

Pierre Dubois

University of Tours, France

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1497-4039>

Music and the Georgian Novel, or the Divorce of Adam and Eve

Abstract: *Tristram Shandy* by Laurence Sterne can be said to have inaugurated a new era in the way music was referred to and used in the eighteenth-century English novel. The growing importance of musical allusions in late Georgian novels paralleled the rise of the so-called “age of sensibility.” The demise of the classical theory of the “sister arts” in the course of the eighteenth century enabled music to become an autonomous artistic practice. It prompted the divorce between poetry and music and consequently encouraged the development of instrumental music. This had a direct bearing upon the new role accruing to music in the novel. It can be suggested that there is not only a difference, but a fundamental generic incompatibility or tension between music and the literary text as they try to share a common territory. Late Georgian writers felt that the “new sensibility” they strove to express in their texts could aptly be explored through references to music or musical practice. However, the very fact of mentioning music or of using musical devices in a prose text inevitably calls in question the nature of the literary medium itself. The role attributed to music inside the literary text drives the latter away from its usual shores, towards dangerous zones that threaten its normal balance. Even as music freed itself from the shackles of imitation and became more and more autonomous from the constraint of having as it were to “clothe” poetry, it acquired a greater role in the novel and, doing so, it highlighted the expressive shortcomings of language. By inviting music as a key component in their texts, novelists both paradoxically enriched them and endangered, or showed the limitations of their own art.

Keywords: imitation, expression, sensibility, language, the Georgian novel, music

In the first chapter of Juan Alonso's satiric novel *Althea, the Divorce of Adam and Eve*, the first-person narrator, X. J. Muldoon, explains that women are the "opposite of people" and that he "grew up with the firm belief that the Devil in Eden worked through Eve."¹ He adds that "Adam never struck [him] as the ambitious type," and he, Muldoon, did not like Eve, because she "was so treasonous and seductive to poor Adam, who was no match for her, and who was henceforth condemned to work and live from the sweat of his brow."² At the end of the novel, Muldoon – at a loss to understand how the "New" independent woman has emerged in the early sixties – declares that we have all by now "gotten wind of the divorce of Adam and Eve."³ To some extent, and somewhat provocatively, it may be argued that the metaphor of "the divorce of Adam and Eve" could be applied to the music-literature relationship as it developed in England in the second part of the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century. Following a gradual process in the course of the Georgian period, the music-literature relationship was eventually to lead to an inevitable divorce. To borrow Alonso's phrase, the novel was indeed "no match" for music.

In the past years, more and more cross-disciplinary studies have come to the fore in the humanities, giving rise to interesting research into the notions of intertextuality and intermediality, in which the links between the visual arts and the novel,⁴ between music and painting,⁵ and between music and literature,⁶ have been variously analysed and discussed. In his study *Laurence Sterne and the Origins of the Musical Novel*, William Freedman argued that *Tristram Shandy* was a fundamentally "musical" novel that borrowed not only metaphors, but also structural elements, from the art of music.⁷ While

¹ Juan Alonso. *Althea – the Divorce of Adam and Eve*. New York 1976, p. 1.

² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 362.

⁴ See for instance Jeffrey Meyers. *Painting and the Novel*. Manchester 1975; Jakub Lipski. *Painting the Novel: Pictorial Discourse in Eighteenth-Century English Fiction*. London 2018.

⁵ See for instance Richard Leppert. *Music and Image: Domesticity, Ideology and Socio-cultural Formation in Eighteenth-century England*. Cambridge 1988.

⁶ See for instance Werner Wolf. *The Musicalization of Fiction: A Study in the Theory and History of Intermediality*. Amsterdam-Atlanta GA 1999; Gillen D'Arcy Wood. *Romanticism and Music Culture in Britain, 1779-1840 – Virtue and Virtuosity*. Cambridge 2010; and my own *Music in the Georgian Novel*. Cambridge 2015, on which the present paper is based.

⁷ William Freedman. *Laurence Sterne and the Origins of the Musical Novel*. Athens 1978, *passim*.

other writers, such as Werner Wolf, reduce the so-called musicalisation of *Tristram Shandy* to only a few elements amounting at best to some “dubious «metaphorical impressionism»”,⁸ it can nevertheless be reasonably admitted that Sterne’s ground-breaking novel inaugurated a new era in the way music was mentioned, referred to and used in the eighteenth-century English novel.

Yet, although music was often summoned by eighteenth-century novelists, it is the very nature of the inscription of musical references in the Georgian novel that I propose further to investigate. It will be suggested that the very inclusion of music in the genre of the novel is often problematic.

The demise of the classical theory of the “Sister Arts” in the course of the eighteenth century prompted the divorce between poetry and music, and this consequently encouraged the development of instrumental music. This had a direct bearing upon the evolution of the role accruing to music in the Georgian novel. I would like to suggest that there is not only a difference, but a fundamental generic incompatibility between music and the literary text.⁹ Late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century novelists felt that the “new sensibility” they endeavoured to express in their works could aptly be explored through references to music or musical practice, hence their effort to summon up music within their novels. However, the very fact of doing so in a prose text inevitably calls in question the nature of the literary medium itself. The role attributed to music inside the text of fiction drives the latter away from its usual shores, towards dangerous zones that threaten its normal balance. The rise of the place of music in the late Georgian novel can be read as a tale of attraction as well as rejection and ultimate divorce. Even as music freed itself from the shackles of imitation and became more and more autonomous from the constraint of having as it were to “clothe” poetry, it acquired a greater role in the novel and, doing so, it highlighted the expressive shortcomings of language. By inviting music as a key component in their texts, novelists both paradoxically enriched them and endangered, or showed the limitations of, their own art.

To show this, I will first stop at the Renaissance theory of the “Sister Arts” and its influence on allusions to music in early Georgian novels; then I will have a look at the rise of the mid-eighteenth-century theory of musical expression and its links with Laurence Sterne’s critique of language through music; finally, I will briefly consider another aspect of the divorce between

⁸ Wolf, *Musicalization of Fiction*, p. 233. Werner Wolf. *Musicalization of Fiction*. Amsterdam-Atlanta GA 1999, p. 233.

⁹ I am not addressing here the question of poetry, which raises other issues.

music and the novel in late Georgian novels of sensibility, and in particular the place of silence.

The Theory of the Sister Arts and the Dependence of Music on Words

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle argued that the aim of both poets and painters was to imitate men and their actions. Following suit, Horace compared poets and painters in his *Ars Poetica*, coining the phrase “*ut pictura poesis*,” which means “as is painting, so is poetry;” in other words, a painting could be used as model from which a poem could be imagined. Both Aristotle and Horace primarily intended to show that they ascribed to poetry the role of an imitation. This was however to lead to the broader theory of the “Sister Arts” in the Renaissance, in which the concept was as it were reversed, since it was now implied that painting was supposed to resemble poetry. Poetry now became the model to be emulated by the painter and thus it acquired a superior status among the arts. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the theory of the Sister Arts still prevailed. In his essay *Of the Sister Arts* (1734), for instance, the poet Hildebrand Jacob (1693–1739) linked all the arts with one another, including music, and made them interdependent:

If it be allow'd with *Cicero* that all *Arts* are *related*, we may safely conclude, that *Poetry*, *Painting*, and *Music* are closely ally'd. From this near resemblance to each other they have been commonly call'd the *Sister Arts*, which is so great, that it is difficult to discourse upon either of them, particularly on the two First, without a mutual borrowing of *Images*, and *Terms*, insomuch that one of these *Arts* cannot well be explain'd, without giving some Insight into the other at the same Time.¹⁰

Jacob included music and suggested that each art could give “some insight into the other[s].” For him, the various arts were based upon the same fundamental principles, namely imitation and harmony. Painting was supposed to imitate poetry, which was supposed to imitate nature, as nature contained the laws of beauty and harmony. In reality, the main role of this theory as regards music was to control it by making it subservient to poetry. Unlike poetry, music has no clear, specific meaning and consequently it cannot provide the same instruction. It could therefore best be understood as an accomplice to, a mere ornament or a translation of poetry. In a song or an opera, it is the words set to music that will determine the way in which the

¹⁰ Hildebrand Jacob. *Of the Sister Arts, an Essay*. London 1734, pp. 3–4.

listener will interpret the music and make sense of its alleged “meaning.” One understands therefore why instrumental music long perplexed critics, as was famously expressed by the apocryphal exclamation attributed to Rousseau: “*Sonate, que me veux-tu?*” There was a general suspicion towards music because one was at a loss to interpret its meaning, as Roger North explained.¹¹ The Church, in particular, was very reluctant to let music be used without the control that specific words set to it could provide. To sum up, one of the functions of the theory of the “Sister Arts” was both to help conceptualize music and to delimitate and restrict its perimeter and role.

The Dependence of Music on Words in the Early Georgian Novel

The aesthetic theories of any given period in history percolate into the works produced during that very same period, even though the writers, painters or musicians themselves may not be acutely aware of it. In the first half of the eighteenth century, novelists tended to anchor references to music in the substratum of the texts allegedly set to it. When they mentioned music or described musical scenes, they generally represented the music they alluded to by referring to the words sung to the music in question. Unconsciously or not, they adhered to the ideal of the imitation of the meaning of the words by the music. Music was not autonomous and it necessarily appeared in the body of the novel in its verbal guise, that is, it remained concealed behind the veil of the words that were set to it.

I would like to take the examples of Fielding and Richardson to illustrate this prevalence of words over music resulting from the theory of the “Sister Arts.” In Henry Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews*,¹² it is thanks to Joseph’s voice and singing that his beloved Fanny recognises him when they happen to find themselves in the same inn.¹³ The song Fanny hears him sing from a room next to hers has an immediate and potent effect upon her: she becomes pale and swoons. Fielding takes the trouble to provide the reader with the words

¹¹ ‘But now coming to the Instrumentall kind of Musick, wee are much more at a loss than before; for the vocall hath the subject provided, but for the other, the master must feigne the subject, as well as forme his musick to it.’ Roger North, “The Excellent Art of Voluntary”, c.1720, in *Roger North on Music*. Ed. John Wilson. London 1959, p. 115.

¹² Henry Fielding. *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews. And of his Friend Mr. Abraham Adams. Written in Imitation of the Manner of Cervantes, Author of Don Quixote* [London 1742]. Ed. Thomas Keymer. Oxford 1999.

¹³ Henry Fielding. *Joseph Andrews*. II, xii, p. 133. *Ibid.* II, xii, p. 133.