

Alenka Koron

ZRC SAZU Institute of Slovenian Literature and Literary Studies

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-6466-6480

alenka.koron@zrc-sazu.si

Sounds and Music in Slovenian Narrative Texts of the Twentieth Century

Abstract

An introductory look at the interdisciplinary field that, in line with global trends, can be called music and literature studies, or word and music studies, gives the possibility to present some important achievements of this field in Slovenian scientific and artistic literature. This article analyses the interaction of sounds, music, and literature in four twentieth-century Slovenian narrative texts, written respectively by Ivan Cankar, Milan Pugelj, Ciril Kosmač, and Rudi Šeligo. The focus is not on the sonority of the prose itself (assonance, alliteration, rhythm, rhyme, and onomatopoeia), but on the effects of musical modernity on narrative forms from early modernism to the present, and therefore, on the ways in which music modernized or shaped their narrative discourse.

Keywords: music and literature studies, word and music studies, Ivan Cankar, Milan Pugelj, Ciril Kosmač, Rudi Šeligo

Introduction

This article focuses on the interaction of sounds, music, and literature in four twentieth-century Slovenian narrative texts, in which music modernized or shaped the narrative discourse. This topic presupposes the acquaintance with the in-tune-with-global-contemporary-trends interdisciplinary field of research called music and literature studies, a term of British origin. This field of research, which has its institutional center in Graz, is also known as word and music studies. Moreover, “Word and Music Studies” is the title of a journal published by Brill. The terms *music and literature studies* and *word and music studies* are, thus, equivalents. They have appeared in the Western European academic community, in which the International Association for Word and Music Studies (WMA) is responsible

for their promotion. Even with different names, this research field covers various philosophical and theoretical orientations, approaches, and interpretative strategies that have in common the reflection on the interaction between literature and music. Nonetheless, it is not established in Slovenian culture and research, despite the important contributions in this sphere by world-famous Slovenians. I have in mind the texts by Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar in “Filozofija v operi” (Philosophy in Opera) (cf. Dolar, Žižek 1992) and “Filozofija v operi II” (Philosophy in Opera II) (cf. Žižek 1996), and Dolar’s book “O glasu” (On Voice) (cf. Dolar 2003). These publications have mostly a philosophical character, which would probably contribute to the criticism of Slovenian traditionalists of literary studies and, at the same time, to their argument against placing these texts in the aforementioned research field. However, as they offer a methodologically specific interdisciplinary treatment of many literary phenomena at the intersection with musical works, in my opinion, they cannot be ignored. It is also interesting the more recent sociological and cultural work “Kako zveni oblast? Zvočnost birokracije v vsakdanjem življenju” (What Does Power Sound Like? The Sonority of Bureaucracy in Everyday Life) (cf. Dragičević 2022) by Nina Dragičević, who is a musicologist and a renowned lesbian poet. Her extensive research focuses on Kafka, among other topics.

In music and literature studies, or word and music studies, we can also include the articles (seven out of eleven in Slovenian) of the thematic series “Literatura in glasba: Stičišča, presečišča in zmote” (Literature and Music: Junctions, Intersections, Misconceptions), issued in the journal “Primerjalna književnost”, edited by Gregor Pompe, Marijan Dović, and Andraž Jež (cf. Dović, Jež, Pompe 2015). The discussions in this number of the periodical are not institutionally linked to Western European studies, but they include musicological and comparativist analyses. A decade earlier, the literary journal “Literatura” published the thematic series “Ut 'musica viva' poesis” (2004), edited by the poet, editor, publisher, and “serious” modern music enthusiast Primož Čučnik (cf. Čučnik 2004). The volume brings together a variety of material: a translation of Schönberg’s essay “Das Verhältnis zum Text” (The Relationship to the Text, 1912), a discussion by Gregor Pompe, another one coauthored by the latter and Gašper Troha, the responses of eight contemporary Slovenian composers and two poets to a survey on their perception of the relationship between music and texts, an essay by Adam Wiedemann. Primož Čučnik’s poems, inspired by the verses of John Cage, are also collected in it.

A decade before this publication, Miran Košuta’s interesting study “Marij Kogoj med glasbo in književnostjo” (Marij Kogoj between Music and Literature, 1994) (cf. Košuta 1994) was printed. After a theoretical introduction based on slightly older theoretical material, the author discusses the literary and partly also musical oeuvre of Marij Kogoj, an important Slovenian musical avant-gardist. In addition to the publications and articles mentioned so far, aimed at showing the breadth of Slovenian studies on the intermediality of words and sound or music, we should cite the many texts on opera music by the comparativist and musicologist Gregor Pompe. Furthermore, we can add the several MA theses written since 1983 at the Universities of Ljubljana

and Maribor (Zalokar 1983; Gselman 2005; Škrajnar 2007; Jež 2011; Miklavc 2012; Zorec 2012; Zupančič 2021), which deal with the interaction of music and literature in the works of Slovenian and foreign authors. All this makes it possible to speak of a continuous – albeit scattered and institutionally disconnected – development of Slovenian studies in the field over the last fifty years. At the same time, this overview demonstrates its characteristic methodological diversity.

Early research

As Anna Snaith (2020: 11 – 12) writes in her introduction to *Sound and Literature*, early research on the interactions between music and literature focused primarily on the relationships and affinities between these sister arts. Such works could find their basis in the tradition of aesthetic philosophy starting with Baumgarten, that is, from the late eighteenth century onward. In them, one of the main focuses was the reflection on the ways in which different art forms and their fusion in a holistic Gesamtkunstwerk of the Wagnerian type evoke emotions and express subjective experiences. This fact was glaring in the second half of the nineteenth century. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Western literary criticism had already extensively dealt with the distinctions and fusions between music and literature, and with theories of their modes of expression or representation. In particular, Ezra Pound was a sympathetic theorist of multimedia in art. Virginia Woolf was a theorist and practitioner of intermedial art as well. When, both in her essays and in her literary writing, she looked for a model of how music creates meaning in relation to feelings, temporality, and memory, she relied mainly on Wagner. In the first half of the twentieth century, another important theorist of literary sound and its relationship to music was Luigi Russolo, who was concerned with the shaping and aestheticization of urban noises and with attempts to attribute meanings to sonic chaos.

More recently, Gemma Moss (2020: 92) has pointed out that music is often used in literature for what cannot be articulated. According to her, the advantage of music is that it actually influences the body; it vibrates the organism, arousing bodily sensations and emotions. Many authors consider music to be a more direct way of communication than language, saying that it transcends literature, which communicates through form. The belief that music can go beyond the mere rationality of language is entirely in the spirit of the twentieth-century modernist presentism, and it unites the modernists with the romantics. Romantic poets such as Edward Alan Poe were convinced that music was absolutely essential to poetry because it could express spiritual truths (Moss 2020: 95). Furthermore, according to the German musicologist Carl Dahlhaus (1986: 34 – 44), the Romantic metaphysics of art even elevated music above the other artistic forms. This idea contributed to the rise of wordless classical instrumental music, which took place precisely during the German Romantic period. It was Kant's philosophy that brought an interest in sensory experience, perception, and interpretation into European thought (Moss 2020: 96).

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the idea that music was able to express things of crucial importance, essences that language cannot, was truly relevant for the poetics of the Symbolists. For example, Mallarmé wanted to separate poetry from everyday experience and refresh it with music. He paid particular attention to the sound of the verse and sought to create an immersive aesthetic experience. Furthermore, he also leaned on music regarding the importance of form and internal structure. The task of poetry was not to describe the world in detail. It was sufficient to allude to it. Dahlhaus also pointed out that the belief that music could express what language could not was common to the German philosophical tradition of the second half of the nineteenth century. For Schopenhauer, Wagner, and Nietzsche, music was an expression of the essence of things. Music was opposed to the language of concepts that cleaved to mere appearances.

The central place in German Romantic music thought belongs to Wagner (Moss 2020: 96). His idea of absolute music, in which abstract, musical meaning fuses with language to produce finite, intelligible propositions, is the basis for the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk. Wagner's aim was the transformation of society, which he believed could become a means of resisting the decline of art and society that had been taking place since the glorious heights of the ancient theatre of tragedy (cf. Wagner 2014: 5 – 37). As a theoretician and intermedial artist, in the second half of the nineteenth century, Wagner significantly influenced European (including Vienna) cultural life, music, and literature with his ideas of the Gesamtkunstwerk, infinite melody (*unendliche Melodie*), leitmotif, and other theories on the role of sensation and memory. He was not only significant for his aesthetic views, but also for his opinions that music contains meanings that are analogous to the social world or that relate to the social world. He, therefore, embedded music in a social context. His influence on the beginnings of modernist storytelling is also interesting. For example, the French writer Edouard Dujardin, who inspired James Joyce and Virginia Woolf with the idea of continuous free-flowing prose able at showing the meanderings of inner thoughts in a so-called stream of consciousness, published the *Revue wagnérienne*. I would like to highlight that I mentioned Vienna as a place where the influence of Wagner spread quickly because it was the musical and cultural center, where Ivan Cankar (1867 – 1918) encountered the ideas of Wagnerism. Cankar, the most important Slovenian writer of the turn of the century and the first half of the twentieth century in general, spent about ten years in Vienna.

Prewar Slovenian narrative texts

Ivan Cankar is the most studied Slovenian writer in music and literature studies. The linguistic sonority of his prose, which includes assonance, alliteration, rhythm, rhyme, and onomatopoeia, has been the subject of attention of many scholars. However, here I discuss the structural role of music and sounds in his texts. Affinities among Wagner's ideas about music, the Symbolist belief that music can express essences that words cannot, and Cankar's attitude to music

as art, can be found in numerous passages in the author's storytelling. However, Cankar's way of writing is not a passive reflection of these views. He transformed them into the literary form of his texts, which are often very short or at least heavily lyricized. Vera Zalokar (1983) notes that the experience of music is one of the fundamental feelings in Cankar's lyrical prose; it relates to inner life and the human soul. Precisely, the latter – is considered by Cankar to be the true, ideal reality in the face of the split between body and soul.

"Melodije" (Melodies, 1914), a short lyrical prose work (only two and a half pages long), is the quintessence of the writer's conception of the relationship between music and literature. In it, the first-person narrator wanders around the city and its surroundings, reflecting on his feelings, experiences, and memories. The latter are always triggered by different melodies or songs. Each described feeling or experience is followed by a brief reflection on the occurred memory or melody. Then, it comes the conclusion: "Everything you have lived, said, and done has a melody" (Cankar 1975: 203). For the narrator, melody always stimulates a memory image: "With every face, with every look, with every word, there is a melody" (Cankar 1975: 203). On the one hand, he realizes that he himself is already old and returns to the past: "Every moment had its melody. The colors faded, the words were forgotten, but the melody remained. There is not a face that does not sing; none are forgotten. None have died. I am not afraid of anything if I tell them that I am among them" (Cankar 1975: 204). On the other, he turns to the future: "All these melodies, heralds of my moments, will merge into one. All my loves, all my unprecedented happiness, all my undeserved friendships and all my loyally guarded pains, all these will merge into one song, one melody that will gather all the others together in a motherly way. I shall hear this song as I sleep quietly" (Cankar 1975: 204). Music, then, in Cankar's prose, as already in Wagner's oeuvre, is primarily sensory, and it is more enduring than words. It triggers the affects, and its meaning relates to the experiences and memory contexts that coincide with those affects. In "Melodies", the narrator experiences and remembers feelings, to which he attaches meaning. Although written in a rudimentary version and with a conventional use of punctuation, the narrative discourse is transformed, precisely with the aid of music, into a form of stream of consciousness.

My second example of the interaction between text and music in twentieth-century Slovenian storytelling is from the text "Igra" (The Play, 1914) by Milan Pugelj (1883 – 1929), a contemporary of Cankar and a writer of short stories and novellas. At the beginning of Pugelj's career, Cankar had a strong influence on his fiction, but in his mature works he moved more toward social realism. In the opening sentence of his novella, which is perhaps Pugelj's most autobiographical text, the narrator gives the floor to "my sad and sick writer," who tells his story in a first-person narration. The narrator suddenly loses his job due to the war situation and is unable to earn a living from writing literature. His family is starving under the new life conditions. So, he takes a humiliating job as a pianist in a cinema, at that time

full of hated Austro-Hungarian military, women of dubious reputation, and young people. One evening, his mother dies in the street under unfortunate circumstances, but he is forced, like every evening, to play only cheerful songs in the cinema.

Among the piano voices, only the image of my mother rustled. I saw her, I have already said, on the edge of the precipice. I saw her falling on her head, on her side, on her chest, on her forehead at the edge of the cliff... and in between I played, played, played the joyful Viennese waltz... I saw nothing but my unhappy mother. Now she is conscious again for a moment. She wants to turn round, to get up. She wants to see where I am, for example, to help her, because she has had an accident. Now she calls out to me, all through the crowd's circling, stamping, and clapping, I hear my name coming straight from her mouth, to help her, all through the Viennese waltz I hear my name coming straight from her toothless mouth... (Pugelj 1920: 139 – 140)

Pugelj's description of the episode demonstrates the stark contrast between the music and the narrator's inner thoughts. The use of the present tense in the narration of the tragic past events emphasizes the presentism of the psychic process. The passage shows how realist writing was gradually transformed in the second decade of the last century by the thematizations of the stream of consciousness and the so-called "inner turn" in the cultural climate of modernism.

Postwar Slovenian narrative texts

Postwar Slovenian storytelling was initially influenced by socialist realism. However, soon after the Informbiro period and the Tito – Stalin split in 1948, it was overshadowed by the narrative prose of the generation of writers that started publishing their works before the Second World War. This generation continued the tradition of social realism and other trends of the period between the two world conflicts, more or less successfully introducing elements of modernism. Among the representatives of this generation, there was Ciril Kosmač (1910 – 1980). His novella "Balada o trobenti in oblaku" (The Ballad of the Trumpet and the Cloud, 1957, 1968) was first published in a literary magazine and received an enthusiastic reception from readers and critics. Nevertheless, the author made significant changes to the text for the book publication, which I cite below. "The Ballad of the Trumpet and the Cloud" intertwines the themes of a contemporary artist in a writing crisis and the ethical dilemmas of individuals traumatized during the war. The protagonist, years after its end, is still suffering the terrible consequences of the dreadful conflict. The music and other meaningful sounds (e.g., the peening of the scythe¹ mentioned by the narrator) have a slightly different narrative role than in Cankar's or Pugelj's texts. The trumpet's blast is the leading motif of the novella and, in conjunction with the lyrics of the somber folk song played by the instrument, it creates an anxious atmosphere foreshadowing the tragic events and the proximity of death:

¹ The scythe is, of course, a symbol of death.

He pulled out his typewriter and inserted the paper. But before he hit the keys, the trumpet sounded. It sounded somewhere far away. The tune was barely audible, but unusually clear and penetrating... He raised his hands to hit the keys again – and then the trumpet sounded again... It was the beginning of a sad folk song, but only the beginning, only the first line. He knew the song well, but he couldn't remember the lyrics. And that made him angry. He waited for the trumpet to sound again, but there was only the clatter of the scythe, as loud as if the peasant wanted to shout and stifle the trumpet's voice. (Kosmač 1968: 32)

In the non-linear and fragmentary narrative discourse of Kosmač, roman type is alternated with italics, sometimes drawing attention to the difference between “aloud” or “silent” speech, to the thoughts of the characters, and sometimes to the embedded parts of the fictional narrative that the writer is laboriously creating. The wartime occurrences are intertwined with the writer's story and the fictional narrative. Both are set in a past war but take place in different locations. The sounding of the trumpet is a sort of regulative link between the different modalities and temporal levels of the story, having a teleological function. The writer's conventional use of punctuation and direct speech for unspoken thoughts, however, testify to the difficulty of introducing modernist elements into the literary milieu of the 1950s and 1960s in Slovenia.

The generation of prose writers that published their first texts only after the Second World War was more radical in practicing modernism. Rudi Šeligo (1935 – 2004) began publishing in the mid-1950s. In the 1960s, he became fascinated by the theoretical ideas of the representatives of the *nouveau roman* (Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, Michel Butor, and others), which he read in translation in Slovenian literary magazines. His most characteristic work, in which he opened himself up to this influence, was the short novel “Triptih Agate Schwarzkobler” (The Triptych of Agata Schwarzkobler, 1968). Until then, his writing was characterized by the precise description of external phenomena, use of the present tense, abandonment of anthropocentrism, an omniscient narrator, psycho-narration, anti-psychologism, external focalization, and other features. Contemporary criticism called his fiction *reizem*, and this label is still in use in Slovenian literary history. Later, Šeligo began to move away from strict descriptivism, and, in the mid-1980s, he tried to catch up with postmodernism, which was then fashionable.

One of Šeligo's most interesting late narratives is “Uslišani spomin” (A Memory Granted, 1995), which thematizes the crisis of modernist writing in a symbolic way and is itself a search for a way out of this crisis. One can notice a retreat from ocularcentrism (i.e., a tendency toward domination of the visible, which characterized structuralism), the aesthetics of the *nouveau roman*, and Šeligo's modernist narratives. The symbolic thread of the narrative becomes a return to sound, music, audibility, acoustics, and transcendence as well. In this text, all this is represented in a much-admired high translucent tone. Instead of the dominance of the present tense, which was characteristic of Šeligo's early prose, the past tense

returns, and so do emotions and the psychology of the character. The fictionalized life story of Timotej Vidrih, a timid and sensitive adolescent who has many of the writer's autobiographical traits, is at the forefront of "A Memory Granted". Timotej walks in a strange way and, for an unknown reason, is ashamed of himself. He hides from people in an icehouse, full of large icicles in winter. He also dreams of a high-pitched sound that goes on forever, without swaying or changing its power. One day, he sees a violin at a friend's house and wants to own one himself. When he finally gets his hands on the instrument, it is a very ecstatic experience for him. "The ritual of approaching it has been going on for a long time, too long..., when he squeezes its poor body under his chin and gently, with a trembling hand, draws the bow across the strings. When he manages to pull slowly on the E string without hitting the adjacent A too hard, and while this soothingly continues, the invisible floodgates are lifted and hot tears run down his nose, into his mouth and onto his chin" (Šeligo 1997: 15). This ideal harmony between the boy and the violin soon breaks down because Timotej cannot always achieve the tone he looks for. However, the fantasy of it does not leave him, nor does the feeling of shame in front of other people. Time brings changes: Timotej's first earnings, the film "Young Man with a Horn", which he watches several times, and his first kiss. He starts to learn the trombone and to play in a brass band.

However, his instrument is of poor quality. He still experiences moments of wavering when he approaches a sound, a tone "close to that which he had discovered on the violin's E string a year and months before, and which was – undoubtedly – close to that of the overtone, close to the initial tone" (Šeligo 1997: 23). Nonetheless, these instants are increasingly less frequent. He has problems at school, and the brass band is not to his taste. Feelings of inferiority, guilt, and shame return, and he begins to take refuge in the icehouse again. After two excesses, one of drinking too much and one of eating too much, his involvement with the brass band comes to an end. At the age of sixteen, he is faced with a choice: school or music. He chooses music and goes to work at a steel factory. In the evenings, instead, he plays in a newly established dance orchestra. His walking also improves. However, working three shifts is very tiring for Timotej. One winter night, he witnesses a terrible accident in the factory hall, which results in the death of a coworker. He goes back to the icehouse and tries to straighten the tube of the trombone, which had become bent between the icicles. This attempt breaks off an enormous cluster of icicles that crush only the trombone because Timotej jumps away quickly enough. The narrative ends with the image of the elderly protagonist: retired after forty years of work at the steel factory, he listens to music in a wooden rocker in the winter.

Bibliography

- Cankar 1975 [1914]: Cankar, Ivan. Melodije. – In: Kos, J. (ed.). Ivan Cankar. *Zbrano delo* 22. Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, pp. 202 – 204.
- Čučnik 2004: Čučnik, Primož (ed.). Ut »musica viva« poesis: Thematic Section. – *Literatura*, Vol. 16, № 151 – 152, pp. 39 – 153.
- Dahlhaus 1986: Dahlhaus, Carl. *Estetika glasbe*. Translated by Andrej Rijavec. Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba.
- Dolar 2003: Dolar, Mladen. *Oglasu*. Ljubljana: Društvo za teoretsko psihoanalizo.
- Dolar, Žižek 1992: Dolar, Mladen, Slavoj Žižek. Filozofija v operi. Razprave. – *Problemi*, № 3 – 4.
- Dović, Jež, Pompe 2015: Dović, Marijan, Andraž Jež, Gregor Pompe (eds.). *Literatura in glasba: Thematic Section. – Primerjalna književnost*, Vol. 38, № 2, pp. 1 – 174.
- Dragičević 2022: Dragičević, Nina. *Kako zveni oblast. Zvočnost birokracije v vsakdanjem življenju*. Ljubljana: Založba *cf.
- Gselman 2005: Gselman, Metka. *Glasbeni elementi v kratki pripovedni prozi Ivana Cankarja*. Diplomsko delo. Maribor: Pedagoška fakulteta.
- Jež 2011: Jež, Andraž. *Primerjalna analiza književnosti 20. stoletja in sodobne glasbe na primeru avantgard in modernizma*. Diplomsko delo. Ljubljana: Filozofska fakulteta.
- Kosmač 1968 [1956/57]: Kosmač, Ciril. *Balada o trobenti in oblaku. Novela*. Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga.
- Košuta 1995: Košuta, Miran. Marij Kogoj med glasbo in književnostjo. – In: Juvan, M., T Sajovic (eds.). *Individualni in generacijski ustvarjalni ritmi v slovenskem jeziku, književnosti in kulturi: Ob desetletnici smrti Marje Boršnikove*. Ljubljana: Filozofska fakulteta, pp. 263 – 276.
- Miklavc 2012: Miklavc, Polona. *Motiv glasbe in glasbenika v slovenski prozi*. Diplomsko delo. Ljubljana: Filozofska fakulteta.
- Moss 2020: Moss, Gemma. *Classical Music and Literature*. – In: Snaith, A. (ed.). *Sound and Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 92 – 113.
- Pugelj 1920: Pugelj, Milan. Igra. – In: Pugelj, M. *Črni panter*. Ljubljana: Umetniška propaganda, pp. 123 – 144.
- Snaith 2020: Snaith, Anna. Introduction. – In: Snaith, A. (ed.), *Sound and Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1 – 33.
- Šeligo 1997 [1995]: Šeligo, Rudi. Uslišani spomin. – In: Šeligo, R. *Uslišani spomin*. Ljubljana: Nova revija, pp. 9 – 37.
- Škrajnar 2007: Škrajnar, Tina. *Vloga glasbe in lik glasbenika v romanu Doktor Faustus Thomasa Manna*. Diplomsko delo. Ljubljana: Filozofska fakulteta.
- Wagner 2014: Wagner, Richard. *Umetnost in družba: Izbrani spisi*. Translated by Tanja Petrič, Mojca Dobnikar and Kostja Žižek. Ljubljana: Studia humanitatis.
- Zalokar 1983: Zalokar, Vera. *Glasba kot prvina pripovedne proze Ivana Cankarja*.

Diplomsko delo. Ljubljana: Filozofska fakulteta.

Zorec 2012: Zorec, Matjaž. *Cankarjevi stiki z glasbo in glasba v Cankarjevi umetniški prozi*. Diplomsko delo. Ljubljana: Filozofska fakulteta.

Zupančič 2021: Zupančič, Klara. *Literatura, glasba in empatija: Analiza percepcije uglasbenih besedil*. Magistrsko delo. Ljubljana: Filozofska fakulteta.

Žižek 1996: Žižek, Slavoj. "Ni spolnega razmerja": Wagner kot lakanovec. – *Filozofija v operi 2: Simptom Wagner. Problemi*, Vol. 34, № 4, pp. 7 – 42.