Intermedial System References: Paul Celan's Fugal Structures

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Abstract

The change of the basic affinity between poetry and music, poet and singer in Modernism marks the background from which Paul Celan's lyricism stands out. The starting point of the present study is the finding that his poetry contains numerous references to music regarding content and form. Besides the description of the most important approaches and systematizations related to the nexus of this unique poetry and music, the paper also investigates the basic similarities and differences between the two media, based on the theoretical achievements of Werner Wolf and Irina Rajewsky. The last part of the research examines Paul Celan's two poems containing system references: "Deathfugue" and "Stretto." The aim is first of all to include both poems in the appropriate subcategory of the intermedial system reference and to subsequently analyze them with regard to their foreign medium imitative construction.

Keywords: intermediality, music, literature, intermedial system references

"Celan, a German-speaking Jew from the Ashkenasim of northern Romania, wrote two texts *Todesfuge* (1944 or 1945) and *Engführung* (1958), in which […] he challenges his reader to accept or question indeed musicalization of poetic text." (Olschner 84)

The starting point of the present paper is the finding that Paul Celan's poetry contains numerous references to music regarding content and form. The core of the present research constitutes a systematization of Paul Celan's references to music: Jens Finckh talks about three forms of references which can be found in his poems: musical motif, intermedial individual reference and intermedial system reference. (Cf. Finckh 271–275)

Musical motif is an intramedial category that includes all the verbal references to the *Lied*, to the act of singing as well as to any musical terminology. Peter Horst Neumann (Cf. Neumann 267) has pointed out that in every eighth poem of the author the words *singen*, *Lied* and *Gesang* are used. The presence of these Topoi can be found on each level of his creation. After Rilke *singing* in modern German poetry is on the way to disappear for good. That is why Celan's use of musical motifs proves to be a confirmation against the background of modern German lyricism and at the same time an exception of an epochal canon. (770) It is a challenge to analyze this field knowing the fact that the change of the basic affinity between poetry and music, poet and singer has definitely changed in the context of Modernism.

The second form of reference that Finckh talks about is called in German tradition *Einzelwerkreferenz* and it means intermedial individual reference. This field includes a series of allusions to music, which he defines as "allusions and quotations that refer to identifiable musical creations." (Finckh 272)[1]

The background of the paper lies in the field of the so-called intermedial system references. This specific form of intermediality is defined by Finckh as (272)[2] "the

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[1] "Anspielungen und Zitate, die identifizierbaren musikalischen Werken gelten."
[2] "Übertragung musikalischer Formen auf die Struktur des jeweiligen literarischen Textes."

transposition of musical forms and structures to a literary text." The examples for these phenomena are less uncommon than one would think:

> […] after some isolated experiments in Romantic and postromantic literature (such as Ludwig Tieck's *Die verkehrte Welt* or Thomas De Quincey's *Dream Fugue*) *musicalising* tendencies have become more outspoken since modernism. (witness e. g., Thomas Mann's *Tonio Kröger* and *Der Zauberberg*, *James* Joyce's *Sirens* episode in *Ulysses*, Virginia Woolf's *The String Quartet,* and Aldous Huxley's *Count Counter Point*) […] These tendencies continue well into postmodernism with Anthony Burgess's *Napoleon Symphony*, Nancy Huston's *Les Variations Goldberg*, and most recently Gabriel Josipovici's *Goldberg: Variations* as most outstanding examples. (Wolf, 326)

The transposition of musical forms and structures are widely discussed by specialists of intermedial studies. Irina Rajewsky defines them as "reference of a medial product with its own media-specific means to a different semiotic system of a conventional distinct medium." (Cf. Rajewsky 158) The spectrum covers the range from partial to whole relation to the work, system, or subsystem to which the given product refers. Thus she points out two further categories: *system-mention* and *system contamination*. Mentioning an altermedial system or subsystem can happen explicit or qua transposition. In the first case, the weakest form of intermedial system reference, we don't get any altermedial illusion. This is a simple verbal description of altermedial components, often marking intermediality. In the case of system mention qua transposition indeed the illusionistic *as if* increases. The altermedial is taken into the verbal medium through evocation (such as in ekpharsis), through simulation (such as suggesting foreign medial experiences through the text) and finally through (partial) reproduction. *System contamination*, the strongest form of these intermedial references, denotes a kind of intermedial reference in which a text constitutes itself in relation to another medium, the literary system thus being *contaminated* by the other medial system. In this case both prestrictive and restrictive rules of the foreign medium modify the organizational principles of the receiving medium. This can happen through translation – in this case the foreign medial rules are translated into the semiotic system of the receiving medium – or by partial use of media- unspecific components.

Analyzing the poems "Deathfugue" and "Stretto" according to this terminological framework, the first obvious components that mark a relationship to music in both cases are the titles. Both explicit *system mentionings* indicate the presence of a musical structure, namely that of the fugue:

> The highest of instrumental or vocal composition is counterpoint. It derives its name from the fact that it is a flight or a chase of melodies; one part enters with the principal theme, a second takes up the theme and another and another follows until all have entered. Every development is directly or indirectly attached to the initial motif or subject, and variety is obtained by modulations and various combinations in imitation. The constructive elements indispensable to any *fugue* are the subject or principal theme; the answer, a repetition of the subject, given a fifth higher or a fourth lower; the counter subject, a counter point […], which combines with the subject, and [finally] the stretto, in which subject and answer are brought as close together as possible for the sake of heightening the interest. In most fugues will also be found episodes or digressions, developments which draw their material form the subject or counter-subject, and serve to vary the work and *act also as transitions*. (Hubbard 217)

What follows after the title in both cases is still just a certain type of text and of course not music. In vain are we trying to explain the exact matching between a certain fugue and the poem or the poems. It is a mistaken way and an impossible attempt. Even the author warns his readers as follows: "My poem Todesfuge […] is not composed according to musical principles; rather, when the poem was there, I felt it not unjustified to call it Todesfuge" (qtd. in: Englund 134).

When talking about structural parallelism between text and music there is indeed a possible way. It is that certain aspect that Steven Paul Scher talks about. In his article "Literature and Music" he writes: "Literature lacks the unique acoustic quality of music; only through ingenious linguistic means or special literary techniques can it imply, evoke, imitate or otherwise indirectly approximate actual music and thus create what amounts at best to a verbal semblance of music."(Scher 229)

Leonard Olschner offers a similar explanation to that of Scher and at the same time gives us an answer to the question how a poem could be compared to a musical fugue, an imitative polyphonic composition with a contrapuntal structure:

> To speak of a literary fugue is either to speak superficially, to speak metaphorically – such as conceiving of a cathedral as being music frozen in stone - or to speak in contradictions. For unless we hear the text of a sung fugue – the final ensemble in Falstaff, for example […] we will not experience a fugue in prose or verse. And of course for the solitary reader, the reading of a textual fugue would make peculiar acrobatic demands on one's eye coordination. The author may by analogy suggest fugal structures through use of motif, juxtaposition, variation and repetition, and by doing so, will create the illusion realized within the reader's mind, of experiencing, or having experienced a fugue. (Olschner 84)

A comparison can be achieved only by concentrating on the basic elements of a simplified musical fugal structure. The presence of the main theme, of the voices and the contrapunction, as well as their final overlapping, can be identified in both poems.

In the case of "Deathfugue" the illusion of polyphony is given in the original text by patterns of repetition, thematically antithesis, paratactic style and intertextuality. Verbal polyphony is achieved by the reciprocal exchange between the voice of the Nazis and their victims. The English translation of the poem by John Felstiner adds further fugue-like aspects to the original. His version uses code-switching between two languages: certain English words are translated back into German, an effect like modulating to a different key in music, another literary imitation of polyphony. Reinforce thus the sense of repetition, and we notice better perhaps than in the original text the metamorphosis of the stretto:

> Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
> we drink you at midday Death is a master aus Deutschland
> we drink you at evening and morning we drink and we drink
> this Death is ein Meister aus Deutschland his eye it is blue
> he shoots you with shot made of lead shoots you level and true
> a man lives in the house your goldenes Haar Margarete
> he loses his hounds on us grants us a grave in the air
> he plays with his vipers and daydreams der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland
>
> dein goldenes Haar Margarete
> dein aschenes Haar Sulamith (Celan 31f.)

The subject and the answer crowd and overlap each other on the thematical level and lead to a similar effect like in the music. Each voice enters with the answer before the preceding voice has finished with the subject. Thus it comes to a system contamination qua translation: the text constitutes itself in relation to the musical structure, its rules are modified according to the foreign medium.

In the case of "The Stretto" Celan imitates the interweaving of voices by the typographic arrangement of the words through anticipation. The voices change by a series of single repetitions which serve as transitions between sections of the text. The repetitions take a special form: they are always on the right side of the page which is otherwise filled with blank white space. Each time we move to a new section of the poem, we find the final line of the preceding one printed on the right part of the page. (Cf. Szondi 35) What at first sight might seem as an echo takes, indeed, as Peter Szondi mentions, "[…] on new significance when we consider the precise meaning of the musical term *stretto* (from strictus) […] the words printed on the right hand edge of the page are meant to coincide with the entrance that follows them. Their typographical placement reproduces the staggered entrances that are an essential feature of the musical stretto" (35).

We have been deported — verbracht, "forcibly brought" — to a terrain that is both foreign and strange (28) and we find ourselves in a text-terrain which is subsumated under a musical title, a system mentioning. Interpretation, or reading is forbidden here by the imperative "Read no more — look!", an imperative that indicates another type of reading, which is capable of renouncing to discursivity. This type of reading might lead one to discover the diversity of techniques used by the Author within both poems, namely Fugal Structures.

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