



SUMMARY

‘He Dared to Paint the Voice’. On Eternal – or Perhaps Only Modern – Analogy

‘He dared to paint the voice’ – the paraphrased quote from Albert Aurier’s 1891 text on Paul Gauguin’s *Vision After the Sermon* – was used in the title of the book in a subversive way, not necessarily consistent with the critic’s intent. Read superficially, it highlights the boldness of a painter attempting the impossible: depicting the voice. It served the author as a springboard for multifaceted reflection on the visual arts and the many attempts to depict the world of sound, to formulate a correspondence between visual arts and music. Dedicated to the memory of Professor Wiesław Juszczak, an eminent art historian and philosopher from the University of Warsaw, as well as a great music expert and aficionado, this book is inspired by several of his interpretive proposals.

The reflection the book offers refers many times to the concept and works of art of the past eras, including Titian, Giuseppe Maria Crespi and Balthasar Permoser. However, the main spotlight is put on works from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly those created around the turn of the centuries, which make up a significant portion of the book. This should not come as a surprise, since it was the nineteenth century, and particularly the period of the turn of the centuries that is considered essential for the search for the interrelations between the arts and the ‘total work’ that unites them. Referencing the Romantic and post-Romantic artistic and theoretical concepts, as well as older motifs and myths, the author tries to reconsider the traditional approach to this concept. He explores ‘unsuccessful’ approaches, in which the starting point or the end result of the creative effort revealed the impossibility of combining picture and sound. Thus, the reader can explore the thorough analyses of various efforts to date, as well as take a closer look at how some of the most prominent artists of that day and age – Edgar Degas, Max Klinger, Arnold Schönberg, Georges Seurat and Félix Vallotton – tried to tackle the issue of construing

other, unobvious relations between the arts. In most cases, the works analysed are considered seminal, yet 'exploratory', leading to reflections and questions.

The history of the inseparability of music and the visual arts is therefore shown here as a sequence of unattainable connections, the history of the 'impossible union', albeit one that brought interesting results. The overarching idea behind the book – keeping the reflections paradoxical in nature – aims at revealing the correspondences of music and visual arts in an apophatic manner. The concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* itself had many variants and could be misleading, much like the category of synaesthesia; the *correspondance des arts* are blurred between the various ways of thinking about art. The examination of the issue of music in the visual arts may also be expanded by including in the observation of the world of sounds those that are non-musical (such as the scream). A reversed relation, one of 'visual arts in music' (without mixing in theatre and other disciplines), allows for a more distanced point of view on the former of the issues. This is made clear by the interpretations of Modest Musorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* cited in the book – a musical work inspired by an exhibition of paintings and drawings, which in turn inspired visual artists, including Wassily Kandinsky. In turn, numerous examples of *violon d'Ingres*, the artists trying their hand at playing music, spark a reflection on the choices of creative discipline and the motivations of artists who, for example, abandoned music for painting.

The nature of the book, conceived as an essay that is unfinished, open to hesitant, uncertain interpretations, is foreshadowed by the introduction, entitled 'The possible and impossible relations of music and the visual arts: in search of a subject'. Several of the works taken up in the text serve to demonstrate the variety of problems and obstacles that hindered or prevented the author from formulating a synthetic approach to the subject of the music-visual arts relationship in the history of the arts – an approach that the author initially intended. The abstract tombstone of Arnold Schönberg appears in the text (and on the book cover) as a kind of anti-attempt, or a venture to circumvent the problem that is the search for the interconnectedness of music and the visual arts.

In the many attempts at synthesising the arts at the turn of the centuries, the author finds a prevalence of a lack of a significant – as long as one is endeavouring to find traces of a community, or unity, of the arts in a work – connection between the visual arts and music, along with their numerous superficial correspondences. While analysing these attempts, he, however, grows to increasingly appreciate the biographical, social, milieu and community factors, as well as a deeper existential dimension of seemingly superficial relationships.

If we treat music as a challenge for the visual arts, perhaps it would be justified to conclude that only works of art or decisions that stand as testaments to failure or the awareness of the existence of a boundary between the disci-

plines are worthy of being granted this (unfortunate?) relationship of interconnectedness.

The following four chapters, treated as separate texts that do not create a continuous argument, but rather a selective collection of such attempts or testimonies, are a discussion of several 'failed unions' of painting, drawings and sculptures with music and sound. The first – 'The Voice in the Painting: The Curse of Marsyas, or Casual Remarks About the Troubles of Art in the Nineteenth Century' – explores examples from the oeuvres of Georges Seurat, Edgar Degas, Edvard Munch, but also sculptors such as François Rude. It is where Aurier's quote, referenced by the book's title, has been used. The invocation of the mythical figure of Marsyas and the myth of his tragically concluded musical duel with Apollo – as well as the attempts to depict the myth – allow for a reflection on the ultimate and dramatic meaning of the message of the story. The author also points out how rarely the attempts to depict the myth had included attempts to portray the scream of the tortured Marsyas. It is as if the history of art and the thinking of art have overlooked the fact that this mythological story was completely forgotten in the age of Romanticism and at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – in the periods when the search for the connection between music and visibility intensified. The absence of Marsyas among the many references to and reinterpretations of the ancient myths, still popular also in Symbolic art, is significant. Does this mean that this bond of great art, the associated suffering and the cry that takes its place (or represents its ultimate form), which manifests itself in different interpretations of the myth, was not in tune with the concepts of the day? The jarring absence of Marsyas and his story, too powerful for the artists of the time to handle, must not be overlooked. The motto for this digression is the reflection of Polish philosopher and art historian, Elżbieta Wolicka, who summed up modern art from the point of view of the myth of Marsyas, claiming that: 'It is extremely rare that art has the courage to admit its own heroic powerlessness'.

The chapter 'Félix Vallotton's Attempt: Musical Instruments, Signs of Silence, Voiceless Pictures' discusses the omnipresence of music in the circles of Parisian Nabis in the 1890s. The editorial offices of *La Revue Blanche*, the salon of Tadeusz Natanson and Misia Godebska-Natanson, his wife and Nabis 'muse', who performed works by Chopin and well-known contemporary composers, were conducive to attempts to draw analogies between the arts. We find musical motifs in works by most Nabis, those by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, who was close to them, as well as in the oeuvre of Félix Vallotton, whose set of six woodcuts from 1896–1897, which was then given the secondary title *Musical Instruments* are analysed in detail. The author interprets this forgotten masterpiece of modern printmaking as an expression of the impossibility of depicting music, its unrepresentable nature, and as a manifestation of an attitude directed against

the idea of *correspondance des arts*. Vallotton reveals the frailty, incorrectness and perhaps even the superfluity of attempting to depict music. Indeed, throughout the Swiss artist's graphic oeuvre, particularly his woodcuts, black-and-white contrasts serve to perversely suggest that what is to be depicted is in fact undepictable, hidden. A consideration of the ways in which silence is depicted in representational works by artists from the same era appears as an addendum to the chapter.

The chapter "Like Some Mighty Poem...": An Impossible Monument to Beethoven?, after a brief reminder of the history of commemoration and depiction of Ludwig van Beethoven (including, among others, by sculptor Antoine Bourdelle), focuses on presenting the circumstances and course of the showing of works by Max Klinger's famous sculptor group during the exhibition of the Vienna Secession group in 1902. His so-called *Beethoven Monument*, created over many years by the artist who dabbled in music himself, and who also created monuments of Johannes Brahms and Richard Wagner, is an interesting example highlighting the complex social mechanisms of artistic action. The inauguration of the sculpture, combined with the performance of a fragmentary interpretation of Beethoven's Symphony no. 9 under the baton of Gustav Mahler in the Secession pavilion, especially decoration with other tributes to Beethoven and music (including those by Gustav Klimt), included an opportunistic goal for the organisers. Paradoxically, this great multimedia undertaking, featuring many highly artistic individual components, can be seen as compromising the idea of *correspondance des arts*. The various arts existed alongside each other, pursuing their own separate objectives, in some cases very extemporaneous and influenced by the circumstances. Klinger's *Beethoven* found itself in this mix of circumstances with its own overly complicated programme and incoherent form.

The chapter 'Arnold Schönberg's Existential Experiment: Painting Instead of Music?' shows the famous composer's visual arts episode of several years as an exceptional attempt because it was not undertaken with the intention of finding an analogy between the creative arts he practised. Instead, painting appears in a direct relationship with (or perhaps even as a consequence of) a deep creative and existential crisis originating, among others, in the public misunderstanding Schönberg's earlier music and in the problems of his spiritual master, Gustav Mahler, ultimately rejected as the director of the Vienna opera. Above all, however, Schönberg begins to paint, having taken his first lessons in this field from a colleague, Richard Gerstl, whose emotional relationship with the composer's wife, Mathilde, will lead to a marital conflict, then to the reconciliation of the spouses and finally to Gerstl's spectacular suicide in his studio. This tragic confluence of life and artistic dramas will paradoxically contribute to an explosion of Schönberg's unleashed artistic expression. This, in turn, after a brief

suspension of his composing work, will direct to towards a revolutionary search for new music. An additional, further consequence of the composer-painter's family drama and explorations would be the establishment of a close relationship between Schönberg and Kandinsky. This relationship, later simplified into a schematic dimension (among others, by Pierre Boulez) as the last shared stage of two great artists on their separate paths towards liberation from tonality (in Schönberg's music) and objectivity (in Kandinsky's painting), is complicated precisely by the 'interjection' of Schönberg's own painting and the consequent weaving of the thread of biography and existence into this crisis.

The book lacks a conclusion – this is a deliberate decision by the author, resulting from the assumptions set out in the beginning. The analysed cases do not form a closed whole; rather, they create a set that could have a different composition or be expanded. At the same time, each of them leads our reflection in a different direction.

The accompanying bibliography is selective, a set of general publications on the relationship between sound and the visual arts, conceived as a 'read more...'. It leaves out numerous specific publications cited in the footnotes to each chapter.

translated by Paulina Božek