

Music - Text - Performance

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This faculty seminar is conceived as a multi-disciplinary workshop which intends to attract participants from diverse research fields, such as classics, philosophy, religion, anthropology, psychology, literature, musicology, and film studies, whose respective expertise would contribute to the culture-historical exploration of music in all its socio-aesthetic complexity. The thematic scope of our investigations shall range from mythological, philosophical, theological, and semiotic questions, through issues of gender, race, and politics, to theories of media, performance, and psycho-analytical implications of the acoustic/auditory sphere.

We shall start with mythological models from antiquity, - Homer's *Odyssey* (siren episode), and Ovid's *Metamorphosis* (Orpheus/Narcissus and Echo), - myths which already prefigure Western culture's ambiguous (gendered) relationship towards music as ultimate promise of happiness and deadly threat. Our readings will be accompanied by critical analyses of the myths (Adorno, Blanchot), operatic renditions (Monteverdi, Gluck), as well as literary adaptations (Joyce, Kafka).

The double-character of music as both transgressive and divine is also reflected in the philosophical and theological debate over the relationship between words and music. From Plato through Saint Augustine, the Council of Trent to the Puritans, music is primarily regarded as a force which threatens the very foundations of culture, and can be only contained, by imposing the primacy of logos over melos, a position which also resonates in the internal musical discussions from the Renaissance to the pre-classical period (Florentine Camerata, "reform" opera etc.), as well as in the secularized context of the cultural debate during the French revolution. Only the mystical traditions in Christianity developed alternative musical concepts in which the unintelligible music assumed divine status (Hildegard von Bingen, *Ordo Virtutum*).

Our next unit in our culture-historical reconstruction will be devoted to Romanticism which terminated the long-standing century-old tradition, by promoting the emancipation of music from language, conceptualized in the idea of "absolute music" (Dahlhaus), and/or the metaphysics of instrumental music (E.T.A. Hoffmann). This radical paradigm shift indicates the important transition from premodern aesthetics of representation to the modern aesthetic of auto-nomy, for the amimetic music ideally embodies the liberation of

art from all extra-aesthetic representational functions. Music serves as an utopian model for the creation of a poetic language that is freed from all grammatical and semantic restrictions (Novalis, Schlegel) - a program only realized in the 20th century. The Romantic period also marks the birth of the music-narrative genre in the strict sense. By focusing on exemplary literary texts (Hoffmann, Kleist et.al.), we will examine the polyfunctional qualities of music, represented by polarizations such as art/religion, insanity/reason, life/death, male/female, and artist/society, - a rich narrative tradition which had far-reaching impact on the literary, cinematic, and musical imagination of the 20th century.

Opera as it develops after 1800 is the privileged site for “envoicing” western metaphysics through the emergence of new operatic voices. The “heightened utterance” of the dominant mode of operatic singing of romanticism and beyond (from bel canto, to Verdi and Wagner) locate the subject in a world that is always conceived as unknowable in a fundamental and almost mystical fashion (see Tomlinson, *Metaphysical Song*). The notion of a world of consciousness that lies beyond the senses is given powerful expression in operatic singing, along with its orchestral, visual, and performative components. Some recent studies of “noumenalism” in modern opera have made important interventions in both narrative theory (Abbate) and post-Freudian, Lacanian thought (Rosalato and Poizat).

Even though verbal and musical language possesses a temporal structure as well as an acoustic dimension which allows the possibility of notation, these obvious commonalities rather obscure the principal differences that separate both semiotic systems. Whereas the linguistic sign despite its internal division in signifier/signified, still points to an extra-linguistic referent, music lacks this denotative function. Starting from the 18th century speculative discussions about the nature of music and language, we will pay particular attention to the contemporary debate in semiotics, whether one can also justifiably speak of music as a language (Saussure, Levi-Strauss, Benveniste, Nattiez). We will also look into literary attempts at adopting compositional techniques into writing (Th. Mann, Schwitters, Joyce, Queneau, Butor) as well as efforts by composers to transpose the phonetic components of language into music (Berio, *Omaggio a Joyce*, Phillip Glass, *Trains*, among others).

The emergence of new acoustic media of reproduction and transmission (phonograph, telephone, radio, tape recorder etc.) made it possible for the first time in human history to capture the transitoriness of acoustic phenomena, be it sounds, voices, or music. As a consequence, the natural linkage between voice and body, instrument and sound, time and space was dissolved, and led to a radical transformation of culture as well as human perception, since any acoustic manifestation could be easily recorded, stored, and reproduced without the physical presence of the sound source. Against the background of modern theories of media (Benjamin, Ong, Kittler), we will examine both early and contemporary literary documents which reflect on the impact of acoustic/ auditory technologies on memory, performance, and reception (Villiers de L'Isle Adam, Th. Mann, Proust, Handke, Nick Hornby). Moreover, we have to address the question of what happens to the subject when voices are dissociated from the body and placed into the

recording apparatus, thus destabilizing as well as multiplying identity (Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape*)?

Psychoanalysis has in past decades discovered the significance of the voice as well as the acoustic-auditory field for human psychogenetic development (Lacan, Anzieu, Rosolato, Dolar), the results of which are also reflected in recent works on film theory (Silverman). Not only is the child already surrounded by sounds in the womb, but even after birth the nonvisual, aural experience first dominates the perception of the infant, whose experience of reality is, due to its initial blindness, considerably bound up with the voice of the mother. For this early stage of pure sonority, theory has coined such terms as "bath of sounds," "sonorous womb," "uterine night," which equally denote the pleasurable and the traumatic modes of the infant's sense perception towards the "acoustic umbilical cord" of the mother. We shall see to what extent musical production and reception is partly shaped by these primordial experiences. It would be particularly fruitful to analyze the evolution of gender roles and sexual identities in operatic works, with regard to vocal typologies ranging from speech to cry, encompassing the angelic, trans-sexual, male and female singing voices, culminating in the expression of vocal jouissance beyond meaning and musical notation (Poizat, *The Angel's Cry. Beyond The Pleasure Principle in Opera*).

Apart from these topics, the seminar could further explore the relationship between music and power (fascism and Stalinism), the function of music with regard to the formation of ethnic, racial, and social identities (jazz, rock & roll, rap, klezmer etc.), the importance of music in film or film music, the division of high and low since the classical period, the role of music in ritualistic practices in Western and non-Western cultures. We might also devote special session to one particular work/aesthetic, such as Wagner, or to Adorno's influential "Philosophy of Modern Music," or to the reading of seminal music novels, such as Th. Mann's "Doktor Faustus" or R. Powers "Time of our Singing." A final selection will be determined by the specific interests of the seminar's participants.