

DOCTORAL THESIS

Musical experience in fictional narrative: William T. Vollmann, William H. Gass, and Richard Powers

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Date of Award:
2018

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ABSTRACT

This doctoral thesis contributes to the ongoing scholarly conversation on literary representation of musical sounds, forms, and compositions. My close examination of the tangible presences of Western art music in the fiction of three contemporary American novelists relocates traditional foci of intermediality and word and music studies from referential precision and structural equivalence across the arts to the problem of readerly experience of music through fictional narrative. Exploring a variety of diegetic encounters with music in William T. Vollmann's *Europe Central* (2005), William H. Gass's *Middle C* (2013), and Richard Powers's *Orfeo* (2014), I draw from cognitive narratology and the philosophy of music, among others, to construct a concise model of musical experience and a system of its literary correlatives, which can provide for the reader's enactive response to music-related themes and means in fiction. I discuss the different strategies the writers apply to communicate the presumably elitist experience of Western "classical" music as suggestive and relevant to their 21st-century readerships, whether big or small.

I order my chapters dialectically, regarding the three authors' literary approaches to musical experience as thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. In Chapter I, Vollmann's intermedial transpositions of Dmitri Shostakovich's fictionalized works are shown to be framed by a mimetic bias, under which diegetic music functions as a characterization means for the author's historical preoccupations. The thesis (i) I infer from Vollmann's approach is that music is part of the fictional reality representative/informative/definitive of what that reality is like. Chapter II is devoted to Gass's metafictional distrust of representation, whereupon his novelistic narrative discards diegetic music almost completely and points out ways of experiencing verbal textures musically. Gass's method is thus antithetical (ii) to Vollmann's: music is a metaphor for creativity, indifferent to the subject matter and/or plot, which at representation level may well be a parodic perversion of the very idea of creativity. Powers's balanced treatment of musicalized content and form and his generous supply of multivalent experiential cues are forged to appeal to a broader reading audience, as I argue in Chapter III. In what I see as a synthesis (iii) of Vollmann and Gass, Powers's storyworld contains abundant diegetic music that constructs narrative settings and drives the events of the plot, but is itself graspable through musical metaphors.

The findings of the thesis open new directions for research into musico-literary reception. Encouraging a revival of reader-response awareness in literary analysis, musicalized fiction is an untrivial subject for interactive theoretical scrutiny by psychologists and philosophers of music, transmedial narratologists, and cognitive scientists. Empirical studies of actual readers' experience of musicalized prose may prove particularly promising in further investigation of this intersectional phenomenon.

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