Małgorzata GRAJTER

Music and Mimesis: Revisiting Typologies of Musical Signs Based on Imitation

Muzika ir mimezė: imitacija paremtų muzikos ženklų tipologijų peržiūra

The Grażyna and Kiejstut Bacewicz Academy of Music in Łódź, Gdańska 32, 90-716 Łódź, Poland
malgorzata.grajter@gmail.com

Abstract
The goal of this article is to propose a typology of musical signs based on imitation, which covers not only tone painting or musical topics, but also musical arrangement and ekphrasis as signs representing other works of art. It seems that combining historical perspective with modern theories can be extremely productive and may result in creating more comprehensive systematics.
Keywords: mimesis, tone painting, topic theory, arrangement, semiotics.

Anotacija
Straipsnyje siūloma imitacija grindžiamų muzikinių ženklų tipologija, kuri apima ne tik garsinę tapybą ar muzikines temas, bet ir muzikinę aranžuotę bei ekfrazę kaip ženklus, vaizduojančius kitokių menų kūrinius. Manytina, kad istorinės perspektyvos derinimas su šiuolaikinėmis teorijomis gali būti itin produktyvus ir padėti sukurti išsamesnę sistematiką.
Reikšminiai žodžiai: mimezė, simfoninė poema, topikų teorija, aranžuotė, semiotika.

In reference to the subject of musical meaning, particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, some methodological bias is observed among musicologists: in the German-speaking countries, for instance, it is more common to tackle the subject from the historical perspective, including the theory and aesthetics of music of these centuries (see, e.g., Bartel 1997, Krones 1999, and others). In the Anglophone countries, on the other hand, a tendency is observed to apply modern research tools, mainly derived from twentieth-century semiotics to the same repertoire. The question, which remains valid for us today, is whether it is possible to combine historically informed interpretive analysis of music with modern theories of musical signification, or in other words, to connect retrospective with perspective. What remains of particular interest to this study is how to classify and arrange musical signs into a typology, based on the knowledge of historical background and contemporary research. As an initial attempt to answer this question, the ways in which different methodological approaches can affect the view on the principle of mimesis in music are discussed in this article on several examples from the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theory and aesthetics of music, as well as the most recent findings in research into musical meaning.

As reflected in the theoretical and aesthetical writings of the late eighteenth century, the principle of mimesis was still considered one of the key vehicles of musical meaning at that time. Towards the decline of the era of mimesis as default artistic doctrine, Johann Nikolaus Forkel, one of the leading German theorists of music of the late eighteenth century, who clearly remained within the area of influence of Kant's aesthetics, introduced a modern and comprehensive typology of music-rhetorical figures (or, in more contemporary language, musical signs) in his work entitled *Allgemeine Geschichte der Musik* (1788). Yet, although in this study the focus is visibly shifted from the aesthetics of *Nachahmung* (imitation of nature), which had been prevalent in the eighteenth-century theory of music, to the categories of intellectual pleasure (*intellectuelles Vergnügen*) and emotiveness (*Empfindung*), the first category still occupies an important place in his classification.

Forkel divides rhetorical figures into two main groups: figures intended "for the reason" (*Figuren für den Verstand*) and figures designed "for the imagination" (*Figuren für die Einbildungskraft*). The first category, intended for the "reason," encompassed figures associated with imitative techniques and various forms of canon, which were supposed to evoke the so-called *intellectuelles Vergnügen*, that is, intellectual contentment. The second category, "figures for the imagination," in turn, is divided into two subcategories, namely the imitative figures, or as Forkel would say, "so genannte musikalische Malereyen," as well the "emotive" figures, defined as "Figuren innerer Empfindung" (Forkel 1788: 53–59). Worth noting is that the word *Malereyen*, in Forkel's terms, includes both onomatopoeias and imitations of visual objects (see Table 1).

FIGUREN | FIGURES		
Für den Verstand | for the Reason	*Für die* **Einbildungskraft** | for **the Imagination**	
	"*musikalische* **Malereyen**" tone painting (**pictorialism**)	"*Figuren innerer Empfindung*" figures of inner feeling/experience
	sichtbar | **visual** *hörbar* | **aural**	

Table 1. Johann Nikolaus Forkel's classification of musical figures.

Notwithstanding the "crisis of the mimetic aesthetics," induced by Immanuel Kant, who first separated the notion of beauty from the imitation of nature, and the prevalence of the idea of absolute music in the nineteenth century, the old Aristotelian principle seems to never have lost its significance entirely. An example is the book *Die Grenzen der Musik und Poesie: eine Studie zur Ästhetik der Tonkunst*, first published in 1856 by August Wilhelm Ambros, to whom the principle of mimesis in music was a relevant, if outdated, topic. Still, the principle of mimesis remains in line with the conviction that the capability of music to imitate natural phenomena is limited; the same conviction that had caused eighteenth-century philosophers to estimate music as an art inferior to painting or poetry.
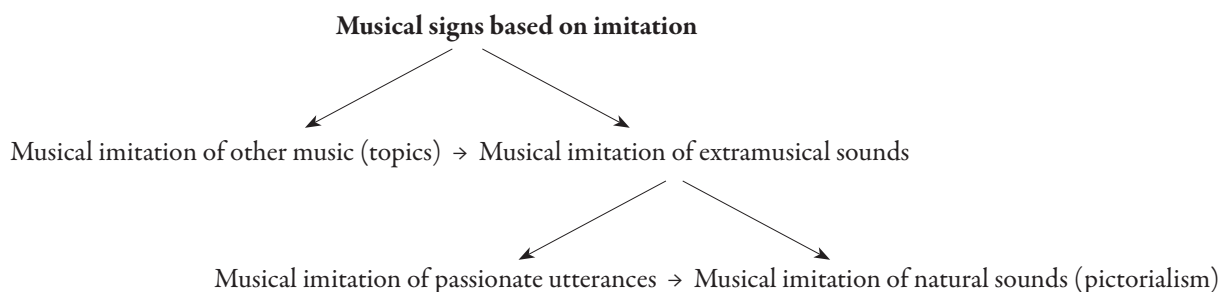
> The music [...] is not able to express any single, specific term – strictly speaking, except for the few [...] cases of onomatopoeic and naturalistically true imitations of the sound of the rolling thunder, the calling of the quail and the like, that can still evoke the immediate memory of these natural sounds in anyone who has already heard the real rolling of thunder or quail calling. (Ambros 1885: 72)[1]

The present-day view on mimesis and meaning in music is affected by the still emerging and relatively young field of musical semiotics. One of the grounds for the interpretive approach to musical meaning is the tripartite model of signs developed by Charles S. Peirce (sign-object-interpretant) as well as his classification of signs into iconic, indexical and symbolic. In the Peircean theory of signs, the principle of mimesis is mostly associated with the *iconicity* of the sign, that is, the resemblance of a certain object. Such is, for instance, the case of musical *onomatopoeias*, which are

clearly iconic. In recent years, contributors dealing with the problem of musical meaning have expanded the theory of musical mimesis with new categories, such as musical topics. For example, a typology of musical signs based on imitations by Danuta Mirka encompasses:

> [...] two classes of musical signs based on imitation: musical imitation of other music (topics) and imitation of extra-musical sounds. The second class can be further subdivided into two types: imitation of passionate utterances and imitation of natural sounds (pictorialism) [...]. Musical imitation of other music – Ratner's topics – lay outside the doctrine of mimesis in the eighteenth century but was subsumed under this doctrine in the twentieth. (Mirka 2014: 36)

Compared to Forkel, Mirka's typology does not include two elements. Firstly, the phenomena subsumed by Forkel into the category "figures for the Reason," based on imitation of a musical subject (e.g., fugal technique, canon, etc.), albeit intended as an abstract concept of intra-musical imitation (*imitatio thematis*),[2] can also produce meanings – for instance, "fugue" connotes escape, getaway; and imitation of a subject as such might convey the idea of following something or someone. An example to this is an aria *Ich folge Cristo nach* from Bach's cantata *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen*, BWV 12. Johann Mattheson also compared the idea of musical imitation (*Imitatio, vel potius, Aemulatio vocum*) to the lively dialogue between two people (Mattheson 1739: 331). Secondly, while Mirka seems to be mainly preoccupied with aural phenomena, Forkel's classification includes the imitation of visual objects in music. By acknowledging the potential of music to represent, even symbolically and in a very limited way, visual phenomena, the author displayed a

Musical signs based on imitation

Musical imitation of other music (topics) → Musical imitation of extramusical sounds

Musical imitation of passionate utterances → Musical imitation of natural sounds (pictorialism)

Figure 1. Danuta Mirka's classification of signs based on imitation.

Intramusical imitation Music imitating other music	Extramusical imitation Music imitating other phenomena	
Imitatio thematis Imitation as a polyphonic technique (that Forkel referred to as "figures for the Reason") can produce meanings.	Music imitating other sounds – "audible objects"	Music imitating "visible objects" (graphic representations in the score) → the symbolic meaning of musical notation, etc.
	Musical imitation of passionate utterances	
Musical topics		

Table 2. An integral classification of musical signs based on imitation (Mirka 2014: 36, Forkel 1788: 53–59).

surprising sensitivity to the intersemiotic aspect of mimesis, that is, the interaction between image and sound as different sign systems.

On the other hand, the absence of musical topics in Forkel's classification is no surprise, since the theory of that time did not speak of musical topics as such, or anything close to them. The reason might be that the doctrine of mimesis in eighteenth-century aesthetics was still linked to the imitation of natural phenomena rather than other artifacts in music. From the modern perspective, however, topics may be included in the classification of mimetic musical signs, since they imitate some other music that appears to be taken out of its original context, according to Mirka's definition. Their character is indexical, since the object of imitation is a musical style or genre, and it points to some extramusical meaning, through associations with the social context in which these genres and styles play a significant role or certain affects or phenomena that they represent. For instance, the operatic topos of *Tempesta* was used to depict "stormy" states of human psyche, such as rage or vengeance (*aria di vendetta*), and so it can also function when transposed to instrumental music. However, musicians, theorists and listeners had certainly been aware of the existence of topics long before the term was coined by Leonard Ratner in 1980, as it is shown in the passage from August Wilhelm Ambros's *Die Grenzen*, in which the author clearly speaks of the "Pastoral" and "Martial" topics:

> If a piece of music mimics the recumbent fifth drones of the bagpipe, which to a certain extent imitates the melodies of the alpine horn, hardly any listener will fail to notice that something shepherd-like is meant; [similarly] with marching rhythms and trumpets blaring on top of them, everyone thinks of warfare and the like. (Ambros 1885: 73)[3]

This commentary shows yet another aspect on typologization of imitative musical signs, namely from the point of view of the different semantic fields to which these signs belong. This concept of a typology was developed by Joan Grimalt in his book *Mapping Musical Signification* (2020). After outlining the main types of musical signs in the introductory chapters (musical signs, madrigalisms, rhetorical

figures, topics, etc.), Grimalt turns the reader's attention to the main semantic fields of eighteenth- to nineteenth-century music, corresponding to the venues in which music was mostly practiced at that time: sacred (church), martial (army), lyrical (chamber), hunt and pastoral (the outdoors), dance (ballroom), and theatrical (theater) – it is a transition from types of signs to the meanings they generate.

The comparison of different representative typologies of musical signs from different historical periods, carried out without conviction about the superiority of any of them, seem to offer new insights into the many ways in which the doctrine of mimesis functions in music. Still, there seems to be yet another perspective that may bring new reflections, namely the perspective of translation theory. The border between musicology and a relatively young academic interdiscipline, usually referred to as translation studies, remains an underexplored research area. Meanwhile, translation theory seems to offer tools that might become an invaluable support in the research into musical work and its signification. My own experience with the topic so far has led to the formulation of the term *musical translation*, defined as a rendition of the work in its entirety that involves necessary changes and transformations resulting from the new medium, time, place, and purpose of the new version. Technically, this umbrella term encompasses such musical phenomena as transcription, arrangement, reduction, or cover version in popular music. But it can also refer to intersemiotic translations or transmutations of other works of art into music.

Among many scientific and non-scientific attempts to find out what translation is, one possible way of perceiving it is as an imitation of some other work by the use of means of the new language. The concept of translation as mimesis was particularly close to the German-Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin, but the idea itself seems to be much older.[4] Based on the triadic model of Peirce, translation can be considered a sign that stands for an original work in the perception of a certain group of recipients. Its key features are similarity – the translation **reflects** the essential features the original, causality – the translation exists **because** the original exists, and conventionality – the **transformation**

process necessary to fit the work into the context of the new language and culture (Pieczyńska-Sulik 2009: 155–156). Following this line of thought, translation and the translator take on the role of mediators between an object and the act of interpreting. This could be done, among others, by means of iconicity and imitation – for Else Vieira and Haroldo de Campos "translation is an operation in which it is not only the meaning that is translated but the sign itself in all its corporeality (sound properties, visual imagetics, all that makes up the iconicity of the aesthetic sign)" (Vieira 1999: 105, cf. de Campos 1992: 35).

Then, if translation is a form of mimesis, it is possible to assume that mimesis is also, in a sense, similar to translation: it involves rendering of an object through some process of artistic elaboration and recreation. Additionally, in the Latin language, the noun *trānslātiō, -ōnis*, signifies "bearing, carrying, bringing something beyond, across or over" something else. This process is obviously not exclusive to the language as a semiotic system, although the question of whether such non-linguistic transfer pertains to the scope of translation theory is still under dispute. In recent years, a South African scholar Kobus Marais has been one of the most avid advocates of a comprehensive translation theory which goes far beyond language. Departing from Peircean model of a sign, Marais makes a distinction between inter-, intra- and extra-systemic translation. Without specifying what a semiotic system must be – except for the fact that it must have semiotic features – the author claims that all systems have their 'intra', "inter" and "extra," and all of them are subject to intra-, inter-, and extra-systemic translation. Finally, the five senses (visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, and gustatory), and the medium in which the translated work is materialized (e.g., music, sculpture, architecture) are further tools to help create more specific categories of translation (Marais 2019: 157).

Therefore, when we take a closer look on how *mimesis* works in music, we may perceive tone painting as a kind of translation (e.g., of indeterminate, natural pitches of birdsong to the determinate pitches existing within the musical system of scales). Similarly, musical topics share the aspect of being taken out of their original contexts and placed somewhere else with translation. Mimesis also plays a significant role in the art of transcription: Franz Liszt, in the third of the *Lettres d'un bachelier ès-musique*, addressed to Mr. Adolphe Pictet, speaks of the high imitative qualities of the contemporary piano that allow it to reproduce several effects of other instruments, such as harp-like arpeggios, prolonged notes similar to those played by wind instruments, and *staccato* (Liszt 1838: 59).[5] The idea of imitating other instruments on the piano was also shared by Johannes Brahms, who, in a 1877 letter to Clara Schumann, mentioned Bach's *Chaconne* in D minor and the best way to play it on the piano:

There is only one way I can find: it is when I can play it with my left hand alone, a very diminished, but approximate and completely pure enjoyment of the work! Sometimes I even remember the story of the Egg of Columbus! The similar difficulty, the type of technique, the arpeggiation, it all comes together – to feel like a violinist! (Brahms 1927)[6]

A much more complicated and disputable case of translation[7] occurs when a musical work represents, or points to, another work composed in different sign system, for example, a painting. In translation theory, the term used for such transformation is agreed to be *intersemiotic translation* or transmutation, coined by Roman Jakobson (Jakobson 1959: 233). Other alternatives, such as *transduction* (Sebeok 1991: 28), *intersystemic translation*, as formulated by Umberto Eco (Eco 2001: 100), or *extra-systemic* translation (Marais 2019: 157) have not yet replaced the original term entirely. Whichever of these terms is applied, the process of translation between sign systems of different kind is close to the concept of *ekphrasis*, as defined by Siglind Bruhn – that is, "representation in one medium of a real or fictious text composed in another medium" (Bruhn 2000: 7–8).[8] Here, a musical work as a sign represents, or stands for, another non-musical work of art. The process of intersemiotic translation involves substitution of visual (or verbal) signs with musical signs, as in nineteenth-century programmatic music, for instance. To give but one example, the symphonic poem *Stanisław and Anna Oświecimowie*, composed by Mieczysław Karłowicz, was inspired by Stanisław Bergmann's painting *Stanisław Oświecim u zwłok Anny* (*Stanisław Oświęcim Next to Anna's Corpse*). In this picture, the bitter end of the legend of the separated siblings Stanisław and Anna, who met by chance as adults and fell in love with each other, is captioned, namely Stanisław kneeling before the body of his late beloved sister. The musical work of Karłowicz "translates" the two characters portrayed in the picture into musical subjects: the agitated theme of Stanisław and the lyrical theme of Anna (see Figure 2 a and b), interwoven with the motif of relentless fate, and the conclusion with a section marked as *Tempo di Marcia funebre*, with Anna's theme in minor mode, representing the woman's death (Szerszenowicz 2008, pp. 305–309):

Figure 2. Mieczysław Karłowicz, *Stanisław i Anna Oświecimowie,* Op. 12 (1907): a) Stanisław's motif (mm. 2–3), b) Anna's motif (mm. 47–50).

Figure 3. Stanisław Bergmann, *Stanisław Oświęcim Next to Anna's Corpse* (1888).

Still, the problem of equivalence of meanings in the intersemiotic translation remains difficult to resolve; therefore, to such case, when one text is translated into a different system of signs, the words of Umberto Eco seem particularly relevant:

> As already mentioned, translating is not only connected with linguistic competence, but with intertextual, psychological, and narrative competence. Similarity in meaning can only be established by interpretation, and translation is a special case of interpretation, in Peirce's sense (Eco 2001: 16–17).

Remaining in this semiotic line of thought, the inclusion of both musical arrangement and intersemiotic musical translation of other work of art into the classification of the imitative musical signs seems to be the next step towards a yet more comprehensive typology (see Table 3).

	Intramusical imitation **Music imitating other music**	**Extramusical imitation** **Music imitating other phenomena**	
Signs	*Imitatio thematis* Imitation as a polyphonic technique, that J. N. Forkel referred to as "figures for the Reason"), can produce meanings.	Music imitating other sounds – "audible objects" Musical imitation of passionate utterances	Music imitating "visible objects": graphic representations in the score, symbolic meaning of musical notation, illustrating movement, "light and darkness" (high register-low register), etc.
Sets of signs	Musical topics		Translating *topoi* from literature or fine arts, e.g., *locus amoenus* (pastoral, hymn), locus terribilis (*ombra*, *tempesta*)
Musical work as a sign representing other work	Musical transcription (arrangement) as a sign representing another musical work		Ekphrasis / intersemiotic translation – musical work representing non-musical work of art

Table 3. A typology of musical signs based on imitation

Conclusions

Considering the principle of *mimesis* in music both from contemporary and historical perspectives reveals some evolution in the understanding of the term. While in the eighteenth century the notion of *mimesis* was still somehow exclusive to natural phenomena, in contemporary research it may also refer to artificial or abstract objects, for example, other works of art. This extension of the meaning of the term no doubt allows us to construct more comprehensive typologies of signs based on imitation, such as the one proposed above. As a conclusion of this paper, it should be emphasized that overcoming methodological bias in the approach to *mimesis* as the vehicle of musical meanings may offer new insights into the problem of the typologization of musical signs based on imitation.

Finally, analyzing historical writings and musical works entitles us to debunk the myth of the disappearance of the principle of *mimesis* from the nineteenth-century aesthetics of music: quite the contrary, the age of Romanticism, with its idea of *correspondence des arts* and programmatic music, has become a new area for the use of imitative musical signs. Moreover, *mimesis*, in a very traditional sense, that is, imitation of natural sounds, has persisted in the twentieth-century music – with such prominent examples as Olivier Messiaen's *Le Merle noir* or George Crumb's *Vox Balaenae*. Therefore, the age-old Greek doctrine does not, and should not, cease to attract the interest and attention of a musicologist.

Endnotes

1　The original text in German: "Die Musik [...] vermag keinen einzigen bestimmten Begriff auszusprechen – ausgenommen etwa die wenigen [...] Fälle onomatopoeisch und naturalistisch treu nachahmender Tonmalerei des Donnerrollens, des Wachtelschlags u. dgl., die allerdings in jedem, der schon der wirklichen Donner rollen, die wirkliche Wachtel schlagen hörte, die unmittelbare Erinnerung an diese Naturlaute hervorzurufen vermögen."

2　For the detailed discussion of Forkel's theory see: Grajter 2018: 502 ff; Grajter 2019: 186 ff.

3　The original text in German: "Wenn eine Musik den liegenden Quintenbass der Sackpfeife, die dem Alpenhorn eigenen Melodien bis zu einem gewissen Grade nachahmt, so wird sich kaum ein Zuhörer tauschen, das etwas hirtenmassiges gemeint sei, bei Marschrhythmen mit dareinschmetternden Trompeten denkt jeder an Kriegerisches und dgl."

4　See, e.g., Berman 2018.

5　The original text in French: "Nous faisons des arpèges comme la harpe, des notes prolongées comme les instruments à vent et mille autres passages qui jadis semblaient l'apanage spécial de tel ou tel instrument."

6　The original text in German: "Nur auf eine Weise finde ich, schaffe ich mir einen, sehr verkleinerten, aber annähernden

u. ganz reinen Genuß des Werkes – wenn ich es mit der linken Hand allein spiele! Mir fällt sogar dabei bisweilen die Geschichte vom Ei des Columbus ein! Die ähnliche Schwierigkeit, die Art der Technik, das Arpeggiren, alles kommt zusammen mich – wie einen Geiger zu fühlen! Versuche es doch einmal, ich habe es nur Deinetwegen aufgeschrieben. Aber: überanstrenge die Hand nicht! Es verlangt gar so viel Ton u. Kraft, spiele es einstweilen mezza voce. Auch mache Dir die Griffe handlich u. bequem. Wenn es Dich nicht überanstrengt – was ich aber glaube – müßtest Du viel Spaß daran haben."

7　See for example: Dusi 2015.

8　The problem with ekphrasis is that, for quite a long time, it has been associated exclusively with language as the target medium (sign system) of representation. Siglind Bruhn broadened the understanding of the term so that it would include other semiotic systems as possible "messengers," allowing the representation of some other work, originally conceived in a different medium (sign system). For a more detailed discussion see: Handley 2020.

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Santrauka

XVIII a. ir XIX a. sandūroje muzikos estetikoje mimezės principas ir garsinė tapyba vis dar buvo laikomi vienais iš pagrindinių muzikinės reikšmės nešėjų: tai atsispindi Johanno Nikolauso Forkelio „Bendrojoje muzikos istorijoje" („Allgemeine Geschichte der Musik", 1788) pateiktoje muzikos klasifikacijoje, į kurią dar įtraukti *musikalische Malereyen* („muzikos paveikslai"). Nepaisant „antimimetinio proveržio" ir absoliučios muzikos idėjos įsigalėjimo XIX a. pradžioje, aristoteliškasis principas niekada neprarado savo reikšmės: daug autorių nuolat ir įvairiais aspektais tyrinėjo muzikos, imituojančios arba save, arba kitus reiškinius, problemą, pavyzdžiui, Augustas Wilhelmas Ambrosas („Die Grenzen der Musik und Poesie: eine Studie zur Aesthetik der Tonkunst" / „Muzikos ir poezijos ribos: garso meno estetikos studija").

Dabartiniam požiūriui į mimezę įtakos turi besiformuojanti muzikos semiotikos sritis. Nemažai autorių, nagrinėjančių muzikinės reikšmės problemą, praplėtė teoriją naujomis kategorijomis, pavyzdžiui, muzikinėmis *topoi* (Danuta Mirka, „The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory" / „Oksfordo *topos* teorijos žinynas"). Žvelgiant iš semiotikos perspektyvos, svarbus vaidmuo tenka ir muzikos bei kitų ženklų sistemų santykiams.