

Emily Petermann, *The Musical Novel. Imitation of Musical Structure, Performance, and Reception in Contemporary Fiction*, Camden House, 2014, pp. 250, \$ 55.00, ISBN 9781571135926

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This book is of significant interest not only to the literary scholar but also to the philosopher of art. Music and literature are intimately entwined in interart phenomena categorized here as musical novels. Petermann's exploration of this literary subgenre, defined as "musical not primarily in terms of its content, but in its very form" (p.2) invites us to rethink a series of classical problems – the essence of music, boundaries of art forms, musical sense and meaning, the relation between music and language – through the lens of these peculiar textual artworks. Petermann's monograph is not merely the latest study on music as described in novels: it is an attempt to theorize the presence of music in artistic prose in terms of "imitation of musical structure, performance, and reception". The book, thus, deals with topics of interest in the current philosophical debate on music: performance situation and its specificity (both in jazz, and in authentic performances of baroque music); improvisation; various ways of listening treated democratically, including both the performer's and the audience's perspectives; music and literature as temporal arts; the question of formalism. Petermann theorizes the musical novel through the key philosophical concept of imitation. In doing so, she evokes the ancient theory of μίμησις with its rich legacy. It is hard not to hear in it also an echo of the polyphonic imitation technique; this second reading, if not encouraged by the author, can be meaningful in light of the conclusive remarks of this review. Thematization of music and explicit considerations of the philosophical problems mentioned above, are often diegetic features of the musical novels discussed. For instance, N. Huston's *Les variations Goldberg* can be read as a rich repertory of such divagations. According to Petermann, however, thematizing music is vital only to the extent in which it makes the reader attentive to the formal musical features exhibited by the text.

In sum, the distinct elements that emerge from Petermann's study should appeal to the art-philosophy readership: the theoretical framework of the book, the class of intermedially involved

artworks it delineates, the distinctive artistic features of these artworks, and the explicit considerations on music that some of them contain.

The monograph is divided into two parts devoted to two groups of novels (Jazz-Novels and *Goldberg*-Novels, see below) which are preceded by an important chapter on *Theorizing the Musical Novel*, all framed by an Introduction and a Conclusion. An Appendix schematically illustrates the new model of intermediality advanced by Petermann and applied to two of the musical novels discussed.

Word and Music Studies provide a primary context for Petermann's work. She mentions seminal writings by C.S. Brown and S.P. Scher, and reviews the most recent studies on music in prose, such as A. Shockley (2009), but she skillfully resists the temptation of overcharging the theoretical part with meticulous discussions of terminological distinctions and internal nuances of the approach: this field of study is relatively young and still methodologically unstable. Instead, having provided the necessary background, Petermann seeks to give a pragmatically clear framework for her own research, a "tool for analysis rather than a philosophical interpretation of intermediality per se" (p.21). Here Petermann draws most extensively on the definition of medium and the models of intermediality advanced by W. Wolf (1999) and I. Rajewsky (2002). She defines intermedial imitation as the use of "techniques of the medium that is materially present [...] to metaphorically suggest the presence of a foreign medium" (p.24). For heuristic purposes, she advances an open catalogue of aspects of the "foreign medium product" (n.b. not a very elegant phrase to my taste) that may be imitated or thematized: *effect* – "real or perceived" impression made "on its audiences"; *surface* – "immediately perceptible elements" thereof; *structure* – "formal elements on the micro or macro levels"; *inherent qualities* – e.g. "the spatial nature of sculpture or the temporal nature of music" (p.25); *context* and *content* – intended as subject matter of narration or representation. Petermann makes use of selected semiotic terms and concepts, adopting the Saussurean duality of *signifiant* and *signifié* in a sign. She justly emphasizes the abstract nature of both as well as the non-identity of *signifié* and a referent. Most important for her general approach to music, as disclosed in the Conclusion, is Petermann's assertion that the "referent need not be extrinsic to the sign system but can be intrinsic, yielding meaning that is self-

referential” (p.30). She adopts J.J. Nattiez’s distinction between the *poietic*, *esthesis* and *immanent* levels of semiotic communication in order to show that musical novels result from both *esthesis*, as “interpretations of and responses to music” (p.213) and *poiesis*, or the creative processes of text making.

In the first part Petermann interprets how the following eleven novels imitate the genre of jazz (and blues): Albert Murray’s *Train Whistle Guitar*, 1975; *The Spyglass Tree*, 1991; *The Seven-League Boots*, 1995; *The Magic Keys*, 2005; Michael Ondaatje’s *Coming Through Slaughter*, 1976, Xam Wilson Cartiér’s *Be-Bop, Re-Bop*, 1987; *Muse-Echo Blues*, 1991; Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*, 1992; Christian Gailly’s *Be-bop*, 1995; Stanley Crouch’s *Don’t the Moon Look Lonesome*, 2000; and *The Best of Jackson Payne* by Jack Fuller (2000). Petermann focuses on the aesthetic and formal aspects of jazz, as imitated in these texts, rather than on its extramusical (political, social, racial) significance. Such an aesthetic interest in verbal jazz resounds well with the increasing attention paid to jazz and its stylistic and performative specificity in the current philosophical debate on music. Petermann distinguishes various levels of textual imitation of music according to the musical element involved: sound (rhythm and timbre – Ch.2), structural patterns (riff, lick, chorus, greatest-hits album, call-and-response – Ch.3) and the performance situation (Ch.4). While adaptation strategies such as the use of gossip-style or second-person address to render the reading experience akin to the spontaneous and direct jazz audience interaction seem merely analogous to the imitated performative situation, the structural and rhythmic operations, as well as the “technique of motivic improvisation” (p.134) permit a significant degree of substantial affinity with the imitated music itself.

Petermann’s chapters follow the overall method of introducing, first, the musical elements in their native context (in jazz and classical music technical terms) and, second, the strategies of their adaptation in prose. These include the use of poetic devices such as alliteration, rhyme, rhythm, meter and various ways of loosening the referential aspect of verbal structures in order to emphasize their sonic qualities. Now it is crucial to clarify that these emphatic operations on the prosodic and semantic level are not foreign to the medium of literature (if unusual, to such an extent, in prose) – in fact, they can be fully analyzed in terms proper to traditional poetics. One is tempted to say that they constitute the *matter*, just as the physical sounds in standard cases

of music that must be intentionally *formed* through the artistic process (B. Sève would say: altered) in order to become music (or its textual imitation, accordingly). What enable these devices to imitate music are their distinct functions within the novels. On most occasions, explicit references to music attune the reader's attention and prepare her to perceive these devices as (imitations of) music rather than instances of poetic prose or poet's novel. At times this is a more complex matter, calling for a firmly justified interpretation of the text as a whole (for instance Cusk's novel never mentions Bach's *Goldberg Variations* and still is convincingly considered by Petermann as yet a further "literary variation" on this cycle).

The second part focuses on five novels that imitate a single masterpiece of baroque keyboard polyphony – Johann Sebastian Bach's *Goldberg Variations* BWV 988. There are more novels, plays and films evoking Bach's cycle, but the following five, however different in style and plot, derive from it their overall structure (with the exception of *Der Untergeher*) as well as many significant details: Nancy Huston's *Les Variations Goldberg*, 1981 (English translation by Huston 1996); Thomas Bernhard's *Der Untergeher*, 1983; Richard Powers' *The Gold Bug Variations*, 1991; Gabriel Josipovici's *Goldberg: Variations*, 2002; and Rachel Cusk's *The Bradshaw Variations*, 2009. This asymmetrical approach (genre imitation *versus* imitation of a particular musical work) is by no means accidental, as it faithfully reflects the central role of the musical work as *opus perfectum et absolutum* in classical music contrasted with musical idioms, rules of improvisation and the predominance of audience interaction in jazz music. Despite the significant differences between these two musical traditions, Petermann highlights the similarities in literary techniques involved in their textual rendition. Ch.5 analyzes the structural patterns in the *Goldberg-Novels* (theme and variations form, canon, numerical symmetry of the cycle's architecture), and Ch.6 considers the aspects of composition, performance, and reception as imitated by them. In her analyses she refers to tempo markings, and metric and tonal aspects of the "hypotext", such as the minor key used in the variations XV, XXI and XXV, and their textual counterparts, such as the "strong state of loss" on the diegetic level in Huston's respective *variationes*.

If Petermann studies in detail the elements of music used and imitated in these texts, she emphasizes that the musical novel is

“valuable in itself” (p.1) and interprets its musical “hypotexts” within the Genettian metaphor of palimpsest. Petermann’s approach to the aspects of the works relevant to her inquiry can be qualified as broadly formalist, matching the position her study takes on music, as she stresses “the intrinsic references of music within its own closed system, through the establishment of patterns, repetitions, breaches with conventions, etc., which make connections to other parts of the piece or to forms and patterns shared by other pieces of music” (p.213). Such a position is not arbitrary: as she acknowledges, Hanslick’s view on music (even if he cannot reasonably be “considered the first to make a scientific study of music” (p.2)) appealed particularly to the modernist writers, offering a stimulating paradigm to transgress. It is precisely the “anti-literary”, purely immanent conception of musical sense that motivates the modernist experiments with prose writing *more musico* (Joyce, Huxley). Petermann studies in depth the post-modern continuation of this line in contemporary fiction. On this account sense and aesthetic value are produced in two different ways in music and in literature. If text can successfully imitate music, the resulting musical prose has the capacity to broaden the scope of fiction to encompass both musical and literary modes of signification and beauty.

Hence we return to the first defining characteristic of the musical novel: it “*contains a musical presence not primarily on the level of content, but rather on that of form*” (p.3 – italics J.C.) This *presence* is achieved most prominently by textual imitation rather than by intersemiotic juxtaposition (typical of the graphic novel, where words and images co-exist in print), as in the case of musical epigraphs which are considered a marginal phenomenon. Much has been done in the past century to mitigate the uncritical usage of the predicate ‘musical’ within literary criticism, and Petermann chooses to be very clear on the point that being ‘musical’ does not mean for her that a novel qualified as such becomes music, nor even aspires to it. This sober assumption, even if cardinal, remains just an assumption of her work and should not be mistaken for its outcome. It cannot be verified on the basis of the study alone, as it necessarily touches upon what music *really is* – a question explicitly excluded from scrutiny by Petermann herself – and thus calls for a philosophical interpretation.

More reviews of this volume

Christin Hoene, *Music and Letters*, 2016, 97:1, pp. 190-191.

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