klee, then the translation of the visual-plastic into the musical is neither a synaesthetic “total perception” nor empathy. Rather, behind this translation lies the mechanism of transformation of “visual remote sensing” into corresponding musical forms. And this mechanism has long been known: the course of visual perception can represent a kind of “wandering around the object.” This is significant in relation to composers who, paradoxically, can be called “visual”: to a certain extent, this includes not only Kaija Saariaho, but also Harrison Birtwistle, György Ligeti, Morton Feldman and Tōru Takemitsu.

Conclusion

Let us now draw some conclusions. Those musical works that embody not only the content but also the structural level of similarity between different arts can be

considered as musical ekphrasis, which makes it necessary to go beyond the limits of musicology itself in their analysis. The similarity in the structure of different media arises on the basis of analogies, representing a common mechanism for comprehending the unity of the world. Differences in the structure of media carry a powerful creative impulse, which

allows us to predict an increase in the number of such works in our postmodern era, where contamination, the fusion of the different, acts as a key principle of creativity. “Expanding the analytical corridor” gives way to interesting research (in particular, Sieglind Bruhn), which creates new impetus for discussion and development.

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