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Arnold Böcklin's 'Im Spiel der Wellen' as Interpreted in Music by Composers Ludomir Różycki and Max Reger. A Contribution to the Theory and History of Musical Ekphrasis

1.

The concept of ekphrasis, which has been making a brilliant career in humanist studies for at least two decades, has seen the publication of its first analyses. Undisputably, among the most important and at once most extensive works so far are two books by Siglind Bruhn.[1] According to Bruhn, who adapts to her deliberations the definition by Claus Clüver, one of the leading contemporary theorists of literary ekphrasis, one can speak of the phenomenon of musical ekphrasis when

1. we are dealing with a scene or history that are real or fictitious,
2. we are dealing with a representation of these phenomena effectuated in a visual or verbal form,
3. when these phenomena are evoked by a representation typical for the language of music.[2]

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[1] Primarily her fundamental monograph entitled *Musical Ekphrasis. Composers Responding to Poetry and Painting* (Hillsdale, 2000), and also the dissertation *Musical Ekphrasis in Rilke's 'Marien-Leben'* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, 2000).

[2] Siglind Bruhn, *Musical Ekphrasis. Composers Responding to Poetry and Painting* (Hillsdale, 2000), 8. Bruhn has omitted from her considerations such examples of works that border on several domains of art as *Parade*, which considers the serious problem of awarding primacy to either of the arts (it is not known whose contribution to the creation of the ballet was greatest: Eric Satie's, Pablo Picasso's, Jean Cocteau's or Léonide Massine's). See Siglind Bruhn, 36.

The concept of musical ekphrasis proposed by Bruhn has one flaw. In its wake, existing musical genres, well grounded in the collective consciousness and the symphonic poem in particular – should be discarded.[3] As she perceives it, musical ekphrasis is true for practically every programme work that is a musical representation of a literary text or possibly a work of art identified by the composer in the title or written into the score.

In my understanding, the concept of musical ekphrasis is much narrower. Certainly it is more conservative methodologically, but at least it does not impinge on the established tradition of one and a half century or so of musical genologic standards. I define musical ekphrasis in a similar way to Bruhn but not identically, as I omit from the abovesaid second condition the category of literary text. Musical ekphrasis in my understanding is, in a manner of speaking, a musical analogy to the concept of poetry which German literary researchers have designated *Bildgedicht* (poetry inspired by painting), that is a sound composition which makes reference to a work of plastic art: usually a painting, sculpture, perhaps architecture. Before I present a working definition of musical ekphrasis, adopted for the needs of this study, I must make one more reservation. I fully share Bruhn's view that the terms heretofore proposed by musicology to describe the process which imaginatively 'metamorphoses' one cultural text into another (e.g. a sculpture into a piano poem) can be confusing. Thus, still inspired by the observations of this researcher, I reject the concept of transposition, because it is too closely associated with the technicalities of orchestration; I do not accept transformation because it runs too close to the variations technique or motif building; I resign from transcription which connotates a different instrumental preparation of one and the same work; I forgo translation – because this stipulates a strict, almost one-to-one recreation of the original semiotic system into another (this, I believe, is an idea fundamentally Utopian). In return, I do propose acceptance of Bruhn's category of transmedialization, as one which precisely, without creating terminological ambiguities, formulates the principle of dependence of one artistic medium on another.

My proposed definition of ekphrasis is this: the occurrence of musical ekphrasis can be confirmed if three conditions are fulfilled:

1. when there is a real or fictitious scene or history, and (something Bruhn has not indicated) a certain abstract structure (in this way I do not preclude the possibility of musical ekphrases arising from inspiration by non-figurative art),[4]

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[3] Of course Bruhn did not postulate this but the conclusion is almost automatic.

[4] An example of music 'transmedializing' abstract art is the work of Zygmunt Krauze, inspired by the Unist paintings of Władysław Strzemiński.

2. when we discover the presence of these phenomena in a widely-understood visual object,
3. when as a result of the transmedialization process, the musical medium elicits an illusion of a close (usually structural) dependence on the visual object.

2.

Composers representing *Jugendstil* or Young Poland – among whom we may include Max Reger and Ludomir Różycki – naturally did not create the category of musical ekphrasis. Influenced, however, by the foremost patrons of European symbolism – Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé and Arthur Rimbaud – they caused it (even without the notion) to become quite a fashionable phenomenon. Among the Young Poland composers, most music inspired by plastic art came from Różycki, author of three instrumental compositions more or less openly related to famous paintings: the orchestral *Stańczyk*, piano *Gra fal*, and a rare example of fourth-degree ekphrasis (so to speak), i.e. the symphonic poem *Król Kofetua*.[5] This work was inspired by a short story by Julius Zeyer, in turn stimulated by the painting *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid* by Pre-Raphaelite Edward Burne-Jones, and that – to close the chain of interdependencies – drew on Alfred Tennyson's poem *The Beggar Maid*.

The work for piano *Gra fal* by Różycki was written in the summer of 1904, when the young composer was at the Baltic seaside resort of Połąga (now Lithuanian Palanga), in the period just before he left for complementary studies with Engelbert Humperdinck in Berlin.[6] The composition was inspired by one of the best known oils by Arnold Böcklin *Im Spiel der Wellen* (1883), which since 1888 has been in the collection of the Pinacothek in Munich. However, according to available sources it is almost certain that as he composed his piano poem, the young artist knew this painting only from reproductions, as he did not pay his first visit to Munich until around this time – as indirectly arises from a letter to his wife dating from October 1906.

Różycki's interest in Böcklin's paintings is of course quite typical for that time. In the history of music one of the first important testimonies

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[5] To this set of Różycki's compositions can be added his opera *Meduza* (with libretto by Cezary Jellenta), which recounts a fictitious episode from the life of Leonardo da Vinci.

[6] This composition was dedicated by its author to Richard Strauss, whom the Polish composer visited at his home in Berlin in the early days of his complementary studies and with whom he sporadically kept in touch (also corresponding) at least until the mid-1930s.

to a musical fascination with the Swiss visionary and master of *Stimmung* is the Symphony No.2 E-minor op.115 (*Böcklin-Symphonie*, 1897–1898) by Hans Huber (1852–1921), now considered Switzerland's most eminent representative of romanticism in music. Later, as well known, Böcklin's paintings inspired musical ekphrases by many composers, from Italy (Giacomo Orfice) to Sweden (Andreas Hallen) and Russia (Sergey Rachmaninoff) but only some of these works have survived the test of time. Today, concert halls mostly recall Rachmaninoff's *Isle of the Dead* (1909), the opera *Der ferne Klang* (1911) by Franz Schreker which has a strong Böcklinesque accent in its third act, and Max Reger's *Vier Tondichtungen nach Böcklin* (1913). One thing should be marked down as an asset of the rather forgotten Różycki piece: it was – if one is to believe contemporary compendia of programme music[7] – chronologically the fourth composition among a total of more than thirty that resulted from the Böcklin fascinations of their authors. But also against the background of composers from the Young Poland movement Różycki was not alone in his aesthetic preferences, since an interest in the Swiss painter was also exhibited by Mieczysław Karłowicz,[8] Eugeniusz Morawski and Mikolajus K. Čiurlionis. It would seem that this spell might have also affected, albeit by transmedialization of the second degree, Grzegorz Fitelberg and Karol Szymanowski.[9]

3.

Let us now take a closer look at the Böcklin painting. The whole composition on the one hand beguiles potential viewers with striking, dark blue expanses of colour, generally acclaimed as the work of a master; and on the other – sometimes reproached by contemporary critics of his – slightly sketchy contours of the figures.[10] *Im Spiel der Wellen* is

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[7] Klaus Schneider, *Lexikon Programmusik*, vol. 2 *Figuren und Personen* (Kassel, 2000).

[8] 'His particular interest was roused by Schack's gallery and there of course the works by Arnold Böcklin. He stopped longest by the well-known *Isle of the Dead*. He mentioned that off the Dalmatian coast there were small islands which had the same quality and mood, as that in the Böcklin painting'. Adolf Chybiński, *Mieczysław Karłowicz (1876–1909). Kronika artysty i taternika* [Mieczysław Karłowicz. Chronicle of an artist and a mountaineer] (Kraków, 1949), 261–262.

[9] Grzegorz Fitelberg in the symphonic composition *W głębi morza* because of the Böcklin-inspired composition by Sergey Rachmaninoff which he had many times conducted; Karol Szymanowski because of a scene in Act 3 of Franz Schreker's *Der ferne Klang*, an echo of which resounds in the score of the 1st Violin Concerto.

[10] See Andrzej Nowakowski, *Arnold Böcklin. Sława i zapomnienie* [Arnold Böcklin. The fame and oblivion] (Kraków, 1994), 52.

a scene set among high waves, where two tritons engage in erotic play with naiads (at this point it will not be without purpose to remind that images of tritons, as of the god Pan, were some of Böcklin's favourite themes: they functioned as iconographic emanations of the idea of a human Eros). Nonetheless, as well as the unquestionable eroticism of the scene, the whole picture – because of the gestures, the facial expression of one of the naiads, and the ball-shaped head of a strange marine creature visible behind the central triton – is quite consensually interpreted as ludic. The genesis of the painting is interesting, clearly marked with an autobiographic element. It was painted after a sea trip to the island of Ischia, which Böcklin made with famous oceanographer Anton Dohrn and his family. During the trip, as all enjoyed a bathe, the great scientist considerably frightened the company when for a long time he failed to surface among the waves. The whole incident made a profound impression on the painter, whose imagination transformed it in his own way, also endowing the central triton, who wears a wreath on his head, with the facial features of Dohrn himself, and likening the mermaid who swims next to him to his own daughter, Angela. It is intriguing that the grimace on her face contrasts to the ludic context of the whole. Is it perhaps the visual expression of some drama of emotions that was played out on Ischia at that time? We do not know.

4.

According to Marcin Kamiński, the most scrupulous of the biographers of Różycki, the composer wrote *Gra fal* responding to two stimuli: the first was the Böcklin painting of course (it is a secondary matter whether original or reproduction),[11] and the second – the fresh memory of an adventure that happened to the composer during a trip on a fishing boat on the Baltic near Palanga.[12] It is perhaps also worthy to recall that the piece appeared in the first weeks after Różycki divested himself from the rigid formula of dos and don'ts imposed on the student composer by Zygmunt Noskowski. Perhaps that is why this work demonstrates a slightly more lax approach to the sonata

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[11] As known, a black and white reproduction of Böcklin's *The Isle of the Dead* had a profound impact on Sergey Rachmaninoff, who then composed a symphonic poem under the same title. In this context it is significant that when – after he finished the work – the composer saw a version of the painting at a museum, he suffered a deep disappointment.

[12] Marcin Kamiński, *Ludomir Różycki. Opowieść o życiu i twórczości* [Ludomir Różycki. The story of life and work] (Bydgoszcz, 1987), 27.

form than the ekphrasis efforts on Jan Matejko's portrait of *Stańczyk*, whereas evidence of this recovered freedom can be gleaned as the composer refrained from applying strict principles of tonic-dominant opposition in connecting themes and abandoned the rule to bring the themes into one key in the reprise. The form of the piece is clear-cut, i.e.:

EXPOSITION (bars 1–44):
Theme I – B-major (*Appassionato*, b.1–21)
Theme II – E-major (*Più lento, molto espressivo*, b. 22–44)
DEVELOPMENT (b. 45–69), *Poco a poco accelerando*
This is rather merely the beginning of a transformation, with alternate transforming of ideas known from the previous phase; Różycki here avoids a direct, simultaneous, 'dialectic' confrontation of both themes (resigns from key signatures, no clearly indicated tonal focus).
REPRISE (b. 70–122):
Theme I – B-major (b. 70–90)
Theme II – E-minor (b. 91–108, slightly abbreviated and modified, towards the end additionally designated *doloroso*)
Theme I – B-major (b. 109–122)

Różycki's *Im Spiel der Wellen* with its dramatic quality is quite devoid of the ludic element, a little as if the composer failed to notice it in the painting, although this piano piece (may we remind) 'Spółka Nakładowa Młodych Kompozytorów Polskich', the publishing company of the Young Polish composers issued under the seemingly 'lighter' title, *Igraszka fal*, perhaps suggesting a buffo aspect. Not much more impressive are the results of the process of transmedialization of the aquatic motifs in the painting: the only 'marine' musical correspondence are the stereotyped, pendulum-like, elaborate figurations of the left hand in the first theme. Maybe 'responsible' for this emotional incosistency in respect of the original was the traumatic experience of the composer in a storm off the coast of Palanga? Perhaps it is an attempt to evoke the sad expression of naiad Angela? Questions without answers.

The serious aura of the work of the Young Poland artist enfolds not only the somewhat sentimental first theme but also the second. Although graver than its predecessor, the second theme to a greater degree transmedializes the erotic charge of the Böcklin painting. On the one hand this happens via the selection of subdominant, the E-major key, which Różycki, like the romantics, associated in many compositions with the sphere of Eros.[13] The second element which supports the transmedialization

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[13] See for instance the lustful Carnival barcarole from the symphonic scherzo *Stańczyk* or the love duet from Act I of the opera *Bolesław Śmiały*.

of Eros are the theme's parallel thirds, which might be thought to portray the frolicking couples. In order to add more power of persuasion to this confessedly doubtful musical interpretation let us note that the theme has been written out using the canon technique. The canon, with its ultimate precision in leading voices, was a well-known symbol for an amorous relationship. This singular topos has been recognized at least since the times of the Renaissance, since it was applied by William Shakespeare in his most musical *Sonnets*, then it was referred to by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart for one (in *Così fan tutte*), Richard Wagner (in *Tristan und Isolde*), or – after Różycki – by Franz Schreker in the opera *Irrelohe*.[14] Drawing thus on a well-rooted tradition, Różycki highlighted the drama of the situation, with the frolicking pair probably about to part. He did this by an alteration of the theme in the reprise, and by introducing the description *doloroso*, which falls exactly on the last execution of the second theme in the canon.[15]

5.

Not quite eight years after Różycki, the same painting by Böcklin was altogether differently read by Max Reger. *Im Spiel der Wellen*, preserved in a tempo of *Vivace* and functioning within his symphonic cycle *Vier Tondichtung nach Böcklin* as a brief scherzo that divides the religious introduction (*Hermit Playing the Violin*) from the central adagio (*The Isle of the Dead*) is the shortest fragment in the orchestral suite by the German composer. The form of this piece, written in a framework key of F sharp minor, can be reduced to ABA' with an added coda, where the A parts are a presentation of the lively first theme, and a side theme executed in thirds (here there is a certain analogy with Różycki), usually by woodwind instruments. The almost aphoristic B part brings in partially new material and conventional aquatic figures as though plucked from the score of Bedřich Smetana's *Vltava*. In Reger's composition we can just as easily – to recall the tremolando of the first violins playing (*divisi*) the minor tonic triad – to 'feel' on one's own skin the wind that is blowing around the figures in the water. It seems, however, that in opposition to

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[14] In our time this topos was summoned by Paweł Mykietyn in the song 'Music to hear, why hear'st thou music sadly?', the third part of the cycle *Shakespeare Sonnets* for male soprano and piano.

[15] 'In the central part of the composition, beginning in the bright key of E-major [...] appear elements introducing polyphony, creating the impression of a conversation, e.g. between lovers', wrote Marcin Kamiński, 28.

a search of the score for single glimmers of transmedialization, it is more important to take in the whole composition from a bird's eye vantage. What we can see then will become no less suggestive than Różycki's play with the tradition of the love-key E-major or topos of 'love canons'. Both in relation to the first theme as well as the second, does Reger masterfully handle the always-present opposition of dancelike and nondancelike fragments (the whole in ¾). Considering that the dance category is here associated with the waltz, and more precisely – in the first instance with a post-Liszt idea (developed e.g. by Ferruccio Busoni in the opera *Die Brautwahl* from 1912)[16] of a fast chromatic waltz and, in the case of the accompanying theme, with the idea of a (so to speak) moderate waltz; because of the erotic implications of the dance the entire composition becomes a symbol of Eros overpowering the human senses. Let us also note that this idea, of a waltz cyclically fading (one might want to say: submerging) and returning (and so: resurfacing) to the fore was not conceived by Reger but his two great contemporaries, who struck upon the concept independently of each other around 1905. This was Richard Strauss and his *Dance of the Seven Veils* (where the fading waltz returns once and again, emerging fully-blown during Salome's performance even as far as *ilinx*, increasingly intensifying the decadent atmosphere that borders on pornography and necrophilia); and also Gustav Mahler, who in the central, third part of his Symphony No.7 (*Schattenhaft*), once and again conceals in the titular shadows the same highly erotic dance theme, balancing on a thin line that divides Eros and Thanatos.[17] Two distinct waltz characters which are heard during Reger's aquatic capers transmedialize what Böcklin merely suggested but what can be deduced from his canvas: the sexual thrusting of the figures that writhe in the foreground and background. However, the coda (*Adagio Tranquillo*) of Reger's *Im Spiel der Wellen* is the composer's own climactic addition to the picture. Played by flutes and oboes, ultra-slow and almost ironic, the waltz stirs into action only for a short time, to have the utterance of the brass instruments interrupted by strings, realizing a melodic line than begins lazily to descend. It is probably an introduction of what is to come but what is not shown in the painting: exhaustion of the virile potential of the male representatives of the frolicking company (bars: 198–212).

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[16] i.e. the so-called *Spuk- und Wirbelwalzer* which illustrates the process of falling in love of one of the characters in the opera (Thusmann).

[17] Then, let us add, an equally brilliant realization of the same idea was the choreographic poem *La Valse* by Maurice Ravel, where the titular waltz, once and again fading into mist, masks or reveals its true festive nature.

6.

A comparison of the mechanisms of transmedialization applied in the two selected works did put Różycki in the losing position because of the limited possibilities of expression of a piano as contrasted to an abundant late-Romantic orchestra, which already sometimes begins to let slip through the lacy texture of the subsidiary theme some first intimations of Claude Debussy's impressionism in the fashion of *La Mer*. Both composers extracted various aspects from the Böcklin canvas. Różycki, let us say it outright: arousing certain suspicions over the correct interpretation of the intention of the painter of *The Isle of the Dead*, made the *doloroso* the central part of the composition and if not supreme, then at least one of its two constituent 'tones'. Reger decidedly favoured the ludic-erotic character. Using a circuitously fading then crystallizing whirling waltz, he could transmedialize what seems most important for the painting: an illusion of movement in many directions dictated by the capricious dialectics of sea waves and the impulsive acts of lovers at play. Going back to the definition of musical ekphrasis I proposed at the beginning, this title – in my belief – can be given only to the composition by Reger. However, the piece by Różycki, as one which does not demonstrate so strong a structural dependency on the canvas by the Swiss master, should be ranked as music freely inspired by his painting.

Translated by Elżbieta Krajewska