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Jacob-Ivan Eidt
(Dallas, U.S.A.)

Rilke contra Wagner
Rilke's early concept of Music
and the Convergence of the Arts around 1900

Abstract

This article examines Rainer Maria Rilke's fundamental distinction between the essence of music and poetry, concentrating on his earliest encounters with music around 1900 and their impact on his poetics. It places Rilke's concept of music into the cultural context of the romantic experience and reception of music and the other arts in Germany at the turn of the century. Rilke's early understanding is ultimately negative, deviating from the popularly held belief in *fin de siècle* Europe that all the arts are not just compatible but also in essence identical. For Rilke there can be neither a Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* nor a greater underlying principle around which the arts could be united, despite his enthusiastic integration of the visual arts into his poetics.

Introduction

Commenting on Richard Danielpour's newly composed setting of the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, Will Crutchfield wrote in a *New York Times* article in 1992:

Rainer Maria Rilke seems – extraordinarily for so lyrical a poet – to have been an unmusical man. He didn't play an instrument or frequent concerts; composers didn't inspire him as Cezanne and Rodin did; he made the acquaintance of Busoni but nothing came of it. He must be unique among German intellectual figures of his day in having had nothing substantive to say, even in passing, about the phenomenon of Wagner.¹

¹ Will Crutchfield, «A “Musician” in spite of Himself», *The New York Times*, 1 November 1992.

Crutchfield highlights Rilke's lack of musical experiences in order to contrast them with what he sees as Rilke's true musical expression, namely his poetry. Ferruccio Busoni famously dedicated his *Sketch of a New Aesthetic of Music* to Rilke, calling him a *Musiker in Worten*². Both Busoni and Crutchfield are of the opinion that Rilke was just as much a musician as a poet because the music of poetry is, in essence, the same kind of music as the notes found in a musical score. Interestingly enough, Rilke saw things differently, at least with regard to his experience of music and the nature of music vis-à-vis the other arts. The subject of this article is Rilke's fundamental distinction between the essence of music and poetry.

Rilke's understanding of what music is, and how one experiences it deviates from his views on poetry and painting, so much so that it raises the question implied in Crutchfield's contrast: how can such a lyric poet be so removed from the world of music, if both arts are so similar?³ Whereas many of his contemporaries celebrated the influence of the other arts upon their work, Rilke, while embracing the visual enthusiastically, resisted the musical experience. He not only avoided direct musical influences in the artistic process, but he even seemed to fear them as an ultimately destructive force upon his creativity and poetic vision. At first glance this understanding of music, particularly in relation to poetry, strikes one as idiosyncratic. However, upon closer examination, Rilke's overall perception of music is in keeping with 19th century ideas, especially in the context of the German musical tradition. Although Rilke said nothing directly about Wagner's music, which embodied the musical aesthetics of the age, he most certainly expressed a profound understanding of the implications of Wagner's aesthetics upon his poetics. This article will detail that understanding while concentrating on his earliest reception of music around 1900, placing Rilke's concept of music into the cultural context of the experience and reception of music and the other arts in Germany at the turn of the century.

Scholarship on Rilke and Music

As Thomas Kovach pointed out in his analysis of the poem «An die Musik», the topic of Rilke and music is much more complex and ambivalent than the familiar topic of Rilke and the visual arts³. Rilke scholarship

² Ferruccio Busoni, *Entwurf einer neuen Ästhetik der Tonkunst*. (Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1907), 2.

³ Kovach, Thomas A. «“Du Sprache wo Sprachen enden”»: Rilke's Poem “An die Musik”», *Seminar* 22 (1986): 206.

on his relationship to music is relatively sparse because of the poet's reticence about the subject. Nonetheless, scholars have been able to render a basic understanding of Rilke's evolving relationship to music, especially with regard to his later works. George Schoolfield and Christoph Petzsch have researched Rilke's musical tastes, his concert going (or lack thereof), as well as the references to composers and specific works of music that are to be found in various memoirs, letters, and works of poetry and prose⁴. Scholars such as Kovach, Rüdiger Görner, Winfried Eckel, Silke Pasewalck, and others have analyzed particular works and the role that music plays in them in the formulation of Rilke's poetics.⁵ Although many of these music-centered works seek to place Rilke into a broader modernist context, few are devoted to the other context surrounding music and its relation to the other arts, out of which Rilke's musical experiences evolved.

In his later works Rilke does not describe music as a phenomenon. Beda Allemann and Rüdiger Görner have identified the figural and metaphorical uses of music as representative of what Allemann sees ultimately as a spatial representation⁶ and what Görner references as «eine sinnlich wahrnehmbare unendliche Endlichkeit»⁷. These distinctions are important because both are removed from what music itself actually is for the poet. A figural or metaphorical depiction of music implies a representation or an analogy, which is not the thing itself. A metaphor designates only by implicit comparison or analogy, suggesting similarity but not sameness.

⁴ George C. Schoolfield, «Rilke and Music: A Negative View», *Music and German Literature: Their Relationship since the Middle Ages*, ed. James McGlathery (Columbia: Camden House, 1992), 269-291. Christoph Petzsch «Musik; Verführung und Gesetz (aus Briefen und Dichtungen Rilkes)», *Germanisch-romanische Monatschrift* 10 (1960): 65-85.

⁵ Thomas Kovach, «Du Sprache wo Sprachen enden: Rilke's Poem "An die Musik"», *Seminar* 22 (1986): 206-217, Rüdiger Görner, «... und Musik überstieg uns ...» zu Rilkes Deutung der Musik, *Blätter der Rilke-Gesellschaft* 10 (1983): 50-67, and Rilkes «Musik des Hintergrunds», *Universitas* 40 (1985): 327-332, Winfried Eckel, «Musik, Architektur, Tanz. Zur Konzeption nicht-mimetischer Kunst bei Rilke und Valéry,» *Rilke und die Weltliteratur* ed. Manfred Engel and Dieter Lamping (Düsseldorf/Zürich: Artemis & Winkler Verlag, 1999), 236-259, Silke Pasewalck, «Die Maske der Musik. Zu Rilkes Musikauffassung im Übergang zum Spätwerk,» *Poetik der Krise. Rilkes Rettung der Dinge in den Weltinnenraum*, ed. Hans Richard Brittnacher, Stephan Porombka, and Fabian Störmer. (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2000), 210-229.

⁶ Beda Allemann, *Zeit und Figur beim späten Rilke. Ein Beitrag zur Poetik des modernen Gedichts*. (Pfullingen: Gg. Hauser Metzgingen, 1961), 168.

⁷ Rüdiger Görner, «Rilkes "Musik des Hintergrunds"», *Universitas* 40.3 (1985): 327-332.

Therefore, Orpheus and Apollo are not to be equated with music. Ultimately it is what music *is* for Rilke that engenders its later treatment in his works and which makes any kind of contextualization from this point of view possible.

Rilke's relationship to music underwent gradual changes throughout his life that correspond to changes in his poetic outlook between 1898 and his death in 1926. Rilke's conception of music can be traced to relatively few sources. The most directly relevant are *Notizen zur Melodie der Dinge* (1898), *Marginalien zu Friedrich Nietzsches Geburt der Tragödie* (1900), his correspondence with the pianist Magda von Hattingberg (1914), and the prose piece *Urgeräusch* (1919). In addition, music also plays a role in *Malte Laurids Brigge* (1904-1910), and in some individual poems written between 1906 and 1926. We can identify an exploratory early period around 1900 reflected in the *Notizen* and *Marginalien* that evidences an open and generally positive attitude toward music. This is followed by a period of pointed negativity that coincides with Rilke's association with Rodin around 1903. *Malte Laurids Brigge* marks the beginning of music's expansion into the spatial and physical realm. The later period, which includes the *Sonette an Orpheus*, reflects a figural and metaphoric understanding of music that has already moved away from music as a purely aural phenomenon.

Because the later period has been relatively well researched with an eye not only for the poetic function of music but also for a modernist nexus, it is important to turn to the early and middle period for a more formative account of Rilke's reaction to the musical experience. This early period offers Rilke's initial, unadulterated thoughts on music, whereas the later periods depict the pivotal consequences of his subsequent rejection of music as a result of his adopted poetic program.

Rilke and the Melody of Things

One way of accounting for Rilke's lack of engagement with music is simply to categorize him as musically disinclined. George Schoolfield advanced his «negative view» of Rilke's music reception with the somewhat cynical conclusion that Rilke was not only ignorant of music but that he also had never really been affected by it in a meaningful way. «Only when, at last, Rilke is confident enough to confront his double sense – of musical ignorance on the one side and virginal hearing on the other – can he write the original “musical” poetry of «An die Musik» of 1918»⁸. However,

⁸ George C. Schoolfield», Rilke and Music: A Negative View», *Music and German Lit-*

the idea that Rilke never heard anything special in music (until 1918) and that statements to the contrary were mere affectations designed to hide his embarrassment and insecurity, fail to take into account his life-long approach to all experience, which he begins to define as early as 1898, as intense seeing and hearing. Furthermore, Rilke's few statements about his musical experiences seem to reflect the desire to experience all things, including music, intensely⁹. We also have very telling descriptions by Magda von Hattingberg that describe his reactions, for example, when she plays Handel, Bach and Beethoven for him:

Sein Gesicht [ist] voll gespannter Aufmerksamkeit, wenn er ein Stück zum ersten Mal hört. Es ist, als ob Licht und Schatten über seine Stirne flüchteten, der große ausdrucksvolle Mund [...] ist fast schmerzhaft zusammengedrückt, seine ganze schmale [...] Gestalt scheint zu horchen [...] Manchmal ist mir, als wäre er, völlig in Klang und Harmonie versunken, die lauschende Weltseele selbst, und so stark ist der Einfluß seiner einzigartigen Persönlichkeit, daß der ganze Raum Musik auszustrahlen scheint.¹⁰

One may certainly claim this to be an affectation either on the part of the poet or his loving correspondent Hattingberg. However, even as a partially accurate account, it attests to an intense desire to at least attempt to hear more than just pleasant sounds. Moreover, by Rilke's time, music had long been enshrined as an important part of the German concept of *Bildung*, worthy of great attention¹¹. Rilke was extremely well educated on artistic topics and very knowledgeable about the cultures in which he moved. Lack of musical awareness would be particularly anomalous given its popularity among intellectuals, its intersection with the visual arts at the time, and its significance in Rilke's two cultural homes, the German and Francophile worlds, between which he moved so freely. Indeed, an awareness of music and its importance is what we find in Rilke's *Notizen zur Melodie der Dinge* (1898).

erature: Their Relationship since the Middle Ages, ed. James McGlathery (Columbia: Camden House, 1992), 269-291 (291).

⁹ Rüdiger Görner, «Musik», *Rilke Handbuch*. ed. Manfred Engel, (Stuttgart/Weimar: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 2004), 151.

¹⁰ Magda von Hattingberg, *Rilke und Benvenuto. Ein Buch des Dankes* (Düsseldorf: Deutscher Bücherbund, 1951), 125-126.

¹¹ Celia Applegate, and Pamela Potter, «Germans as the “People of Music”: Genealogy of an Identity», *Music and German National Identity*, ed. Celia Applegate and Pamela Potter (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 1-35 (5).

In his notes on the melody of things, music is not yet represented in the figural or metaphoric terms of the later writings.¹² However, it can be seen as the beginning of his reflections on the inadequacy of language, which suggests the prominent crisis of language so often referred to by many of Rilke's contemporaries.¹³ Published posthumously, these notes should be understood as personal reflections on Rilke's poetic production around the year of 1898, especially on his theatrical piece *Die weiße Fürstin*¹⁴. The set of forty notes begins with two aphoristic poems, which emphasize a new linguistic beginning. After this poetic prelude, the third entry begins with the reflective character of the notes in prose form.

Strikingly, the initial discussion of painting leads to an excursus on the melody of things as it relates to staging drama. In the early Christian tradition up until the 15th century, figures were often painted in front of a gold background. Rilke notes that this process of isolation obscures and interrupts the unity of individual figures with their natural contexts. Rilke compares modern man to these figures in isolation, only instead of a gold background, meaningless words and gestures are what disturb our unity with the things around us.

As is typical for Rilke around the time of his Russian journeys, he evokes religious imagery when speaking of art. Art is described as God's love, which may not dwell with the individual, but must mingle with all things and take effect where all things are one. According to Rilke, art has shown us how isolated and separate we are from the things around us. The unifying principle that connects us to our environment is the powerful melody of the background. The prerequisite for being attuned to the unity of life, and its poetry, is a reflection upon the grand melody which resides in all things, both internal and external, and which helps form our subjectivity. Art's role in this process is to depict a more profound life that goes beyond isolated individuals and interrupted relationships.

In note xxxvi, he compares this to a religion. Interesting here is not just the imperative nature of this quasi-religious calling but also the return to the spatial realm that inspired the excursus in the form of the discussion

¹² Winfried Eckel «Musik, Architektur, Tanz. Zur Konzeption nicht-mimetischer Kunst bei Rilke und Valéry», *Rilke und die Weltliteratur* ed. Manfred Engel and Dieter Lamping (Düsseldorf/Zürich: Artemis & Winkler Verlag, 1999), 236-259 (257-258).

¹³ Jürgen Lehmann, «Rußland», *Rilke Handbuch*. ed. Manfred Engel (Stuttgart/Weimar: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 2004) 107.

¹⁴ *Rainer Maria Rilke, Werke: Kommentierte Ausgabe in vier Bänden Band 4*. ed. Manfred Engel, Ulrich Fülleborn, Horst Nalewski, August Stahl. 1st ed. (Frankfurt am Main/Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1996), 806.

of painting. Ubiquitous invisible music orders and justifies individual space. The invisible world of melody is comparable to the invisible world of God. It underlies and unifies subjective phenomena. It is the unifying force behind the spatial and the tangible. Rilke's understanding of music as melody at this stage in his thinking is strikingly reminiscent of the view of music taken by the early German romantics. He is also applying this view, as the romantics did, to other arts in order to postulate a common universal principle around which to formulate his poetics.

The similarities and differences with the romantics are worth exploring in more detail, because, as Carl Dahlhaus reminds us, «the music of the second half of the nineteenth century was still romantic, while the current of the age as expressed in literature and painting had moved on to realism and impressionism»¹⁵. This may also be said of the way in which music was viewed philosophically, especially in the German cultural sphere.

The legacy of Romanticism

A paradigm shift took place with the development of the concept of absolute music, which according to Dahlhaus originated in tendencies in German romanticism and specifically in German poetry and philosophy around 1800¹⁶. A key aspect of this shift was the newly gained autonomy of music as an art form, which was at first rooted in the unifying principle of «*das Poetische*». The romantics freed instrumental music from its ancillary quality in relation to *logos* by postulating an underlying and unifying element in all art. *Das Poetische* was for German romantics not confined to the literary, rather, it was the substance common to all real art¹⁷. Dahlhaus points out that the romantic notion of the poetic was not unlike a platonic idea, in which artistic expression had to take part in order to qualify as genuine art at all. Therefore, music and painting as well as literature strove to be «poetic» according to the early romantic aesthetic¹⁸. Interestingly, we find Rilke following a similar reasoning with a slight variation. Instead of the poetic principle applied to music, he applies the musical principle to poetry, painting, and drama. This reflects the general crisis of language

¹⁵ Carl Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and Modernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) 5.

¹⁶ Carl Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 3.

¹⁷ Richard Newald, et al. *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur vom Humanismus bis zu Goethes Tod* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1962), 536.

¹⁸ Carl Dahlhaus, *Absolute Music*, 66.

that necessitated an underlying principle for art that was not rooted in logos.

This quasi-platonic essence of art was by definition divorced from the external world of phenomena. The underlying essence comes first, then the concrete manifestation of that essence in the world. Behind the romantic notion of «*Poesie*» is what Dilthey referred to as the all-encompassing element of the world, a metaphysical connectedness of being¹⁹. What made music a special art for the romantics was its ability to express this underlying element of existence more powerfully and more directly than other art forms. In 1898 Rilke seems to follow this romantic notion rather closely with the difference that music is not just the most direct expression of underlying unity, rather it is the cohesive element itself, forming the basis upon which the word can once again be united with the unity of life. This unifying melody is found in all things, as the poetic was for the romantics a century earlier.

Taking Rilke's intellectual milieu into account his attitude towards music at the turn of the century is not surprising. *Fin-de-siècle* Europe was caught up in a profound sense of the disharmony between the spiritual and the physical. Ever since the romantic period, music had been seen as «in essence abstract, absolute, non-referential, metaphysical, and thus ultimately not connected with the real world»²⁰. For this reason, music arose as an ideal antidote to materialistic tendencies such as positivism and naturalism. The disharmony between the physical and the spiritual was seen as the result of an over-emphasis on the strictly empirical in an increasingly technical age.

We can notice two different developments with regard to music on the one hand and literature and the visual arts on the other. Whereas the other arts seem to be flowing with the *zeitgeist* in terms of social, political, and scientific events, music remained traditionally romantic in its orientation especially in the German-speaking world. Many artists transplanted aspects of the romantic world-view in order to move beyond positivistic tendencies. However, unlike literature or the visual arts, music, «the most romantic of the arts», brought with it a great deal of metaphysical baggage. There are many aspects of romanticism that were both anti-positivistic, as well as incompatible with modernist sensibilities. Therefore, when Rilke

¹⁹ Quoted in Richard Newald, et al. *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur vom Humanismus bis zu Goethes Tod* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1962), 536.

²⁰ Walter Frisch, *German Modernism: Music and The Other Arts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 88.

initially incorporates music into his ideas about the melody of things, it inevitably becomes problematic as his «new way of seeing» begins to take shape in the context of a visually oriented aesthetic.

Absolute music, the sublime, and the loss of self

The incompatibility of romantic music with Rilke's poetics can be traced back not only to music's autonomy vis-à-vis the concrete world of phenomena, but also to the postulated lack of autonomous subjectivity involved in the romantic-sublime experience of music. The romantic understanding of music is one that drew greatly on concepts and outlooks already established in German idealism. Music ceased to be a referential language, and became an object of contemplation²¹. The active engagement of contemplation would soon give way to a more mysterious passive engagement resulting in revelatory experiences, a process in which music itself took over, overwhelming the subject. This shift within a shift occurred most prominently with the romantic incorporation of the sublime into music aesthetics, mainly through E. T. A. Hoffmann's extremely influential reception of Beethoven's C minor symphony (1813).

Hoffmann differed from pre-romantic approaches toward music by combining earlier notions of the sublime with a new understanding of the musical experience. Hoffmann portrays music in general as capable of opening up another world, which is beyond both language and sensory perception. He stresses music's nature as indescribable and indefinable through words and concepts.²² However, Hoffmann's description diverges from previous concepts in one conspicuous way. Whereas previously such thinkers as Kant and Schiller required a free and autonomous self for reflecting upon the sublime as a moment of self-awareness, self definition, and even ethically oriented subjectivity, Hoffmann gladly relinquishes the freedom of the experiencing subject to the power of music.

Hoffmann says of Beethoven's music that it destroys everything in us except for the infinite longing inspired by the sublime²³. The listener is able to retain his status as autonomous subject while listening to Haydn and Mozart because their music is still bound to the human realm. Beet-

²¹ Mark Evan Bonds, *Music as Thought: Listening to the Symphony in the Age of Beethoven* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 33.

²², E. T. A. Hoffmann, *Sämtliche Werke Band I. Frühe Prosa*. ed. Gerhard Allroggen, Friedhelm Auhuber, Hartmut Mangold, Jörg Petzel, and Hartmut Steinecke (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2003), 534.

²³ Ibid 534.

hoven transports us beyond this realm, triggering a loss of subjectivity in the encounter with the dark world of the sublime²⁴. The astonishment and impotence that Kant describes, as giving way to a reflection on the moral independence of the subject vis-à-vis the external world²⁵, is replaced by a consciousness of infinite longing for a world in which we have no independence as subjects. Not only is the role of moral independence subverted by music, but it is even expressly negated as a function in the process altogether²⁶. Feeling without a subject is the result. For Hoffmann, it is now a mechanism by which the subject is made aware of a transcendent world divorced from him that he can never really reach and which remains indifferent to the realm of human activity. Music now has absolute autonomy and the self has none in its wake. The romantic musical experience is therefore not an experience of self but of loss of self. This is central to Rilke's understanding of how art functions. Lönker correctly places the loss of self in relation to the crisis of self and language expressed in Hoffmannsthal's «Ein Brief»²⁷. And indeed, this is also the point where the aesthetics of absolute music intersect with Rilke's own attempts to bridge the gap between the physical and the spiritual, between and Self and Other.

Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Hoffmann

Kant's formalism was certainly not the way that Rilke thought of music. The famous Wagner-Brahms polemics in the latter half of the 19th century were really a expression of Schopenhauer-Kant polemics as far as the ultimate view of the essence of music was concerned. August Stahl has researched Rilke's relationship to Schopenhauer's philosophy and its possible influence on his work in some detail. Despite many inconsistencies, Stahl recognizes what he calls a proximity and affinity of thought that exists between poet and philosopher²⁸.

Although decidedly anti-romantic in much of his outlook, Schopenhauer nonetheless elevates music to the metaphysical realm with his ideas

²⁴ Fred Lönker, «Beethovens Instrumentalmusik: Das Erhabene und die unendliche Sehnsucht». *E. T. A. Hoffmann: Romane und Erzählungen*. ed. Günter Saße. (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 2004), 31-42 (36-37).

²⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* Werkausgabe Band X. ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1994), 165.

²⁶ Fred Lönker, «Beethovens Instrumentalmusik, 38.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 40-41.

²⁸ August Stahl, «„ein paar Seiten Schopenhauer“ – Überlegungen zu Rilkes Schopenhauer-Lektüre und deren Folgen Teil 2», *Schopenhauer Jahrbuch* 70 (1989): 174-188 (179).

on its ultimate meaning. And like the romantics, he singles it out as the most metaphysical of all the arts.²⁹ For Schopenhauer, the perceptible world is but the visible manifestation of invisible platonic forms in plurality. These forms are objectifications of the will, the irrational noumenon that motivates and stands behind all of existence. While the other arts are reflections of the will that utilize the platonic forms in order to objectify the will indirectly, music objectifies the will directly without recourse to the forms. Music passes over the forms and is thus independent of the phenomenal world, in effect ignoring it. Thus, music could in fact exist without the world because it is a direct copy of the noumenon itself and not a representation of a form rooted in perceptible phenomena. We can easily see the «proximity and affinity of thought» between Rilke and Schopenhauer in Rilke's reading of Nietzsche's *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik*³⁰.

Rilke's marginalia to Nietzsche's *Die Geburt der Tragödie* are very revealing of his thoughts on music around 1900 and were surely influenced by Lou Andreas Salomé, who brought him into closer contact with Nietzschean thought. The fact that the marginalia are reflective responses to Nietzsche is significant because they bring to light instinctive poetic reactions to the kind of culturally inherited reception of music that Nietzsche exemplifies. Rilke is responding not only to Nietzsche's text but also to an entire world of ideas that encompasses Wagner, Schopenhauer, the Greeks, German Romanticism and German sensibilities toward music in the 19th century. He is unable to avoid the inherited affinity of thought and context that he shares with idealist and romantic thinkers. He is very much responding to the traditional 19th century German idea of music.

Rilke keeps his idea of the melody of things intact, but specifies its nature in connection to the idea of music that Nietzsche espouses in his early Wagner-inspired work. Reacting to Nietzsche, Rilke says of music:

Die Musik (der große Rythmus des Hintergrunds) wäre also zu erfassen: als freie, strömende, unangewandte Kraft, von welcher wir mit Schrecken wahrnehmen, dass sie nicht in unsere Werke steigt, um sich in der Erscheinung zu erkennen, sondern sorglos, als ob wir nicht wären, über unseren Häuptern schwebt. Da wir aber nicht im-

²⁹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* I, Erster Teilband (Frankfurt am Main: Diogenes, 1977), 380-381.

³⁰ Jacob-Ivan Eidt, «Rilke und die Musiker» *Rilkes Welt: Festschrift für August Stabl zum 75. Geburtstag*, ed. Andrea Hübner, Rätus Luck, Renate Scharffenberg, Erich Unglaub, William Waters (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009), 126-134 (130).

stande sind, unangewandte Kraft, (d.h. Gott selbst), zu ertragen, so bringen wir sie mit Bildern, Schicksalen und Gestalten in Beziehung und stellen, da sie selbst, stolz wie ein Sieger, an den Erscheinungen vorüberzieht, immer neue vergleichende Dinge an ihren Weg.³¹

Melody has now been replaced by a more rudimentary rhythm. While retaining his original understanding of a unifying aspect of music that underlies all things, Rilke adds both the sublime component as well the Schopenhauerian idea that music passes over form and representation through form. As in the notes on the melody of things, in a very romantic vein, he evokes religious imagery in his understanding of the noumenon. It is clear that he does not see music formalistically like Kant or Hanslick, denying any connection to the noumenal. In fact, Rilke goes further, essentially equating music, as the great rhythm of the background, with God. Furthermore, this experience of God's unutilized power induces a sublime reaction. Far from mere pleasant entertainment based on mastery of form, music is a divine force that fills the poet with dread precisely because it passes over his representational work, eschewing any manifestation in the realm of physical phenomena.

Rilke elaborates on this experience by explaining that the only way to endure such a musical encounter is to connect it to images, destinies, and forms, thus in essence trying to tie music down to the very things that it naturally bypasses. For Rilke, the only way to endure the noumenal in music is to surround it with analogous concrete phenomena. Schopenhauer also offers an example of this tendency in recognizing an analogy between music and form by virtue of their connection to the will. Schopenhauer maintains that it is possible to approach music in this way but that in the end it must remain an imperfect analogy. Music has no direct relationship to its analogies. It expresses the inner nature of phenomena but not the phenomena themselves. Music remains abstract, essential, transcendent, and non-referential in the romantic sense³². Rilke seems to concur, recognizing that the listener adds something extra-musical to the experience of which music itself remains independent and indifferent. We encounter music, but it does not encounter us. This is an important distinction for Rilke because his poetic program deals with an interactive encounter with concrete things. This will later become the inspiration for his much cele-

³¹ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Werke*, Band 4., 161.

³² Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, II Zweiter Teilband (Frankfurt am Main: Diogenes, 1977), 526.

brated *Dinggedichte*. It is also the source of his emerging understanding of the role of the artist.

For Rilke, the artist has a very special task in his attempt to reconcile life and spirit. This task is complicated by music. Rilke says of the artist in relation to music:

Gottes unendliche Freiheit wurde durch die Schöpfung beschränkt. Mit jedem Ding wurde ein Stück seiner Kraft gebunden. Aber nicht sein ganzer Wille ist mit der Schöpfung verknüpft. Musik (Rythmus) ist der freie Überfluß Gottes, der sich noch nicht an Erscheinungen erschöpft hat, und an diesem versuchen sich die Künstler in dem unbestimmten Drange, die Welt nachträglich in dem Sinne zu ergänzen, in welchem diese Stärke, weiterschaffend, gewirkt hätte und Bilder aufzustellen jener Wirklichkeiten, die noch aus ihr hervorgegangen wären.³³

What becomes evident here is the distinction that Rilke makes between music and visual art. Two years earlier, he connected painting to the melody of things. Now we see that images, be they in paintings or in poems, represent the artistic attempt to continue creating where God left off. Music, however, is the primordial creative force of God Himself; overflowing, divine, and lacking any tangible form. Therefore, the only recourse left to the artist is to try and capture music as form. He goes on to contrast music and image in Nietzschean terms:

In der plastischen Kunst überwindet Apollo das Leiden des Individuums durch die Verherrlichung der Ewigkeit der Erscheinung, während in der dionysischen geradezu die ewige Flucht der Erscheinung gefeiert wird.³⁴

For Rilke, music is elemental, alien, and non-human. Human beings create art in order to establish a connection with the primordial world, which underlies all things. Music comes from God and therefore is eternal and can do without phenomena entirely. Seen in this way, the composer does not create in the same way that the poet or painter creates. For Rilke Apollo's music is connected to the lyrical word. Where poets and painters build on to God's creation, establishing a connection to it, composers are simply arranging that which emanates from God in overabundance. Composers are the collectors of God's surplus divinity. For this reason, Rilke is unable to center his poetics on any kind of musical principle. Here Rilke is

³³ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Werke* Band 4. 161.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 166.

in agreement with Hoffmann about music destroying everything in the individual with the exception of longing. Rilke draws an appropriate conclusion, however, when he states that the Apollonian (poetic form) overcomes the longing of the individual for eternity through the eternity of phenomena, whereas the Dionysian art of music signals the dissolution of form and thus image. The difference between Hoffmann and Rilke's concept of music, then, lies in Rilke's negative assessment vis-à-vis human subjectivity and music's relationship to any notion of transcendence.

Rilke's New Way of Seeing and the Rejection of Music

Given Rilke's fundamentally different understanding of how music affects the experiencing subject, it is of no surprise that the very fashionable convergence of the arts with regard to music does not come into play for him. It is impossible for him to incorporate the musical experience as such into his new poetics. In fact, because of this fundamental difference and the pivotal role played by the visual experience in the formation of his middle period, music is even at times perceived to be a destructive force, to be rendered only metaphorically.

Rilke's interest in the visual arts is centered on the nature of the artist and the existential experience of the creative individual³⁵. Music bypasses this subjective creative process. Rilke explores the creative process in his artist portraits, most notably in his works on Rodin, Cézanne, Van Gogh, and Picasso. Although dedicated to the lives and work of the artists in question, these pieces provide an occasion for Rilke to formulate his poetics through his personal encounter with sculpture and painting, which are then also later reflected in individual poems. Because of Rilke's understanding of an artist as continuing God's creation, the visual artists can serve as a model for his poetic program of accomplishing the same. The composer offers no such example. Rilke's poetics seek to salvage the modern individual subject and its connection to life through both language and a commitment to a kind of immanent transcendence³⁶. The sublime in music is beyond both language and the individual subject. One is reminded of the double meaning attributed to the idea of absolute music in the 19th century as being both beyond words and men³⁷. There was a tendency toward materiality in language in modern poetry around the turn

³⁵ Antje Büssgen, «Bildende Kunst», *Rilke Handbuch*, ed. Manfred Engel (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler Verlag, 2004), 131.

³⁶ August Stahl, 182.

³⁷ Carl Dahlhaus, *Absolute Music*, 40.

of the century that looked upon words as things and poems as constructed worlds of both meaning and spatiality³⁸. This was certainly part of Rilke's understanding and his main motivation for turning toward the visual arts for inspiration, and away from music.

This focus on the visual is intensified during Rilke's time as Rodin's secretary. He describes the sculptor in his letters and prose pieces in the same way that he describes the real artist, as one creating in God's footsteps, finishing the work of creation. Likewise, he contrasts this artistic ethos with the false art of music. In a letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé from 1903 he says of Rodin and his art:

Seine Kunst war von allem Anfang an Verwirklichung (und das Genthheil von Musik, als welche die scheinbaren Wirklichkeiten der täglichen Welt verwandelt und noch weiter entwirktlicht zu leichten, gleitenden Scheinen. Weshalb denn auch dieser Gegensatz der Kunst, dieses Nicht-ver-dichten, diese Versuchung zum Ausfließen, so viel Freunde und Hörer und Hörige hat, so viel Unfreie und an Genuß Gebundene, nicht aus sich selbst heraus Gesteigerte und von außen her Entzückte ...).³⁹

Rilke's anti-musical sentiments, which are almost synonymous with anti-romantic ones, become clear as he describes music as a distorter of reality, dissolving form and darkening things so as to render a connection with the experiencing subject impossible.

The romantic tendencies toward internalization of experience, self-reflexive aestheticism, and alienation from the outside world are directly associated with the musical experience. Even more unflattering is his description of the listener as a willing slave trapped inside himself and his one-sided pleasures. Music is depicted almost like a hallucinogen that when abused ultimately leads to dissipation of the self. This is contrasted with Rodin's particular concern for the *Schein der Schönheit*, which he seeks to save from time, the actual medium of music as *Zeitkunst*. «Er wollte daß sie sei und sah seine Aufgabe darin, Dinge (denn Dinge dauerten) in die weniger bedrohte, ruhigere und ewigere Welt des Raumes zu passen [...]». It seems that what disturbed Rilke about music was its temporal, ephemeral aspect. Unlike the converging tendencies of movements like *Jugendstil* Rilke now draws a grand distinction between *Zeitkunst* (music) and *Raum-*

³⁸ Carsten Strathausen, *The Look of Things, Poetry and Vision around 1900* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 12.

³⁹ Rainer Maria Rilke and Lou Andreas Salome, Briefwechsel. ed. Ernst Pfeiffer (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1989), 94.

kunst (painting and sculpture). Rilke's reduction of music from melody to the great rhythm of the background is an attempt to give music a spatial dimension, thus tying it down to the eternity of phenomena and the semblance of beauty in things.

Rilke's Beethoven

Rilke continues to develop his notion of music as a spatial phenomenon in his description of Beethoven in *Malte Laurids Brigge*. Rilke was fascinated with Rodin's creative process as a new way of seeing the world and transforming that vision into tangible reality. Beethoven, also a lionized icon of artistic creativity, is referenced in *Malte*, but clearly with a very different relation to his craft. *Malte* offers a depiction of Beethoven that is characteristic of Rilke's vision of music in figural and metaphoric terms in his later works, which marks a departure from the romantic notion of music as autonomous art form, existing independently of concrete reality.

The Beethoven episode in *Malte* centers on a copy of the composer's death mask. This is significant because the man and his music can only offer the poet inspiration in the form of a concrete image. Rilke treats the description of the death mask like a *Dinggedicht* in prose form. Görner even refers to the mask as «zum Ding gewordenen Musik»⁴⁰. Much like the «Archaic Torso of Apollo» the mask serves as a catalyst for artistic reflection after intense visual scrutiny. Moreover it is not music alone that is of interest, rather its necessary attachment to the physical realm.

Beethoven's physiognomy is described as «Diese unerbittliche Selbstverdichtung fortwährend ausdampfen wollender Musik»⁴¹. The term «Selbstverdichtung» is in direct opposition to Rilke's characterization of music as «dieses Nicht-ver-dichten» in his letter about Rodin. It is clear that Beethoven's titanic personality is so heroic not because of music but rather despite its influence. Beethoven's individuality as read in his face is «unerbittlich» in the shadow of a music, which has its own volition, and which is not composed as much as it is emitted like so much formless vapor. The reason that Beethoven was able to triumph as an artistic individual despite music is then given as a result of his deafness.

According to the description in *Malte*, God shut him off from other sounds leaving him only his own sounds. That is to say he could create without having to hear music «Damit er nicht beirrt würde durch das

⁴⁰ Rüdiger Görner, *Rainer Maria Rilke: Im Herzwerk der Sprache* (Wien: Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 2004), 139.

⁴¹ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Werke Band 3*. 508.

Trübe und Hinfällige der Geräusche»⁴². The Apollonian «Ewigkeit der Erscheinung» is echoed in the description of Beethoven's deafness as one that granted him clarity and lastingness (*Klarheit und Dauer*). Only by virtue of being cut off from music as aural phenomenon is Beethoven able to appear as «Weltvollender», in the same way that the poet is called to finish work on God's creation. This is the basis for the fantastic vision of Beethoven playing a piano in the desert surrounded by angels, mountains, and long dead kings. The vision is reported in subjunctive and begins in a similar fashion to the lament of the first Duino Elegy: «Deine Musik: daß sie hätte um die Welt sein dürfen; nicht um uns. » «Und dann hättest du ausgeströmt, Strömender, ungehört; an das All zurückgebend, was nur das All erträgt».⁴³ It is clear that the most preferred type of music is music that goes unheard by the human ear. Beethoven's music is described much like the *Überfluß Gottes*. It is not of man and cannot strengthen our individuality. It should be confined to creation.

As Pasewalck has noted about *Malte*, it contains a criticism of music because of the passivity that it demands from the listener that fails to strengthen and form the inner self as art should⁴⁴. The narrator in *Malte* declares:

Ich, der ich schon als Kind der Musik gegenüber so mißtrauisch war (nicht, weil sie mich stärker als alles forthob aus mir, sondern, weil ich gemerkt hatte, daß sie mich nicht wieder dort ablegte, wo sie mich gefunden hatte, sondern tiefer, irgendwo ganz ins Unfertige hinein).⁴⁵

The music that we find in *Malte* is not really music but an altered state of musical awareness untouched by hearing. Rilke criticizes the very aspect of romantic music, which Hoffmann celebrated, namely its tendency toward dissolution of self and self-awareness. Rilke's Beethoven is a far cry from Hoffmann's. From the time of *Malte* onward we can see Rilke's treatment of music primarily in terms of its spatial and extra-musical aspects.

The endeavor to utilize the lyrical and rhythmical aspects of music through a spatial medium was popular at the turn of the century. Theodor W. Adorno famously saw this type of convergence of the arts as a pseudo-

⁴² Rainer Maria Rilke, Werke Band 3. 508.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Silke Pasewalck, «Die fünffingrige Hand», *Die Bedeutung der sinnlichen Wahrnehmung beim späten Rilke* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), 227.

⁴⁵ Rainer Maria Rilke, Werke Band 3. 542.

convergence, which he traces, at least in France, to the positivistic influence of the age. This is the very influence that poets like Rilke sought to overcome around 1900. Adorno maintained that music and the other arts were in fact not compatible, at least not on such a superficial level. «Vielmehr ist die Verräumlichung der Musik Zeugnis einer Pseudomorphose der Musik an die Malerei, im Innersten ihrer Abdikation»⁴⁶. In a remarkably Rilke-like passage aimed at Stravinsky, he also traces this incompatibility to the temporal dimension inherent in music as being the opposite of the other arts. «Alle Malerei, auch die abstrakte, hat ihr Pathos an dem, was ist: alle Musik meint ein Werden [...]»⁴⁷. The «becoming», which Adorno refers to as the temporal in music, is the aspect of music that makes Apollo's glorification of eternity in appearance impossible. Not only is there no concrete phenomenon to connect the subject to, but even if there was one, it would not be a finished «thing» but of a continuously changing nature. A work of art offers the viewer the whole experience at once, allowing the subject to connect to the static thing. Music never stands still. It fades into the time in which it is born, passing over all things and all subjects. The visual arts create a visible world. The language of poetry creates an imaginable world no less concrete in its referential connection to things. Music, by contrast, is a world of its own, separate and sovereign. For Rilke, the only possible redeemable aspect of the musical experience would be the physical space into which music resounds. It is the only thing left after it fades into silence. Consequently, the spatial is the only semblance of the beautiful in which immanent transcendence can be found by the experiencing subject.

Conclusion

Rilke's concept of music around 1900 is essentially in line with many aspects of the romantic understanding of music and its subsequent reception in German philosophy after Kant. However, his reaction to this romantic conceptualization is decidedly negative and mirrors the struggle that Nietzsche underwent a generation earlier. This negative reception can be traced back to what Hegel identifies as romantic art's undoing of the classical attempt to unify form and content. Music's autonomy over the physical creates a hegemony of spiritual content superseding material forms of representation and in the end reducing the material form to in-

⁴⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 12: Philosophie der neuen Musik*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1998), 174.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

significance⁴⁸. The impact on Rilke's poetics was significant, which in essence strove, if not for the opposite, then at least for parity of inner and outer worlds. The aversion that Rilke demonstrated toward music in his early writings can be seen as a consequence of the role played by concrete things and their dialectic impact on the artist.

Although Rilke gradually outgrew his aggressive rejection and avoidance of music, it never represented a fundamental revision of his original critical attitude from the early years around 1900⁴⁹. Much in the sense of Adorno's *Pseudomorphose*, the spatial aspect was a way of salvaging the musical experience by extending it beyond its own aesthetic sphere. It was, as he called it, «*Verführung zum Gesetz*». Even in Rilke's turn toward the visual arts he avoids abstraction. He found limited inspiration in Picasso's cubism because of its rootedness in the concrete geometric forms of the visible world⁵⁰. This was not the case for the hallucinatory and ultimately alienating images of Kokoschka and other abstract artists.⁵¹ Nor did he seem to fully embrace Cézanne, Klee, Dada, or surrealist tendencies in art. While finding such movements and individual artists interesting, Rilke nonetheless resisted much of what constituted artistic abstraction and above all experimental movements at the turn of the century. Rilke's own imagery is rarely very surreal⁵².

Just as Nietzsche cried «*cave musicam*» in *Human, All Too Human* in 1886 as he began to attack Wagner for his seductive, romantic music⁵³, we can see Rilke's distrust of music grow from the same understanding that music represents a danger in its ability to de-emphasize if not dissolve the concrete world in which we exist as subjects. Erich Heller reminds us in his reflections on Rilke and Nietzsche, that both attempted to compensate for the death of God and the loss of transcendence in the modern world. As a

⁴⁸ David L. Mosley, «Auflösung in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Music», *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51.3 (1993): 437-444 (443).

⁴⁹ Silke Pasewalck, «Die Maske der Musik. Zu Rilkes Musikauffassung im Übergang zum Spätwerk», *Poetik der Krise. Rilkes Rettung der Dinge in den Weltinnenraum*, ed. Hans Richard Brittnacher, Stephan Porombka, and Fabian Störmer (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2000), 210-229 (211).

⁵⁰ Martina Krießbach-Thomasberger, Afterword. *Rainer Maria Rilke über moderne Malerei*. By Rainer Maria Rilke (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 2000), 153-178 (161).

⁵¹ Ibid 167.

⁵² Judith Ryan, *Rilke, Modernism and Poetic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 222-223.

⁵³ Georges Liébert, *Nietzsche and Music*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 155.

consequence they were both concerned with similar questions: «How to cast eternity from the new mold of absolute transience, and how to achieve the mode of transcendence within the consciousness of pure immanence ...»⁵⁴. The main difference between poet and philosopher is that Nietzsche kept a very romantic notion of music that he never fully could overcome⁵⁵. Rilke, on the other hand, recognized all of music as «romantic» in nature and felt compelled to first reject it all together, and then modify it in accordance with his poetics, a poetics that desperately sought an immanent transcendence in experience. In this sense Rilke was more *contra* Wagner than even Nietzsche. As one of his late French poems so eloquently attests, the sublime is a departure, a departure from the self and its concrete world. And music is the last glance that we cast back upon the departed.

⁵⁴ Erich Heller, *The Disinherited Mind* (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), 164.

⁵⁵ Carl Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism*, 39.