

## DOCTORAL THESIS

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

Delazari, Ivan

*Date of Award:*  
2018

[Link to publication](#)

#### General rights

Copyright and intellectual property rights for the publications made accessible in HKBU Scholars are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners. In addition to the restrictions prescribed by the Copyright Ordinance of Hong Kong, all users and readers must also observe the following terms of use:

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from HKBU Scholars for the purpose of private study or research
- Users cannot further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- To share publications in HKBU Scholars with others, users are welcome to freely distribute the permanent URL assigned to the publication

## 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 21<sup>st</sup>-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.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Declaration</b>	i
<b>Abstract</b>	ii
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	iii
<b>List of tables, figures, symbols, and abbreviations</b>	vi
<b>INTRODUCTION. Ends and Means</b>	1
<b>CHAPTER I. Transposing Reality: William Vollmann’s Verbal Music</b>	19
1.1. Rushing Around: Vollmann’s Musical Predispositions	–
1.2. Intermedialities of <i>Europe Central</i> : An Overview	23
1.3. Fictionalizations of Shostakovich: History, Biography, and Music	34
1.4. The Cello Sonata: (Dis)Narrating a Score	49
1.5. The War Symphonies: An Imaginary Content Relocation	64
1.6. Intermedial Transposition as a Readerly Challenge	83
<b>CHAPTER II. Recomposing Language: The Metamusic of William Gass</b>	95
2.1. Slowing Down: Gass’s Music of Prose	–
2.2. Faking and Failing Musical Education in <i>Middle C</i>	102
2.3. The <i>Moonlight</i> Sonata and the Experientiality of Diegetic Music	119
2.4. The Second Viennese School: A Non-Diegetic Turn	128
2.5. Sketching the Sentence: Joseph Skizzen’s Composition Lesson	139
2.6. Sound, Representation, Metaphor: Tracing Musical Experience	154
<b>CHAPTER III. Diversifying Stimuli: Richard Powers and Musical     Enactment</b>	171
3.1. Riding Smoothly: The Musical Topoi of Powers	–
3.2. <i>Orfeo</i> ’s Musical Repertoire: An Introduction	177
3.3. “Gradations of Fictivity”: Peter Els’s Music of the Spheres	190
3.4. Synthesizing Messiaen	210
3.5. John Cage and the Multimodality of Response	221
3.6. Shostakovich Revisited	234
<b>Codetta. Prolegomena for Empirical Research into Musico-Literary     S(t)imulacra</b>	241
<b>CONCLUSION. After Words</b>	253
<b>WORKS CITED</b>	262
<b>Curriculum Vitae</b>	295