

## DOCTORAL THESIS

### Description as a transmedial mode of representation and its potential in instrumental music explored through a study of musical work inspired by paintings

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## ABSTRACT

Among various forms of art, music (and instrumental music in particular) is said to be the *least* descriptive art form, owing to its limitation with respect to hetero-referentiality—the ability to refer to things outside itself. However, in view of the impreciseness current in the definition of musical description itself, as well as a lack of case studies in understanding the modes of representation of descriptive music, there remain some questions about the fundamental nature and the potential of music as a medium of description. These questions will be raised and explored in this dissertation. It is particularly interesting that, while description is distinguished from narration in literary studies, in the past musicologists have often treated the two categories as one; thus, I posit that this ambiguity might blur our understanding of some aspects of the medial nature of music. By looking at semiotic features of music, I study how these features operate in delivering descriptive content through the analysis of programmatic music of various types. Their roles in developing the descriptive potential of music are also explored here. Building on theoretical studies by Werner Wolf, and the concepts of semiologists such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, I discuss three musical cases: Franz Liszt's piano work, *Sposalizio* (inspired by Raphael's *Lo Sposalizio della Vergine*), Ottorino Respighi's *Trittico Botticelliano* (inspired by three of Sandro Botticelli's paintings), as well as Sergei Rachmaninov's *The Isle of the Dead*, Op. 29 (inspired by Arnold Böcklin's *Die Toteninsel*). The research presented here seeks to reveal how musical signs describe the elements of the painting, as well as how they gradually acquire their own symbolic meaning that, in turn, ultimately allows them to transcend the visual images, and operate to present the inner content of the painting, as expressed by either the painter or the composer towards the pictorial artwork.

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