Description as a transmedial mode of representation and its potential in instrumental music explored through a study of musical work inspired by paintings

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Description as a Transmedial Mode of Representation and its Potential in Instrumental Music Explored through a Study of Musical Works Inspired by Paintings

LIU Lai-ying

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Principal Supervisor: Dr. David Francis Urrows
Hong Kong Baptist University
July 2014
DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis represents my own work which has been done after registration for the degree of PhD at Hong Kong Baptist University, and has not been previously included in a thesis or dissertation submitted to this or any other institution for a degree, diploma or other qualifications.

Signature: ______________________

Date: July 2014
Among various forms of art, music (and instrumental music in particular) is said to be the least descriptive art form, owing to its limitation with respect to heteroreferentiality—the ability to refer to things outside itself. However, in view of the impreciseness current in the definition of musical description itself, as well as a lack of case studies in understanding the modes of representation of descriptive music, there remain some questions about the fundamental nature and the potential of music as a medium of description. These questions will be raised and explored in this dissertation.

It is particularly interesting that, while description is distinguished from narration in literary studies, in the past musicologists have often treated the two categories as one; thus, I posit that this ambiguity might blur our understanding of some aspects of the medial nature of music. By looking at semiotic features of music, I study how these features operate in delivering descriptive content through the analysis of programmatic music of various types. Their roles in developing the descriptive potential of music are also explored here. Building on theoretical studies by Werner Wolf, and the concepts of semiotists such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, I discuss three musical cases: Franz Liszt’s piano work, *Sposalizio* (inspired by Raphael’s *Lo Sposalizio della Vergine*), Ottorino Respighi’s *Trittico Botticelliano* (inspired by three of Sandro Botticelli’s paintings), as well as Sergei Rachmaninov’s *The Isle of the Dead*, Op. 29 (inspired by Arnold Böcklin’s *Die Toteninsel*). The research presented here seeks to reveal how musical signs describe the elements of the painting, as well as how they gradually acquire their own symbolic meaning that, in turn, ultimately allows them to transcend the visual images, and operate to present the inner content of the painting, as expressed by either the painter or the composer towards the pictorial artwork.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Chapter 1  Introduction

Background

My present research is inspired by concepts outlined in Werner Wolf’s 2008 article *Description: A Common Potential of Words and Music.*¹ In his study, Wolf compared the medial nature of three different traditional media—words, painting, and music—and reaffirmed that music (and instrumental music in particular) is the *least* descriptive art form, owing to its limitation with respect to the ‘hetero-referentiality’ (the ability to refer to things outside itself). However, in view of the imprecision current in the definition of description itself, as well as a lack of case studies in understanding the modes of representation of descriptive music, there remain some questions about the fundamental nature and the potential of music as a medium of description. It is particularly interesting that, while description is distinguished from narration in literary studies, in the past musicologists have often treated the two categories as one; thus, I posit that this ambiguity might blur our understanding of some aspects of the medial nature of music. By looking at the semiotic features of music, I study how these features operate in delivering descriptive content through the analysis of programmatic music of various types, and their role in developing the descriptive potential of music is also explored.

Purpose of the Research

Although various fields of musicology take different perspectives in understanding musical works, musicologists often start their inquiries by questioning meaning. Throughout the history of musicological study, schools and scholars took various stands, including structuralism, absolutism, referentialism, and symbolism, as well as adopting concepts such as musical topics, connotation, metaphor, or hermeneutics—all in an attempt to grasp the true meaning of music. Many musical scholars have visited the issue of musical meaning frequently over the last few decades, with works by Lawrence Kramer, Jean-Jacques Nattiez, Susan Langer, Kofi Agawu, Carolyn Abbate, and numerous others pushing the question of musical signification to the frontline of the discipline. All these efforts have been aimed at finding an answer to or providing a framework for the understanding of musical meaning. For example, to take the referentialist standpoint, music as a medium is regarded as delivering a meaningful message or expressing human emotions. In his *Cours de linguistique générale*, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) noted that, as a signifier, music contains not only signs but also the signified.\(^2\) In semiotic terms, given its potential to deliver signified meaning and expression, music could be studied as a signification system.

In the nineteenth century, the expansion of musical genres resulted in the proliferation of different types of program music with varying programmatic or

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narrative content. This abundance of new material made the study of this phenomenon a popular topic in the academic field. Composers have regarded music as a medium for human emotions, akin to the medium of language. However, music as an artistic medium is often criticized as the least representative art form, for it provides only vague messages and arbitrary meanings, if any, particularly when compared with words or language. If music—particularly program music, in which the composer inserts a deliberate content—is to be regarded as a medium for representation (or, others may prefer using the term signification), the message (or a signified) has to be clear and concrete. Or at least, the relationship between musical signs and signified of each musical works has to be specified to some extent. As Michael Klein, who has studied the intertextuality of Western art music, revealed there is “a closely related problem surrounds the term program music, which is often the nexus of confusion, since it may refer to representation, or narrative, or expression, or a combination of these ideas.”³ Klein has, in fact, pointed out the major confusion related to representation in music, that we often develop no definite idea from terms such as representation, narrative, expression, as well as description in music. Rather than clear up all ambiguities related to definitions of these terms, I have chosen to concentrate upon one of them, that is, description, as this is an area that seldom received proper attention in music studies. In particular, I am intrigued as to how music acts as a medium for description (as opposed to narrative) and succeeds in delivering descriptive content with its particular signification system.

³ Michael L. Klein, Intertextuality in Western Art Music (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 112.
Current research on description tends to be concentrated in the field of literary studies, particularly in relation to fictional writing.\(^2\) It used to be studied from a monomedial perspective in linguistic studies. However, with growing awareness of medial and intermedial studies on various linguistic topics, it is now recognized that description is in fact a transmedial phenomenon. The study of intermediality or transmediality involves looking at the participation of more than one medium of expression operating in the signification of a human artifact.\(^3\) It emphasizes the signifying process of various media, which involves different media serving as the channel for this process in which they *interact* with each other in various ways. It also emphasizes the understanding of the uniqueness of different media. To put it in another way, Wolf stated the necessity of transmedial study, and opined that “the transmedial nature of the descriptive permits one to locate it within a typology of semiotic macro-modes, which not only includes media/genres but also micro-level realization since description can occur in parts of them.”\(^4\)

Although description has been recently revisited as a transmedial mode of representation, academic discussions are still very limited and generally confined to the field of linguistics. Description, when applied in music (the so-called ‘least representative art form’), is bound to be very restrictive when compared to verbal media in particular. The fact that musical meaning is mostly conveyed through arbitrary signs make the study of this area a more problematic one.

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\(^4\) Wolf, “Description as a Transmedial Mode of Representation,” 1.
Some scholars in semiotics, such as Claude Levi-Strauss, therefore stated that music contains signs without a signified. It becomes one of the reasons why musical description is a less-researched area in music studies, especially when it is compared with other modes of representation such as narrativity. Even when there is some discussion on musical description, due to the lack of a precise definition of the word ‘description’—as description is so regarded as a common-sense phenomenon in our daily world—this confusing situation regarding musical description has become even more pronounced and complicated. In view of this, by revisiting the essential features of description in this paper, particularly how the linguistic studies approached to this area, I intend to contribute to the extant knowledge of the potential of description in music from an intermedial point of view.\(^5\)

The recent development and growing academic interest in interdisciplinary perspectives provide further justifications for the present research. The present research focuses on two major media forms—music and visual art. Although interdisciplinary research is not entirely new in the field of music—in particular that of focusing on the intermedial study of musical text (verbal medium) and music—the issue of the crossover of visual art and music in the perspective of intermediality has not been extensively discussed. I believe this kind of intermedial study could reveal the possibilities and limitations inherent in the two seemingly incompatible semiotic systems, as well as alerting us some aspects of

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\(^5\) According to Werner Wolf (1999), intermediality is defined as a particular relation (a relation that is ‘intermedial’ in the narrow sense) between conventional media of communication. This relation consists in a verifiable, or at least identifiable, participation of two or more media in the signification of a human artefact. Rajewsky (2010) defined intermediality as relations between media, to medial interactions and interferences.
the aesthetic beliefs and conventions regarding these semiotic systems. Unlike the studies of descriptive in linguistics, there is a marked lack of a systematic approach in music, and case studies on this topic are few. With such a gap in the current knowledge in this field, this study aims to provide further insights for cross-disciplinary methodology in this area. Related concepts of descriptivity in language studies will be referenced and applied to the study of musical descriptive in this paper, in the hope that the linguistic models could bring something fruitful to musical analysis, and this exploratory research could arouse further academic interest in the related areas.

In summary, the research questions that are addressed in this paper are:

1. What is description? What are the implications of description from a medial perspective?
2. What are the semiotic features of music, and how do these features influence the descriptive potential of music?
3. To what extent can music describe? How does the medial feature of music affect the transmedialization of visual signs from painting to music signs?
4. How could the understanding of the above be applied to the descriptive works of music—in particular, works of Franz Liszt (1811-1886), Ottorino Respighi (1879-1936), and Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943)?
BASIC ASSUMPTIONS – MUSICAL SEMIOTICS

As the doctrine of signs, semiotics treats its subject—whether music or a painting—as a system of signification. As both media are now commonly accepted as human signifying practices, whereby their respective signs operate to give meaning in our human world, the semiotic approach provides a common theoretical framework for their study by grounding their relationship in the broader context of sign activity. Seen as arts, literature and music, as well as painting, are comparable as they are regarded as conventionalized human signifying practices, and are assumed to possess a ‘grammar’ governing their practices. This type of study not only allows the nature of different media and their signification processes to be revealed more fully, it also uncovers something new about the fundamental nature of music.

The definition of description adopted in this work will be based on basic concepts borrowed from linguistic studies. I will first discuss Wolf’s idea of description as a macro-semiotic mode of representation which involves concepts such as referentiality, iconicity, and connotations. His ideas on description will serve as a starting point for my research inquiries on descriptivity, and provide perspectives that stand for linguistic concerns. However, as I am not entirely satisfied with Wolf’s linguistic definition of description, I also examine the ideas of other linguists and aesthetic philosophers, such as Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, Lydia Goehr, and others. A genre of literary description—ekphrasis—will also be explored as a common descriptive practice, extending back to ancient Greece. The study of ekphrasis will inform this work through broadening our
understanding of the traditional Greek ideas pertaining to the concept of description, thus giving a new and critical perspective for studying the descriptive potential of music. More importantly, this will also enrich our understanding of the nature of description, dispensing with the physical or denotative attributes of the descriptive fact. With a more sophisticated understanding of description, I will show in this study that the descriptive potential of music is no longer as limited as is commonly perceived.

The application of literary description to musical cases is one of the central themes of this study. Although descriptive music of various descriptive content (or topics) abounds (such as music describing landscapes, literary scenes, poems, and so forth), in this study I have selected musical examples inspired by paintings, as such a choice aids my research efforts by providing definite descriptive content that makes the examination of the descriptive devices of music more feasible. Besides, the growing interest in intermedial studies has also urged me to select two distinctive media for study—music and painting, through which to reveal the unique features of these media. Description as a transmedial mode of representation often involves more than one medium—either through transfer from one medium to another, or via a simultaneous use of more than one medium to deliver the descriptive content. Painting-inspired music therefore allows us see how musical signs describe, or represent visual signs, and how the interaction of the two seemingly incompatible semiotic systems operate together in the function of descriptivity.

Nevertheless, this study will focus on music rather than painting, but it would be inevitable to touch on the medial characteristics of painting and verbal medium.
Among various musical works inspired by paintings, music of varied genres has been considered in selecting the musical examples, in order to encompass musical cases of varied length and nature, and facilitate a more comprehensive discussion of the descriptive potential of music. Thus, a piano work, a chamber orchestra suite, and a lengthy full orchestral work have been included. The works included in this study are: a movement from Liszt’s piano cycle, *Années de Pèlerinage II* (inspired by Raphael’s *Lo Sposalizio*), Respighi’s *Trittico Botticelliano* (inspired by three of Botticelli’s paintings), and Rachmaninov’s *The Isle of the Dead*, Op. 29 (inspired by Böcklin’s *Die Toteninsel*). As the paintings ‘described’ by the selected musical works actually exist and are well-known, they can be used as the source of references when conducting this research. All these musical works involve description of visual artworks (this is sometimes called ‘musical ekphrasis’), and they will provide tangible imagery of the signified and signifier frozen in a moment of time. One final remark worth-noting is that, the approach to the musical cases in this research are descriptive analysis which only examine the selected works for the purpose of establishing material and structure that directly related to my research. I am principally concern with the large-scale structure from a melodic point of view with some considerations given to the fundamental tonal strategy. In sum, with a clearer definition of description, and a thorough understanding of its role in relation to narrative, this research hopes to add to the current body of intermedial musical studies.

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7 The selection of painting-inspired works of various genres is intentional, as it would make this study more comprehensive, although more studies on other genres are needed for an even more conclusive result.
OUTLINE OF THE RESEARCH PAPER

Based on the research questions and modes of inquiry mentioned above, this work will proceed to seven major sections, which examine various aspects in relation to musical description. As I have already mentioned, this research takes the stance of regarding music as a system of signification. Hence, I shall start by looking at the prominent semiotic features of music as a medium of art, and see how these features help to deliver meanings of various kinds. Areas pertinent to the current study, in particular those informing the research questions, are explored through extensive reviews of related books and academic publications.

Semiotics is about the study of signs, as language is defined by a system of signs with its unique mode of operation. It was pioneered by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who laid the foundations of modern semiotics in linguistics. The most important contribution Saussure gave to semiotics is his idea of *sign*, which, in his view, comprised of *signifier* and *signified*. Another important semiotic philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), representing the American school of thought, formulated an even more detailed definition and framework for the operation of signs. Based on their explorations on the idea of the sign, other scholars further explored the signification system in music in which the signifier and signified operate. The common thread amongst all these works is that the signification process of music can be achieved through understanding the nature of these signs and related processes.
In addition to the views of the two founders of semiology, Saussure and Peirce, ideas of other authoritative semioticians, such as Roman Jakobson, Eero Tarasti, and music semioticians such as Kofi Agawu, Raymond Monelle, David Lidov, Michael Spitzer, Susan Langer, and Nattiez, are also informative for the purpose of this study, as they all have influenced not just literary but also musical semiotics. Their fundamental ideas, therefore, will be reviewed in chapter two, which provided a basic conceptual framework for the discussion of musical descriptivity. Admittedly, it would be unrealistic to cover all the doctrines and discussions of musical semiotics in this paper, therefore I believe only key concepts of semiology and musical semiotics—how the musical signifier related to the signified in the delivery of musical meaning—will be adequate to provide a semiotic framework for the subsequent discussions of my paper.

After reviewing aspects of the semiotic features of music, I will proceed to evaluate how these semiotic natures influence the descriptive potential of music, and to what extent a musical work can describe. In chapter three, first of all, I will look at the definition of description from a linguistic point of view, and examine the natures and functions of description. Wolf stressed that for a medium to describe, it should have a potential of hetero-referentiality and be able to achieve what he calls the “object-centered reference.” However, it is generally understood that music is the most abstract and non-referential form of art, and its potential of referring to something other than itself is very limited. It would therefore hinder the potential of musical description. With a more thorough and precise understanding of the characteristic of descriptive, I intend to

give a more detailed account on the descriptive potential of music in this section. Various mechanisms of musical description will also be discussed.

In chapter three, I also argue that the weighted emphasis in Wolf’s definition of description, one that rests heavily on object-centered referentiality, would create problems if we look at description in a musical work. I therefore examine the original form of description, *ekphrasis*, to see the scope and purpose it had when it was adopted in its early stages in ancient Greece. To look more deeply into the qualities of the musical descriptive, I shall also discuss an earlier form of musical description, *Tonmalerei*, as well as an important ideology in musical aesthetics, *Kunstkritik*—the idea of the adaptation of one art form into another. The existing definition of description is derived more from the language perspective, and when applied to musical works proves to have some insufficiencies. Therefore, in this chapter, I propose to supplement the existing definition of description from a musical point of view.

With a better understanding on the nature and features of description, Liszt’s *Sposalizio* will be the musical example for consideration in chapter four. One of the advantages of studying Liszt’s music is that he wrote so prolifically about his thoughts on the nature of music as well as the idea of his musical works in his various letters and documents, and he read widely in books by contemporary artists in search of corroboration of his ideas and intentions. The study of Liszt’s *Sposalizio*, as I shall discuss, demonstrates that music relies heavily on subjective-centered referentiality in description. It supports my argument that both the object-centered and subject-centered referentiality should be given
thorough consideration when description is studied from medial perspective.

Description as a transmedial mode of representation works across various media and exhibits unique features in distinctive media in chapter five. I shall explore how musical signs are transmedialized to visual ones through various signifiers and signification processes, in particular how they deliver description in both object-centered and subject-centered aspects. In this chapter, the three movements of Respighi’s *Trittico Botticelliano*, inspired by three Renaissance paintings of the Italian painter, Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510), serve to show how description can fulfill the requirements of descriptivity in accordance with my suggestions on musical descriptive discussed in the previous chapters. Music as a medium specializes in expressivity and always works to deliver both feelings and emotions, which then become an indispensable part of the musical description. I propose to look into both sides of the matter in order to have a fuller understanding of the capabilities of music in achieving descriptivity.

Chapter six will focus on a discussion of the distinction between musical description and narration. While description is distinguished from narration in literary studies, musicologists have often treated the two modes of semiotic organization as one. Music scholars generally use the term, narrative, to describe all musical works that relate to extra-musical topics. Some of them fail to define and distinguish precisely between narrative and descriptive music. Given this confusing situation, a discussion of musical narrative that differentiates it from musical descriptive is needed to reveal the deeper nature of music as a medium of description. The temporal and metaphorical natures of music give it strength in
narrative representation, therefore the evaluation on musical narrative reveals some important aspects of musical signification. As a result, in chapter seven, I again refer to the major concepts on narrative of literary studies and apply them to the last musical example, Rachmaninov’s *The Isle of the Dead,* to see whether description can be separated from (or always goes with) narration in music, as is the case in literature. In addition, I explore how narrative is possible in musical works, given the fact that narrative might require more specific criteria such as “the presence of a teleological, goal-oriented trajectory and, in connection with this, a motivated ending.” ⁹ All these descriptive mechanisms and musical signifiers will be discussed in detail. The evaluation of whether this work should be regarded as descriptive or narrative will also be discussed here in a comprehensive manner.

⁹ Wolf, “Description as a Transmedial Mode of Representation,” 70.
Chapter 2 Music as a Medium of Art from Semiotic Perspectives

SEMiotIC ANALYSIS OF MUSIC – BACKGROUND AND KEY CONCEPTS

Originating with ancient Greek philosophers as early as Plato and Aristotle, early aesthetic theories placed great emphasis on the theory of mimesis. Competing with other arts, music at first strove for its dignity by trying to be an imitative art form. However, substantial changes in aesthetic beliefs towards the late-eighteenth century, during which an increased awareness of expressivity and subjective potential of music, led to intensive discussions on the role of music, and finally to a new definition of musical meaning under Romanticism. A new generation of philosophers in the nineteenth century considered that music could be able to convey a special kind of affect, or “at least that it revealed a special order and significance within the world of feeling.”¹ Kant’s view of the subjective mind, and his emphasis on its active role, advanced the idea that music was to speak for human subjectivity. Other philosophers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) and Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), also shared similar views that all human utterances are fundamentally expressive of feeling; music should act for language in delivering human expression. According to Schopenhauer, the objects of the phenomenal world, including language or other art forms, could only represent human will indirectly. Yet, music was completely independent from empirical

reality, therefore it could ‘objectify’ the will in a direct way. This was also the reason why it was believed that the affective effect of music is more profound and penetrating than other art forms. As Schopenhauer put,

Therefore music is by no means like the other arts, namely a copy of the Ideas, but a copy of the will itself, the objectivity of which are the Ideas. For this reason the effect of music is so very much more powerful and penetrating than is that of the other arts, for these others speak only for the shadow, but music of the essence.²

The composers reveals the innermost nature of the world, and expresses the profoundest wisdom in a language that his reasoning faculty does not understand, just as a magnetic somnambulist gives information about things of which she has no conception when she is awake.³

Amongst the important Romantic aestheticians, Wilhelm Wackenroder (1773–1798), Ludwig Tieck (1773–1853), and E.T.A. Hoffmann (1776–1822), valued music for its indeterminate content. This was regarded as the major weakness of music in the past, but with the change of aesthetic currents, it was believed that “through its non-referential suggestive forms, music was perceived as evoking an ineffaceable essence more metaphysically profound than anything communicated through language or sight.”⁴ A transcendent view of music therefore prevailed during this period. The transcendent nature of music rests upon its autonomy in poetic and dramatic delivery of human expression, without at all compromising its freedom of musical expression.

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³ Ibid., 260.
However, there were still different views towards musical expression and communication in the Romantic era, owing to the different assumptions concerning the nature of music. This major dispute has ever since rested upon the split between formalists and referentialists (or as Lydia Goehr called them—the transcendentalists). Goehr summed up the major contrasting views between formalists and transcendentalists as this way:

For the formalists, music achieves its beautiful form in the radical separation of its language of tones from any outside element; for the transcendentalists, the language of tones achieves its sublime expression in its profound metaphysical connection to everything else.\(^5\)

The key advocate of formalism, Eduard Hanslick (1825–1904) stressed that a musical work is a structure of forms—“tonally moving forms” consisting simply of structures of tones, which are not related to an extra-musical world.\(^6\) The sublime beauty of music consists in beautiful musical forms and musical elements. While he admitted that music might stimulate emotions in some cases, Hanslick opposed any aesthetic concern for the meaning or expression that a musical work delivers. His focus was entirely on the music itself.

Beyond all these disputes over the nature and meaning of music, musical semiotics in the twentieth century developed with an aim to provide a better understanding of the issues of the meaning and nature of music. One earlier important scholar was Leonard Meyer (1918–2007), who in his landmark book, *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (1957), discussed his ideas about the meaning of

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music, and admitted that there are significant extra-musical aspects of music. He endorsed the referential meaning of music and therefore took the referentialist’s point of view that music could refer to extra-musical elements. He explained that “meaning is thus not a property of thing. It cannot be located in the stimulus [that is, music] alone.” It is therefore meaningless to ask what the intrinsic meaning of a single tone or phrase is, as if music could only be discussed in an isolated confined manner. This clearly contradicts the view of the formalists. Besides, the same musical stimulus can often generate different meanings and diversities of interpretation under different contexts or situations. In this regard, Meyer reminded us that a sound stimulus does not have meaning unless “it becomes realized as part of the system of sound relationships and until its particular functions within that system is made apparent.” He explained the concept of connotation, through which meanings that are shared in common by a group of individuals in a culture are delivered. Even though he did not frame his concepts under a theory of semiotics, Meyer indeed touched on some preliminary ideas of musical semiotics. He related music’s expressive effect to tension and expectation, and from there he drew the associations between musical elements and their organization to extra-musical experience. Although his concepts are sometimes regarded as too generalized, they indeed initiated further discussion and exploration of musical meaning, and laid a foundation for subsequent studies of musical semiotics.

8 Ibid., 46.
9 Ibid., 258.
Originating in linguistic studies, musical semiotics arose in the 1950s and 1960s, developing alongside with traditional historical musicology. It offers a new area of interest in music study, and gives new perspectives and approaches in defining the meaning of various musical works. From there it also provides new experiences in music appreciation and understanding. Music analyses in semiotic perspectives are now widely accepted, and have been studied by scholars such as Kofi Agawu, Raymond Monelle, David Lidov, Michael Spitzer, Susanne Langer, and Jean-Jacques Nattiez, amongst many others.

In general terms, musical semiotics involves the study of music as signs, and assumes that there is an association between this sign and its representation, which includes both intra-musical and extra-musical elements. Like language, music as sign could be understood and investigated by means of rules, norms, and generalizing approaches. Musical semiologists are therefore concerned with “general problems of representation, how media are comparable and different, how reference is possible and its limitation, how signs are biased and how they compete with their objects.”

Their research interests tend to “concentrate on pattern rather than content, to seek out structure rather than to interpret meanings.” Trying to make the study of music more scientific and systematic, musical semiologists therefore aim to establish a new musicology on a more scientific foundation, and to “replace the views of established tradition within system and approaches which are more radically scientific and logical, more comprehensive, more universal.”

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12 Ibid., 21.
FUNDAMENTAL SEMIOTIC CONCEPTS ROOTED IN LINGUISTICS

It is always hard to define the boundary, or come to a universal definition, of the scope of musical semiotics, owing to its rather broad concepts and varieties of thoughts. Besides, as a renowned musicologist in the field, Jean-Jacques Nattiez, described it, a musical semiology will not necessarily provide answers to all the questions related to the issues of nature or meaning in music, at least not at this stage. This paper is not intended to discuss all its doctrines, nor give a lengthy account of all its idea and concepts. Instead, a brief background and the key concepts borrowed from linguistics are to be covered, as I believe this will provide a sounding theoretical framework and clear understanding of the terminology used in the subsequent discussion.

Semioticians start their inquiries with the key concept of sign, as language is defined by a system of signs with specific modes of operation. This was pioneered by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure who aimed to develop a systematic approach to the study of language and thereby laid the foundation for modern semiology in language. His central notion is that language may be analyzed as a formal system of differential elements, and these elements are what he called signs which comprises of signifier and signified. Signifier is the form of sign (i.e. the material aspect) that presents itself in communication, whereas the signified represents the respective idea or mental conception of the signifier.¹³

Based on Saussure’s first exploration on the idea of sign, other European semiotic scholars such as Levi-Strauss, Nattiez, Eco, and Monelle, further explored the signification system in music, in which the signifier and signified operate. Through understanding the nature of these signs and their processes of referring that we could understand the signification process of music.

Another early and founding semiotic philosopher representing the American school of thought, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839 – 1914), formulated an even more detailed definition and procedure for the operation of the signs. Peirce defined that the total sign comprises of three entities: the representamen (i.e. the sign itself, or the material qualities of the sign); the object (i.e. that the sign refers to) and the interpretant (i.e. a secondary sign by which people “mentally link the representamen to its object.”) The representamen is almost the same as Saussure’s idea of signifier, which is then presented itself as an object and is perceived or interpreted by people with various interpretants. A sign, according to Peirce, refers to an object through an infinite numbers of interpretants, and these interpretants work together to create the meaning of the sign in the level of connotation or denotation. This sign, or the collection of related signs, to which an infinite complex of interpretants is linked, can be called a “symbolic form.”

In music, the interpretants might include a related work, a genre, a title, the historical background, the composer’s biography, convention, or culture. Following Peirce, I shall look at subsequent musical cases with respect to their objects and interpretants, and study how the system of symbolic form operates.

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14 Ibid.
In Peirce’s thought, the operation of sign and its representation involves processes of referring. He was aware that one sign often refers to infinite numbers of another signs (and infinite number of interpretants); in other words, it often refers to something *other* than itself. As defined by Peirce, the whole process of referring is as follows: “I define a Sign as anything which on the one hand is so determined by an Object and on the other so determines an idea in a person’s mind, that this latter determination, which I term the Interpretant of the sign, is thereby determined by that Object.”\(^\text{16}\) This forms a triadic relationship between sign, interpretant, and object, in which there are *infinite* processes of referring going on within them. This is the essence of Peirce’s semiological thought which I shall use for analysis the musical cases for the subsequent discussion.\(^\text{17}\)

Peirce further proposed three types of sign: *iconic, indexical,* and *symbolic* signs. Each represents a different nature of the representamen and intrepretants, and unique relationships with the object. Iconic signs share similar physical appearance with the object, and therefore are of direct imitative nature. Indexical signs give a logical and direct indication for another sign, usually in the virtue of contiguity and causality. Symbolic signs embrace a concept or idea that is related to the culture or convention. A musical example of cuckoo that has often been quoted by scholars best illustrates the character of these three different signs. For example, in a musical work a composer might imitate acoustically the sound of


\(^{17}\) Peirce’s ideas are often being regarded as complex and contradicting, and therefore here I have just touched on his most useful and suggestive idea about the triadic relationships between the components of sign.
the cuckoo, which then serves as an *iconic* sign of a birdcall. This could be an *indexical* sign too, when it represents the idea ‘spring is coming.’ On the third level, it could also symbolize the whole of nature, symbolize fertility, or imply the joy of new season, thereby serving as a *symbolic* icon for the representation of a topic relating to these attributes. As a result, a sign can be iconic, indexical, or symbolic at the same time, depending on how it signifies an object or an idea.

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18 As in Frederick Delius’ orchestral work, *On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring* (1912).
MUSICAL SEMIOTICS – KEY CONCEPTS

In musical semiotics, musicologists study musical elements as if they are signs. Nattiez affirmed that meaning exists when a sign or an object “is placed in relationship to a horizon.” \(^{19}\) In other words, signification operates when sign is placed within a context, where a sign delivers its semantic content. Signs, including musical ones, do not exist in isolation. There are other signs in larger contexts, where an individual sign possesses some relationship with others, and with the larger context in which they are situated. As such, we are in a position to acknowledge the presence of both an intrinsic and an extrinsic referential capacity of music that is worth our attention when we look at the referential aspect of musical signs. Using key concepts borrowed from linguistic semiotics, music is structured as a complex system of signs. Each of these signs has multiple signifieds, and their referring processes, though complex and sometimes arbitrary, demonstrate some conformities and patterns which become the research interests of musical semioticians. Musical semiotics seeks to study music as signs, and seeks to find out the relationship between signifier and signified. The focus is not solely on whether or what music means, but whether it is possible to figure out ‘how’ musical signs mean, or to understand the signification system of musical signs. \(^{20}\) Under such an assumption, music could be analyzed in semiotic terms in order to reveal its nature and meaning, and it is only under this assumption that the present study is meaningful and workable. As Nicolas Ruwet puts it, “our only means of access to a study of musical meaning is, indeed, a

\(^{19}\) Nattiez, *Music and Discourse*, 102.

\(^{20}\) Mirigliano, 44.
formal study of musical syntax, and a description of the material aspect of music on all levels where music has a real existence.”

Raymond Monelle’s “Linguistic and Semiotics in Music”

Being a prominent figure in musical semiotics, Raymond Monelle (1937 – 2010) thoroughly studied the nature of musical signs. Unlike literary signs, which are almost exclusively symbolic in nature, concrete musical signs are generally considered as iconic, and it is usually the iconic musical signs that are more easily identified (owing to its imitative nature). However, according to Monelle, it is rather difficult to find examples of pure iconic musical signs. While Peirce opined that most of the signification in language depends on convention (i.e. symbolic signs), and should be understood against the cultural context, Monelle and another key semiotics scholar, Umberto Eco, share the same view that most musical icons have to be interpreted with reference to symbolic implications. In other words, these icons and their interpretants should be referenced to conventions, or to a larger cultural context. There are no pure icons in musical signs because no musical fact could be isolated from the influence of conventions. Even the most common musical icons, as described by Monelle—such as waves, clouds, storms, horses—are not purely iconic. They are all dependent on well-known conventions. For example, a piece of dance music in slow triple meter could be interpreted as a sarabande music, because of the conventions of the sarabande style. However, if there is no convention that could be referred to, music becomes even more abstract. In these situations, there is a tendency to

look to its indexical reference for meaning, trying to relate the musical signs to some causal relationship.

In many circumstances, musical signs not only possess meaning on their own, but also refer to or represent something else, by which the relationship of these two things becomes complicated. In this respect, the analysis of musical meaning, unlike language, is complicated by “a distinction and ambiguity between possessing a quality and referring to a quality.”

(This will be seen to be important, particularly when I discuss the representation or referentiality of music in subsequent chapters.) For this reason, there are often two types of referential meaning. The *denotative* meaning is the primary meaning of a musical sign, referring to what the signified literally is. It is “the immediate referee which a code assigns to a given term in a given culture.”

It is like a definition, the primary meaning encoded to a signifier. The other one, the *connotative* meaning refers to the “implied meaning generated by situation or context.”

Rather than an objective representation, this second type of meaning usually represents values and concepts of a cultural or language group, and often involves an interpretation or value judgment of this group. As described by Monelle, music appears to have denotative meaning when it imitates some natural sounds, e.g. a fanfare, horn call, or shepherd’s pipe, or when quoting a phrase or theme from another work. However, these sounds could also give connotative meanings (such as war, hunting, countryside) at the same time. In practice, Monelle considered that the connotative meaning is at least as important

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22 Lidov, 2.
26 Ibid.
as the denotative meaning, though they might interact with or even contradict each other.

Roman Jakobson distinguished the two categories of semiosis, the *introversive* and *extroversive* semiosis, reflecting both the inherent and referential natures of musical meaning. Introversive semiosis denotes internal or intramusical reference by looking at the relationship on the musical elements such as harmonic progression, rhythm, and phrase structure. Extroversive semiosis focuses on the external or extramusical referential connection, such as the reference of musical work to social or historical context, between the signs and signified. Nattiez further elaborated on the introversive semiosis to include both intramusical referring, that is the relationships between musical units; and intermusical referring, in which a particular music associate with a larger musical community, or style.

With introversive and extroversive semiosis, Jakobson considered that introversive semiosis should dominate in music, because “the referential component is either absent or minimal in musical messages, even in so-called program music.” This makes it clear that he is taking the formalist’s position that music is first and foremost a play of forms. Even though he acknowledged that there is an emotive connotative in music, it “exists despite the purely formal nature of music.” Agawu however disagreed with the dominance of introversive semiosis. In his book *Playing with Signs – A Semiotic Interpretation*

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of Classic Music, he states that Jakobson’s claim for the predomination of introverse semiosis over extroversive semiosis is too generalized.\textsuperscript{30} At best, musical signs have to be analyzed with respect to both of these two modes of signification. Their interaction may sometimes show that one predominates over the other, but such a condition is usually work-specific.

Again, we risk falling into the irresolvable debate between the formalists and referentialists, which is certainly not the purpose of the present study. I would rather take Nattiez’s stand, and affirm that “one of the semiological peculiarities of music is owed to the existence of two domains, intrinsic and extra-musical referring.”\textsuperscript{31} In other words, we should always look at both the intrinsic and extrinsic musical reference. In Rosario Mirigliano’s words, “what is often overlooked is the basic fact that, whether they are indexes, icons, or symbols, musical phenomena are semiotic in nature only insofar as they do not stand for themselves, but for something else, something which is outside them.”\textsuperscript{32} There are multiple facets in musical facts and therefore “for users of music, composers, performers and listeners, all participants in a ‘total musical fact,’ musical material will establish connections to their lived experience and to their exterior world.”\textsuperscript{33} As a result, semiotic analysis in music should take care to consider this ‘total musical fact,’ and “must be able to verify whether the meaning that a composer invests in the work is perceived and understood by performers and listeners – and if so, how.”\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{30} Agawu, Playing with Signs, 133.
\textsuperscript{31} Nattiez, Music and Discourse, 117.
\textsuperscript{32} Mirigliano, 54.
\textsuperscript{33} Nattiez, Music and Discourse, 126.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
Nattiez further reminded us that musical semiotics has “biological, psychological, and cultural bases, but we must beware of all reductive or mechanistic explanations.”\(^{35}\) After all, he pointed out that musical meaning is different from the case in language because the meaning in language is univocal. There is often a psychological reality involved in the reference process of musical signs. As a result, the complexity of music as a symbolic sign needs our attention when studied, because unlike human language, “music discourse does not strive to convey conceptually clear, logically articulated messages.”\(^{36}\)

Intermedial studies often have to take into consideration the specific semiotic natures of signs when they are located in different art media, including verbal, visual and musical media. In his book *A Study in the Theory and History of Intermediality*, Wolf has illustrated the essential differences of the semiotic nature of the three traditional media. The verbal signs are symbolic in nature, where there is no direct or iconic relationship between the signifier and signified. There are rarely iconic signs in verbal art. Probably owing to its purely symbolic nature, it can signify, or refer to any kind of subject or meaning. It therefore can achieve what Wolf called “hetero-referentiality”—that is, referring to things other than itself. On the other hand, musical signs embrace all the iconic, indexical, and symbolic natures. Limitation in hetero-referential connotation makes it difficult for this medium to convey a precise and definite meaning. It does not fit well in the demands of a mimetic art, and its referential potential is always being challenged. (I shall have a more detailed discussion on this point in the next chapter.) Finally, visual art, such as painting, possess signs of more iconic

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 124.
\(^{36}\) Ibid., 126.
nature. They have a greater potential in imitation and representation, but less in symbolic nature.

The comparison of different art forms in terms of their semiotic nature has often aroused interest among academic scholars, particularly those involved in interdisciplinary studies. One of them, Michael Spitzer, has reminded us that both painting and music are works of an expressive art that “established a common interest in expressive immediacy based on the perceived analogy between the dynamics of light and sound,” 37 and both of their sign systems naturally have the *immediacy* capacity that can imitate passions and thus move the audience directly with tones and colors. This immediacy effect is comparatively lacking in verbal language. It is for this reason Spitzer described language as ‘artificial.’

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SOME CONSIDERATION OF COMMON MUSICAL SIGNIFIERS

A discussion of the transposition of a work of art of one medium to another is only possible when we have sufficient understanding of the specific semiotic natures of signs of both the source and targeted media. This kind of medial transfer can occur between any two (or sometimes more) different media: words and music, words and painting, music and painting, and other cases. An example is Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s (1828–1882) Sonnets for Pictures, where he wrote sonnets to describe various paintings, demonstrated how a visual artwork was referenced and transposed to a verbal medium. In fact, one of his sonnets, written in 1880, describes a famous painting, Primavera by Sandro Botticelli, which will be discussed in chapter five in connection with Respighi’s Trittico Botticelliano:

What masque of what old wind-withered New-Year
Honors this Lady? Flora, wanton-eyed
For birth, and with all flowrets prankt and pied:
Aurora, Zephyrus, with mutual cheer
Or clasp and kiss: the Graces circling near,
Neath bower-linked arch of white arms glorified:
And with those feathered feet which hovering glide
O’er Spring’s brief bloom, Hermes the harbinger.

Birth-bare, not death-bare yet, the young stems stand,
This Lady’s temple-columns: o’er her head
Love wings his shaft. What mystery here is read
Of homage or of hope? But how command
Dead Springs to answer? And how question here
These mummers of that wind-withered New Year?38

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In this study, as I am studying how musical signs describe pictorial objects, one fundamental discussion would be what musical elements would trigger in the audience a connection to the extra-musical objects (or subjects), and generate meaning of various aspects. Although I cannot give an exhausting list of musical signifiers, the identification of the most common ones will give some basic references and serve as a guide for my subsequent case studies.
Pitch, Interval and Shape

The melodic materials are often regarded as one of the most important musical signifiers that allure audience to draw some kinds of extra-musical association. Pitches seldom convey a message individually. However, when they are grouped together or organized in some patterns, the potential of its representation could be unlimited. The classic example, the third interval, representing the cuckoo voice or bird call are presented in many popular works such as Daquin’s Le Coucou (1735), Beethoven’s Symphony No. 6, ‘Pastoral’ (1808), Tchaikovsky’s March (The Seasons, Op. 37, 1876), and Respighi’s Gli uccelli (1927), to describe the presence of birds and depict scenes of nature. When more pitches are grouped into patterns such as in an ascending or descending order, it becomes an indexical sign that might refer to rising up or falling down gesture, or convey a rising or falling emotional state. Besides, pitches joined together to form musical motifs might reappear through an entire work, and becomes key thematic materials that composer might use to draw an association with a theme, topic, or even a character.

Tonality and Mode

Rita Steblin has written a whole book on tonal references, A History of Key Characteristics in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries, to discuss the relationship between various keys, and their characters and extra-musical
meanings. Although there is still no universal consensus on the meaning of tonalities, some general understanding with regards to the major or minor modes, and other church modes, particularly on how they convey certain emotions, or symbolically represent events of a certain nature, imply function in musical signification. The consistent use of the same tonalities by a composer would also set up audience expectation towards the topic and mood of the musical work, injecting some kinds of meaning to the music. For example, the constant use of C minor by Beethoven in his various works of stormy and sorrowful nature, including his Piano Sonata No. 8, Op. 13, (1798, commonly known as *Sonata Pathétique*), his Symphony No. 5 (1804-08), and others, help to establish this key as a struggling and emotionally dramatic one for him. The church modes, on the other hand, do not only convey an emotion but are also associated with the style of early sacred music because of their origin in plain chant. These associations might also help to signify meaning when adopted in other musical works (for example, the large percentage of Requiems in the key of D minor, the Dorian mode).

*Rhythmic Signifier*

Apart from the pitch-related musical signifiers, rhythm is another important musical element that operates in musical signification. Rhythmic signifiers as simple as meter can already convey very unique characters: musical works in march-style are in duple meter, whereas much dance music is usually in triple meter. Besides, other rhythmic parameters such as compound meter, dotted
rhythm, syncopated rhythm, hemiola, or even a melody with no definite rhythm can signify various meanings, and draw association to other works or style of a definite context or historical background.

Texture

The way in which the melodic, rhythmic and harmonic materials combine to develop into different sound aspects of a musical work contributes to textural variety of a musical work. With different densities, ranges of pitch, numbers of voices or parts, and how these voices are related to or depended on each other, all these parameters give very distinctive textures to music, which in return form the musical iconicities that signify various aspects of the extra-musical world, and usually function as indexical or symbolic signs. In some cases the textural iconicities might refer to or associate with style of works of particular historical contexts. For example, the linear polyphonic nature in which independent parts are imitating each other is a typical style of Renaissance or Early Baroque music. When this kind of imitative contrapuntal texture is used in other musical works, its association with Renaissance or Early Baroque musical style would help to import the relevant qualities or characteristics to the work, and generate meaning in the signification process.
Timbre and Orchestration

The way in which different instruments are used and how composers make use of their unique timbres, also contribute to the signification of musical works. As with texture, the size and combination of different instrumental ensembles bear some historical significance. For example, the Baroque orchestra was usually of a smaller size, with the string section taking the leading position; whereas the expansion and development of artistic expression from the Classical to the Romantic era made the Romantic orchestra contrast substantially to the Baroque one in terms of its size and the roles of different section. Many new instruments, including bass tuba, bass clarinet, English horn and an expanded percussion section are also found in the Romantic orchestra. The association of instruments to some extra-musical characters also made the signification more interesting. For example, historically, violin was sometimes regarded as the ‘instrument of the devil’; the viola imitates the sound of human voice; the haunting timbre of trombones suggests some non-human existence; the bassoon conveys some a pastoral nature. All these connotations help to enhance the signifying power of specific musical instruments. When particular instruments are used in a musical work, its established association or qualities participate in the signification process.
According to semiotic theory, a sign refers to an object via an infinite number of interpretants. In music, the relationship between signifier and signified is more complicated than in other arts. The problem becomes even more complex when there involves an interpretation, and the individual experiences of the recipients. As Nattiez put it, “what renders any semiotics difficult, particularly musical semantics, is that the occurrence of one determinate series of interpretants, rather than another, is linked to each subject’s idiosyncrasies and individual experiences.” He thus recognized that the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary in musical signs. This problematic situation was also admitted by Eco, who supported the notion that the relations between signifier and signified are complicated because there involved a network of correlations that will be reconstructed continuously.

Despite the fact that musical semiotics might not provide all the answers concerning the meaning of music, I am still committed to take the semiotic perspective that musical works are to be studied as if they were signs, particularly as this research is a cross-disciplinary one. As such, I consider music as a signification system, and study it “as a symbolic fact that characterized by the presence of complex configurations of interpretants.” 39 Musical signs relate to themselves as well as to the external world, and deliver meaning through both its internal as well as external relations. These two processes of referring, intrinsic

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39 Nattiez, Music and Discourse, 102.
and extrinsic referring, I would say, is dynamic, multiple, and confused in some senses, and should be given thorough attention whenever we aim to understand the nature of music.\textsuperscript{40}

As discussed, musical signs contain the nature of all three types of sign—iconic, indexical, and symbolic. These three categorical types of sign help to reveal music’s nature of signification, and more importantly its signification relationships to the external world. It is also important to be aware of the intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of musical meaning, although intrinsic meaning might also depends on extrinsic factors, such as an awareness of convention. Like the categories of the three types of sign (iconic, indexical, and symbolic), there is never a perfect and pure categorization. But at least it gives us a frame of reference in further studying the signification process of musical signs.

\textsuperscript{40} The issue of the validity of music as a sign system is not an area to be explored in this paper.
Chapter 3  Literature Review: Definitions of Description and Examinations of the Descriptive Potential of Music

**What is the Meaning of ‘Descriptive’ From Linguistic Perspectives?**

In language studies, description is regarded as a semiotic macro-mode that is being “realized in, or triggered by, concrete sign systems (texts, artefacts or parts of these) to a higher or lower degree, according to their variable relations to prototypes and their characteristic features.”\(^1\) Similar to narrative, description serves as a framing device for recipients to understand the meaning of the work. However, as noted by Wolf, the term ‘descriptive’ has long been viewed from a “monodisciplinary and monomedia perspective”; and it was in the literary field where the most extensive studies on the notion of descriptive were written.\(^2\) In music, most of the discussions on the significance and meaning of description are preliminary and superficial. Thus far, no precise definition has been given, nor in-depth survey of description conducted in the field of musicology. Owing to this apparent lack of interest, the terms ‘description’ and ‘narration’ are not substantially differentiated, and the two genres often confused. Thus, there is a need for a closer examination of both description and narration, as these two closely related, macro-mode organizing signs are critical for meaningful discussion of program music that is believed to contain ‘content.’

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\(^1\) Wolf, "Description as a Transmedial Mode of Representation," 1.
\(^2\) Ibid., 3-4.
In pursing a more concrete understanding of descriptive, this chapter starts by drawing upon Wolf’s survey of the definition and features of descriptive, which he addressed in his various articles on the subject. Not only has he conducted a thorough survey on the various aspects of descriptive, he has also studied the term from intermedial or transmedial perspectives, considering descriptive with respect to different media contexts and characteristics, which fit well into the present study. Wolf’s findings indicate that description is better perceived as a transmedial mode of representation, as the collaboration of various arts enables intersemiotic transposition. His studies and concepts in *Description—A Common Potential of Words and Music* was the starting point for my interest in the subject and thus serves as a foundation for my current research, providing a theoretical framework for the discussion of musical description.\(^3\)

When discussing the term description, Wolf claims that people usually express no doubt when required to define the term “description” in general use and can easily identify a passage providing a description in any verbal medium in daily life. In line with other semiotic macro-modes (or rhetorical modes)—such as narrative, argument, or definition—most people can form an intuitive idea of the basic forms of description. Description, as well as other semiotic modes of organization, triggers our ‘cognitive frame’—a mental construct that is “aimed at regulating specific forms of organizing signs in various genres and media for specific purposes.”\(^4\)

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\(^4\) Wolf, "Description as a Transmedial Mode of Representation,” 8.
As a semiotic mode of organizing signs for communication, description displays typical features with respect to its role in different contexts. In the fields of science, linguistics, or other empirical studies, description facilitates the study of things as they exist. In scientific inquiries, for instance, description “serves the function of identifying phenomena and of communicating information excluding explanation and evaluation.”

The key concept here is ‘identifying’ (or identification), revealing that description should help us to determine ‘whatness.’ Description is positioned at the opposite end of the spectrum from explanation, as it focuses more on the facts, objects, or phenomena that exist. It addresses the question of “what?” instead of giving an explanation or evaluation for our understanding. In this regard, description has an affinity to fact or information, and it functions mainly in “the collection and subsequent representation of sense data” in the field of science.

Wolf sums up the three basic functions of scientific description. Firstly, description functions as a means of identification and reference through pointing to object or phenomenon in the world. In science, this object or phenomenon should typically be empirical and present (or observable) in our world. Thus, through description, we could identify and determine the object and its characteristics for further scientific inquiries. Secondly, description involves identifying and communicating the sense data observed in the given world, as we need to ‘see’ things in description. Finally, description serves mainly to provide objective or factual information, rather than reasons for or interpretations of a given phenomena.

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5 Ibid., 11.
6 Ibid., 12.
The central feature of description, therefore, lies in its function of referentiality. According to Wolf, description “employs reference in a special way which permits the identification of the object or phenomenon that is meant.” It not only helps us to identify a certain object or phenomenon through directly naming it, more importantly, it provides various features of the object or phenomenon, so that we are able to recognize that particular object or phenomenon with respective details. This is an important marker for descriptive work, and I shall come back to this when I discuss musical description in the subsequent section.

**Description in Art Domains**

In the field of literature and other art media, including music, although the three basic functions of description are somehow valid, each might need careful consideration. Owing to the unique medial nature of each medium, description in art might perform differently when compared to those in science. First, in terms of its function in identification, description helps us to identify an object or phenomenon, while it may also help to construct the fictional world. The latter is typically achieved through detailed rendering of features and attributions by the author in description, which is how most of the descriptions in art domains perform. This is important especially where imagination plays a crucial role in creative art works. Description creates the illusion of reality and invites the recipient to settle in to experience the fictional world created by the author. In sum, irrespective of the object or phenomenon being real or fictional (as opposed to the scientific description, where there should be no fictional phenomena),

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7 Ibid., 13.
description provides criteria or qualities that the recipients will be able to attribute to the referred object or phenomenon, as well as its characteristics.

The second major function of the description lies in its **vividness** in representation (or as language scholars would call it, *word painting* in literary description). In order to identify, the representation of reality in description should be vivid enough for the recipients to experience or visualize the object or phenomenon, whether real or fictional. As such, this involves the presentation of multiple features of the described objects or phenomena, which would inevitably include the physical appearance or the sensory attributes of the objects being described. In the case of fictional or imaginative works, description can function as a means of enhancing the aesthetic illusion, through presenting the various features of the descriptive object vividly. This is common, and particularly essential in the arts. However, Wolf did not state clearly (or he may find it too hard to specify) in what way and to what extent this vividness in the representation should be present in a description. In arts, it may not always be possible to provide the highest degree of vividness, one concrete enough for general consensus over what the said object or phenomenon might be, as arts are often meant to be left to individual interpretation and experience. In the later part of his essay, where he discussed the internal organization of description, Wolf reiterated that sufficient details (particularly the physical details) pertaining to the described object are needed, helping to differentiate description from mere reference or simple enactment.\(^8\) This perhaps sheds more light on the extent of necessary vividness of the representation in description. In this sense, description of a given object

\(^8\) Ibid., 30.
typically features some level of redundancy of its features (from an efficiency point of view). Nevertheless, the scope remains uncertain when we discuss the description in music, as its abstractive nature often makes the identification of descriptive objects undetermined.

The third function, following Wolf, is the pseudo-objectivizing and interpretative function of description, in that it aims to “provide more or less objective facts rather than interpretations.” 9 Wolf was aware that objectivity is always problematic and it is debatable in the field of arts (except, perhaps, in pure science). Therefore, Wolf terms it “pseudo-objectivizing”, referring to situations where description serves to trigger “a referential sub-form of aesthetic illusion, namely a reality effect.” 10 This happens often in literature or other art subjects, where most of the reality is constructed, or a subjective interpretation of an object or phenomenon is required. In this sense, descriptions help to “render the possible world which they constitute or of which they are a part plausible and confer an aura of objectivity on it.” 11 Description functions not only to refer, but also to make people believe in something that is fictional, and through displaying the ‘constructed’ reality; it helps in constructing the meaning of the entire work by “the construction of meaning of the artefact or text as a whole as well as in guiding various responses of the recipients.” 12

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9 Ibid., 17.
10 Ibid.
12 Wolf, “Description as a Transmedial Mode of Representation,” 18.
Objects for Description – Object-centered Referentiality

Apart from the functionality of descriptive, Wolf has written at length about the nature of the objects or phenomena in description, because he believes that not all objects can be described equally well. His discussion of the nature of these objects is of particular relevance to this study. Whether they are to be found in the external world, or in the internal world of imagination, these objects or phenomena have to be concrete, rather than too abstractive. What Wolf was referring to, I suppose, is a physical object or phenomenon in our world with concrete physical details or features that enable us to identify them; thus, this object-centered referentiality becomes the key feature of description. Yet, the description of any object or phenomenon would inevitably involve subjective aspects, such as feelings or emotional responses towards the descriptive objects (Wolf called this ‘subject-centered referentiality’), otherwise it would become just a factual or scientific description. This raises an important question—could the subjective feeling or emotion be an object for description? Wolf said he would put these subjective aspects under the category of expression, rather than including them in description. Moreover, Wolf pointed out that descriptive has to refer to something outside its own semiotic system (and here he used the term “hetero-referentiality.”) Further, it ought to fulfill a referential function in a narrow sense, that is, the representation of factual information—facts, opinions, or ideas of the world. Wolf put it as follows:

[T]he descriptive as a mode of representation typically has a referential function. This does not only mean that the descriptive, in a general semiotic sense, points to something outside the semiotic system and hence is ‘hetero-referential’ as opposed to self-referential, but also that it fulfils a referential function in the narrower sense, as described in Roman
Jakobson’s well-known theory of the functions of language, namely the utterance or representation of facts, opinions, ideas. As such, the referential function, as typically fulfilled by descriptions, is to be differentiated from what Jakobson calls the emotive, that is the expressive function which is another semiotic function in itself.\footnote{Ibid., 26.}

While Wolf obviously put the subjective aspects aside from description, in my view, the subjective part can never be neglected. Even factual descriptions implicitly rely on a subject’s perspective or point of view, or embedded with some emotions towards the descriptive object or phenomenon. Wolf returned to this point as follows:

In fact, there is no such thing as an absolutely objective, object-centered referential description, since description, as mentioned above, always presupposes a subject, the descriptor, and his or her perspective (although the descriptor, as will be stressed later, need not necessarily be part of the descriptive representation). In practice, a descriptive act could therefore even be said to be tendentially bi-polar: in it, a dominant referential, object-centered pole is opposed to a subdominant subject-centered pole, which determines the perspective of observation but also contains emotional reactions and evaluations.\footnote{Ibid.}

Wolf stressed that the contents of the description have to be concrete objects or phenomena that inevitably involve factual and sensory details; and this object-centered aspect should dominate the description over the subjective-centered features. In Wolf’s opinion, there is a tendency of description towards external objects, rather than internal or mental ones. Moreover, there is a greater tendency of descriptive objects to be visual rather than other sensory aspects, although Wolf has not denied the possibility of finding descriptive objects in other senses.
This brings us to an important feature of descriptive, namely the *object-centered referentiality* as a dominant feature of the description. From this, Wolf further pointed out the most important and typical presentational feature of description, that is, the connection of the objects (or phenomena) with a plurality of qualities and details.

Another language scholar, Rebecca McClanahan, when she talked about how to write more descriptively, summarized a good description as follows, which echoed what Wolf is advocating about the objective aspect of description:

Good description is sensory, making the audience or reader, as Aristotle suggests, “see things.” Good description, like most powerful things in the world—a salty kiss, a dancer’s leap, the fine brown hairs on a lover’s arm—accomplishes more than we are consciously aware of. We may not notice its power until our blood begins to simmer or cool, the Windsor knot in our stomach tightens, our breath shifts to quick hard pants. This is due, in part, to description’s root in the physical world. Good description almost always employs specific, concrete detail so the reader can “see” what is being described, or experience it through one of the other senses.15

Throughout his discussion on the various features of description, Wolf keeps reminding us that, when located in different media, description might exhibit distinctive features. The descriptive, he raised, constitutes “a transmedial and transgeneric semiotic macro-mode of organizing signs in representations which can inform the macro-level of certain works.”16 In other words, the extent to which a medium can influence the realization of description varies, and the

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16 Wolf, “Description as a Transmedial Mode of Representation,” 35.
nature to which each medium interacts with descriptive nature would thus play a significant role in description in the respective medium.

To sum up Wolf’s views on description, his tentative definition comprises the following features:

1. Serving the basic function of *identification*—object-centered referentiality;
2. *Vivid representation* of an object or phenomenon;
3. Displaying a plurality of *physical* qualities and features.
THE DESCRIPTIVE POTENTIAL OF MUSIC – HOW FAR AND BY WHAT MEANS?

All the arts are based on two principles: reality and ideality. Ideality is perceptible only to cultivated minds but the reality of the sculptor can be perceived by everyone because its prototype is the human form, familiar to all. There is not a single artisan who would be any less stirred than a poet by the truth that exists in the works of Phidias and Michelangelo. Each person is equally capable of appreciating the degree of fidelity in the statue’s representation of the human body. This, however, is not the case with music: it has no reality, so to speak; it does not imitate, it expresses. Music is at once both a science like algebra and a psychological language that is intelligible only to the poetic consciousness. Hence, like science and art, music remains almost entirely inaccessible to the crowd…That is why there is a lot more misunderstanding between the public and the musician than between the public and the sculptor.17

The above quote from Franz Liszt has revealed a very fundamental truth about the nature of music. Music has always been regarded as the least descriptive medium, in that “it has no reality.” It seemed to be the most abstract and non-referential medium of all the arts and media, especially when compared with other art forms.18 When Kendall Walton discussed the representational nature of music, he pointed out:

It is not easy to make sense of the fictional world of a fugue or a sonata as a coherent whole, to see what the various diverse bits of make-believe have to do with one another. It will be fictional that there are instances of upward and downward movement, statements and answers, causes and effects,

singing... all these fictional truths jumbled together with few coherent links among them. There will rarely a plot line for the listener to follow.\textsuperscript{19}

This is particularly true in instrumental music, where there are no texts or lyrics, or any other verbal signs to help deliver the desired message or intention of the composer. In his article, Wolf has provided a long discussion on whether music can really have the descriptive qualities of the verbal medium. From an intermedial point of view, Wolf aimed to analyze the descriptive potential and limitations of music, as opposed to other traditional media, therefore revealing to us how music, particularly program music, describes, as compared with the verbal medium.

In Wolf’s point of view, the descriptive function of music is at most confined to giving a reference to an object or phenomenon. In many circumstances, music can at best fulfill the first feature of description, that is, the identification of extra-musical object or event, in a very limited sense. In most musical cases, the reference to an extra-musical object or event is \textit{indefinite}. As I have discussed in chapter two, the connection between musical signifier and signified is mostly unspecific and plurivocal. Compared to fiction, which depends largely on verbal signs as a predominant symbolic reference system, the descriptive potential of music is more problematic, owing to the fact that musical signs are abstract and ambiguous. The signification system of the verbal medium (such as words or language), on the contrary, is much better defined than that of music. Unlike musical signs, verbal signs can be used to symbolize any real or virtual objects as

well as abstractive concepts in our daily life. The denotative meaning of verbal signs is clear and univocal. The lack of univocal nature, or the indeterminacy in the denotative meaning in musical signification system makes it problematic to exercise its potential in description.

With regard to the representation of the physical or sensory details of an object, Wolf pointed out that music has significant limitations, as it is a non-referential medium that cannot always refer to other media or objects apart from musical ones. Unlike words or pictures, music operates as a ‘closed system,’ in which signs or symbols could hardly refer concretely to the non-musical world of concepts, ideas, or objects. How can we use a collection of pitches arranged in certain rhythmic patterns to sketch biological features of a creature such as bird? Hence, Wolf concluded that in most cases, music can only be self-referential, rather than hetero-referential. Unlike the verbal medium, where there are unlimited numbers of words conveying meanings of various levels, music contains signs that can at most refer to other musical signs. In explaining this relationship, Wolf gave an example of the musical genre of ‘theme and variations.’ The themes are self-referential, as they could refer or relate to each other in the same piece or set of music, but they could not refer to other objects or concepts beyond music. This limited referentiality therefore becomes the major obstacle for music to be considered as a medium for description.

This also touches upon the issue of the opposing views between formalists and referentialists. Any discussion on whether music could be able to describe extra-

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musical objects will invite numerous arguments and lengthy debates. The referentialist position, adopted here, is to regard music as having the potential to be emotionally expressive. In Wolf’s terms, musical description relies heavily on emotional expressivity, which allows music to create aesthetic illusions, and enables us to experience the created world of the composer. Here, an important and unique aspect of the descriptive quality of music has been revealed.

Very often, music appears to evoke an emotion or mood that is attached to an object or a scene. It is capable of putting us to the same state of mind as the object or the scene could, even though a concrete description of the features of the described object or scene might not be available. Through the experience of this state of mind, we reformulate the object or scene that the composer intended to describe. Hence, this emotional expressivity often contributes to description by “evoking typical, culturally coded moods, atmospheres, etc.” that attached to descriptive objects such as a ‘peaceful’ pastoral landscape or a ‘sublime’ mountain scene. In his article, Wolf further supported this argument by quoting Franz Liszt’s point of view, noting that he had not “regarded music as a direct means of describing objects; rather he thought that music could put the listener in the same frame of mind as could the objects themselves.” In other words, music can indirectly represent or describe an object by conveying the emotional reality with which the listener can resonate. The question thus becomes—without directly describing the details of the object or event, can we as the listeners still experience the joy or excitement of experiencing it? Couldn’t this be regarded as a form of description?

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
The answer to the above question would rest upon whether the stimulation of a certain mood related to an object or event, leading us to experience that object or event, is really a kind of ‘description.’ In the field of linguistic studies, most scholars would probably share the same view with Wolf that all descriptions should have an object-centered reference. In other words, a description should be able to convey the physical or sensory aspects of an object, such as size, shape, texture, etc., rather than just evoking the relevant feelings and emotions (the subject-centered reference). As Wolf said, “in all descriptions, and this includes musical ones, an object-centered reference is compulsory, while subject-centered expression is optional.”

According to Wolf, this subject-centered expression has to be subordinated to the object-centered reference, which in verbal medium is typically sufficient. I doubt whether this emphasis on the object-centered feature of description is applicable in music, although I must admit that the object-centered referentiality usually dominates over the subjective expression in other art forms, including literature and painting. As Wolf suggested, the potential of music as a descriptive medium depends heavily on how it can refer to objects other than music itself and to what extent it could achieve hetero-referentiality.

Is it really impossible for music to refer to concrete objects or phenomena? If that is true, how could the composers of program music or symphonic poems in the nineteenth century communicate via so many compositions that often refer to extra-musical elements, expecting the listeners to experience a different realm of the world? If we restrict the function of music to solely emotional expressivity, can music then be said to describe extra-musical objects?

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\(^{24}\) Ibid., 208.


Descriptive Devices in Music

From Wolf’s point of view, hetero-referentiality is not common in music, and yet “music does have some possibilities of pointing to extra-musical objects—indisputably of expressivity.” Wolf reminded us that, as music is an aural medium, the most direct icon that music could be able to deliver is aural iconicity. Through various aural iconic signifiers, music can imitate sounds or phenomena of the physical world. By further exploring various tones and timbres of instruments, we can imitate numerous extra-musical sounds or phenomena, such as a ringing of a bell, birdsong, animal cries, thunderstorms, rain, or other environmental sounds. This is exactly how Beethoven created the pastoral scene in his Sixth Symphony, in which he imitated various natural phenomena by using various musical signifiers. Not only can music directly reproduce these extra-musical sounds, but through the manipulation of their space and sequences, the composer can also create the environment of a phenomenon, resulting an aural description of a natural event. In addition, through arranging various iconic musical signs in sequence, we could actually develop a diagrammatic program. According to Wolf, this diagrammatic iconicity can be used to describe or even narrate through the medium of music. Much of program music indeed has employed diagrammatic iconicity to describe events or phenomena by arranging the sequences of various sounds. An example given by Wolf was Richard Strauss’ Alpensonate, where the composer made use of two descriptive devices—aural mimicry and symbolic connotation—to illustrate or describe,
various rural scenes of Alpine landscape and bring listeners to experience the travel over various places on the mountain.  

There are numerous examples of nineteenth-century music in which composers used various treatments of sound to describe a scene or phenomenon, creating so many fantastic programmatic works. Very often, composers adopt various physical qualities of musical signifiers—such as interval, melody, harmony, tempo, volume, and texture—to convey specific attributions (such as high, low, intense, relaxed) of the non-musical world. Wolf called this kind of descriptive device metaphoric illustration, typically achieve through different musical signifiers, such as melody, harmony, rhythm, or timbre. According to Wolf, “use of iconic similarities between a conventionalized vehicle that is linked to an extra-musical tenor owing to some common denominator or tertium comparationis permits a reference to an extra-musical object.” Nelson Goodman used the term metaphorical exemplification to describe this sort of borrowing of meaning (i.e. the metaphorical transfer) through the use of metaphor to generate or express meaning. In Western music, tones are characterized by various qualities, such as color (dark or bright) or position (high or low), and these characterizations often involve an association of some definite attributes or concepts that we apply to them. These become the interpretants of musical signs, to use Peirce’s terms. Many descriptive interpretants in music, such as ‘dark’ register, ‘unstable’ harmonies, ‘high’ or ‘low’ pitches, are examples of this kind of metaphorical illustration that enable the creation of the

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27 Ibid., 212-3.
28 Wolf, “Description as a Transmedial Mode of Representation,” 63.
associations between the music and our world. Using Peirce’s terms, the relationship between these kinds of musical sign and the objects that they signify appears *indexical*. An example given by Wolf to demonstrate this metaphoric illustration is the symbolization of running water in musical works. To describe the running water, composers often use ‘wavy’ melodic lines and employ the spatial metaphor of rising and falling melodies to symbolize the running water. Other examples, such as high and low sounds representing rising or falling of an object, are also examples of metaphoric illustration that have been often used in musical compositions.

Another even more indirect aspect of musical description that triggers our cognitive frames, and often refers to convention or culture, is what Wolf calls the employment of *acoustic connotations*. This musical device, on one hand, functions “by means of evoking individual compositions, or more frequently typical genres or kinds of music,” and is the result of “the associations between some aspect of the musical organization and extra-musical experience.”31 On the other hand, it generates meaning through beliefs and values related to culture or convention. Music cannot convey a universally consented meaning by itself; therefore, it has to rely on these conventions or cultural factors to endorse its signification. Consequently, scenes or situations that are conventionally used to associate with, traditionally or culturally related to, particular sounds or musical instruments pop up in listener’s mind, drawing an association and stimulating the respective emotions when these sounds or musical elements appear. For example, composers frequently use a bell-like or hymn-like melody to depict a church; the

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30 Wolf, “Description: A Common Potential of Words and Music?” 211.
sound of horn to evoke a hunting situation; or the call of cuckoo to symbolize the arrival of spring. In semiotic terms, these musical signifiers induce interpretation through symbolic connotation, deriving a meaning that is generally accepted under a given social context. Very often, this cognitive frame is culturally or historically developed, and implanted in our mind in our daily lives. Many these connotations have their origins in traditions and culture. Examples of such include, the pentatonic mode which was “used in the nineteenth century to represent things pastoral,” and the diminished fifth that “was closely associated with expressions of grief and anguish during the Baroque period.”\(^{32}\) They could immediately trigger our cognitive experience either in real-life situations or through cognitive learning, thereby drawing an association between the music and extra-musical world.

In chapter two, I discussed the views of Monelle and Eco, who asserted that most musical icons have to be interpreted with reference to symbolic implications. The operation of acoustic connotation has, in semiotic terms, demonstrated the process of symbolic signification by the musical signifiers and their interpretants, and this symbolic signification process operates under the influence of conventions within a cultural group. The pentatonic mode, for example, does not function in itself as the signification of a pastoral setting. Instead, it acts as a musical signifier that triggers interpretants of pastoral and rural qualities that derive from our conventions and, in return, helps to reinforce this convention throughout the subsequent signification processes.

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 259.
Another music scholar, Michael Walter, has also revealed to us how music describes events or objects. In his *Musical Sunrises: A Case Study of the Descriptive Potential of Instrumental Music*, he used sunrises as a particular example, and evaluated musical elements used to achieve the description of this natural phenomenon. Based on his study of Franz Joseph Haydn’s *Symphony No. 6 (Le Matin, Hob. I:6)*, he summarized several music elements or devices that are commonly used by composers to depict a phenomenon such as a sunrise.

First, the melodic contour, with its up and down directions, implies rising or falling motion of an object. The rising sun is therefore often represented by ascending melodic line, as is the case in the introduction of Haydn’s symphony. This is an example of indexical musical sign that exercises its function in what Wolf calls the *metaphorical illustration*.

Second, an intensification of orchestration can also depict an increase in the degree of brightness as the sun rises. The addition of instruments would certainly increase the density and intensity of sounds, resulting in an image of growing and enhanced brightness. The same indexical signification applies in the dynamic alternations. Gaining dynamic level would associate to a higher level of brightness, which then creates the ‘image’ of the rising sun in the listeners’ minds.

Apart from the melodic contour and intensification of orchestration, there is another interesting musical description of rising sun noted by Walter in Haydn’s work. Haydn started the piece in D major while music reached its dominant at

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the climax of the introduction. To convey a sense of tension in the introduction, Haydn created a suspension and a secondary dominant before reaching the A major chord, and this is the only choice in harmonic development for such a slow introduction. Therefore, when the music arrives at the A major chord, it is heard as a breakthrough from the secondary dominant tension. The music finally reaches its destination, indicating the full rise of the sun high up the sky.

Walter admitted that the increase and decrease of dynamic level, as well as the tension and resolution of harmony, are only *metaphors* of representation. The meaning of music is often abstract. It relies heavily on our prior understanding of music, as well as the cultural context of this understanding. This correlates with Wolf’s idea about metaphoric illustrations and connotations that trigger our cognitive reflex, thus enhancing our understanding of description in music. Walter further showed his consent in Wolf’s saying that the non-musical elements, such as title, paratext, prologue, and musical structure that are attached to a musical work are parts of the cognitive framing that facilitate descriptivity in music. Walter reiterated in his article that both extra-musical framing and intra-musical structure or elements must coexist in order to give a clear ‘description’ in a musical work.
The Potential of Musical Descriptivity – Hetero-referentiality

In sum, the descriptive potential of music lies in its capacity for achieving musical hetero-reference through various devices, including aural iconicity, diagrammatic iconicity, metaphorical illustration, and acoustic connotation. Each of these devices actually corresponds to the various natures of the musical signifiers and signified, or points towards some characteristics of the signification process. For example, Wolf’s idea of aural iconicity is in fact the function of iconic signs in music that directly imitate the sound experienced in our physical world. Acoustic connotation, on the other hand, illustrates the function of the symbolic musical signs, through which we draw an association from the music to events or concepts in our external world based on conventional or cultural values. Finally, the indexical signs operate through what Wolf termed metaphorical illustration, achieving signification by giving a logical and direct indication for another sign, usually by virtue of contiguity and causality. Amongst these, the concept of metaphor is particularly interesting in musical representation, as musical signs often ride on interpretants of metaphorical nature, the potential of which is infinite. As McClanahan pointed out in her book on descriptive writing, metaphor has traditionally been considered as the most prominent figure of speech. It derives from the Greek *metaphora*, which comprises of *meta* (‘over’) and *pherein* (‘to carry’). It suggests the transfer of items from one place to another, thus implicitly including imaginative transfer.\(^\text{34}\)

\(^{34}\) McClanahan, 89.
The Descriptive Potential in Music Revisited

Returning to the descriptive potential of music, it is worth reiterating again the most important features of the description. Description allows identification of an object or phenomenon, while also providing concrete details (usually sensory ones), so as to represent vividly the described object or phenomenon. Wolf argued in his article that music often failed to describe because of its deficiency in identifying (or referring to) specific objects concretely. Even if, in some cases, it can refer to a particular object, it cannot be able to deliver most of the attributes or features that specify the concrete object. Wolf used the example of the imitation of a cuckoo to demonstrate that it is only a mere reference (iconic in nature), as it does not supply details of, or attributions to, the bird.\(^{35}\) In a strict sense, musical representation of a cuckoo is not a description, as it does not fulfill the second requirement of the descriptive act (i.e. the vividness).

Whether description should be confined to “object-centered referentiality” may also invite discussion. Description, particularly in art domains, often transcends the state of a mere reproduction of the physical object, especially when description in an aesthetic sense implies that “the components of most descriptions are chosen from a reservoir of memories, decomposed and put into place again in a new construction of a world.”\(^ {36}\) Götz Pochat illustrated this when he discusses the descriptive potential of painting:

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\(^{35}\) Wolf, “Description: A Common Potential of Words and Music?” 212.

Description is not a mirror of visible reality but of the mind of the artist at work. This complex subject touches the core of artistic creativity, representing and transforming the world *vu à travers un temperament*....

The true subject of the painting—cognition as a frame—is here located in the realm of otherness, reflecting the autonomy of mind.  

Pochat further reminded us that there is “no absolutely objective description” in our world, although he also supported the idea that the central function of description is only *referential*, rather than re-presentation.  

Despite Wolf’s argument for the limited descriptive potential of music, in my view, two points should be reconsidered in this situation. First, Wolf persuaded us that musical signs cannot refer to many descriptive details by quoting an example of the imitation of a cuckoo in music. He considered that music can succeed in giving a reference, but fails to convey the physical attributes of the bird. In fact, I believe it may not be unfeasible for musical signs to describe the details of the bird. As we have just discussed, various musical descriptive devices or signifiers often work together to give a vivid representation of an object or phenomenon. In this case, for example, composer can actually make use of various kinds of metaphoric illustration to deliver attributes in the description of the bird, such as its size, character, or actions, by manipulating the actual form of musical sign (the minor third interval) in terms of dynamic levels, tempo, pitches, or texture. Hence, music could have the potential to describe the features of a bird, but only if the composer intends to provide those details in his description to the recipients of his work.

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37 Ibid., 271.
38 Ibid., 274.
On the other hand, what if the composer is not aiming to describe a bird, but rather, he wants to depict a spring scene, where he would like to show us various aspects of the vitality of spring? Then he would ‘show’ us birdcalls, flowers blossoming, or other natural events signifying warm and tender scenery, instead of just describing the physical details of the bird. He might include musical iconic signifier to imitate birdcalls as well as other fertility-related signifiers to suggest the scene of spring. Therefore, we always have to look into the musical work as a whole, understand the topic of the work and study both its signifiers and signified within a totality of the artwork, rather than taking only selective information from there.

Musical signs—whether iconic, indexical, or symbolic ones—evoke a mental construct of the object’s attributes (or the interpretants) in their signification process. In music, owing to the abstractive nature of musical signs, this mental construction is of an even greater importance. In this regard, both the object-centered and subject-centered aspects are truly important in the signification process. In art-based description, the subject-centered referentiality is particularly crucial and of greatest aesthetic value. This is how McClanahan described the importance of subjectivity in literary description:

Description doesn’t always mean detailing how something looks. One of the best descriptions I’ve ever read was written by a blind child. Evocative and memorable description is rooted not only in visual detail but in the smells, tastes, textures and sound of our world.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{39} McClanahan, 7-8.
McClanahan was referring here to the description in words. Of course, words could not provide smell, taste, texture or sound; rather, she metaphorically pointed out that descriptivity depended very much on how it could stimulate our senses and our imagination. The subjective aspects of the description, therefore, are sometimes even more important than the object-centered referentiality.
A Critical Review of the Definition of Description

Limitations in Wolf’s Definition of Description

Wolf’s definition of description emphasizes physical attributes and object-centered referentiality. In a sense, it is grounded in a functional or pragmatic view of descriptivity. As Wolf’s definition places great importance on objective reality, such a realist’s view often “implies an external approach to character, a view of human personality that is roughly analogous to a lifelike portrait that accurately renders the external details of the human form.”  

The emphasis on “accurate external details” also implies the recognition of the denotative meaning of a descriptive work as the most important factor in understanding that work. However, the weight Wolf places on physical reality and his treatment of description as a layout of physical characteristics (or sense data) may nonetheless limit our understanding of the potential of music as a descriptive medium. Besides, in art-based description, the poetic function is usually of higher value in the work of art. As Jakobson puts it, “[T]he more poetic a text, the less are the relations between text and context (world) underscored; the less poetical a text, the more does its referential standing become dominant.”  

Jakobson believed that a descriptive work would be less poetic when it emphasizes referentiality. Music as an art certainly requires a higher degree of poetic function.

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A definition of description that is based on object-centered referentiality may create problems when examining descriptivity, especially in cases of musical description, as the poetic function of music is not situated in its object-centered nor solely denotative aspects. In music, the subject-centered reference, such as emotions, feelings, or moods, and other symbolic or connotative meanings are always of the utmost importance in understanding the semantic content of a musical work. The insufficiency of the pragmatic view on description urges us to examine other definitions of description, or to look for a broader view of ‘description,’ before we come to any conclusion about the descriptive potential of music.

**Does Description Function Only to Reference/Represent?**

1. **Aesthetic function**

Wolf’s realist definition of description focuses very much on the pragmatic aspects of description, particularly on how it concretely identifies and refers to object-centered reality. However, it seems to neglect the aesthetic function of description. Roland Barthes (1915–1980), the renowned literary theorist and philosopher, reminded us of description’s aesthetic function:

…description has long been an aesthetic function. Very early in antiquity, to the two expressly functional genres of discourse, legal and political, was added a third, the epideictic, a ceremonial discourse intended to excite the admiration of the audience (and no longer to persuade it); this discourse
Barthes identified an aesthetic function of description that has nothing to do with object-centered referentiality. Rather, this aesthetic side of description aims to arouse emotions of the audience. According to Barthes, this function is important and comprises “the very idea of an aesthetic finality of language.” It is incontrovertible that music is able to arouse or excite the emotions of an audience in a way that is not restricted to ritual or ceremonial events but also applies to everyday occasions. Descriptive music in particular can also serve to stir up our emotions and help us experience sentiments that are intended (or not intended) by composers. Although some of music’s descriptive iconicities and connotations suggest a state of physical reality, the ultimate aim of a composer is to bring the audience to experience an emotional reality through the musical work.

2. Interpretative function

Apart from the aesthetic function of description, its interpretative function and connotative implications are worthy of attention. According to Michael Riffaterre, the primary function of description “is to make the reader see something. Its aim is not to present an external reality.”

In his study of descriptive imagery, Riffaterre arrived at the following conclusion:

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Description, like all literary discourse, is a verbal detour so contrived that the reader understands something else than the object ostensibly represented. Description translates this something else into the idiolect of the apparent object. The mimesis is thus subordinated to the significance, rather than the other way around – hence the ungrammaticalities, hence the imagery. The mimesis still presupposes a reality, but uses the descriptive system of that reality only as a conventional code for the semiosis. Its primary purpose is not to offer a representation, but to dictate an interpretation.44

Riffaterre pinpointed that the primary aim of description in literature is neither to refer nor to represent, but to “dictate an interpretation.” Further, he observed that description should not be considered a factual account of external reality. As discussed in earlier in this chapter, a complete or exhaustive verbal description cannot exist, as every piece of description is subjected to the interpretative process of the author, no matter how objective it seems. Certain viewpoints or perspectives are inevitably embedded in a descriptive account. This allows the author to manipulate the audience reception by focusing on certain aspects of the object or event, or by interpreting it according to a particular viewpoint. As such, a totally objective description may not be realistic, and neither can a “neutral, zero-focalized way of linearizing a visual scene,”45 even in descriptive images that are believed to mimic the factual world.

However, the referential function of description cannot be totally overlooked, as it remains an essential part of a description. Building on Wolf’s definition of description, I suggest that both the object-centered and subject-centered aspects of description should be given equal attention when reviewing a descriptive

44 Ibid.
artwork, although different media may shift the weight between the two. I have commented on the subjective aspect in music. D. P. Fowler, on the contrary, has made the following comments about the medial nature of visual art and its representational capacity: “Art however realist is no more ‘naturally’ iconic than literature: in both the signs are read according to systems of meaning that are cultural constructs. In the end, visual art is not significantly different from literature.” In Fowler’s view, no one medium is more accurately representative of reality because there is always a point of view involved. He continued this line of thinking in his discussion of how words describe a visual image, i.e., ekphrasis. He reiterated that although ekphrasis is commonly considered a pure description of a visual image through words, it is not as objective as perceived because “the one way in which description is often related to narrative psychologically is through the figure, explicit or implicit, of the observer.”

In criticizing the modern view of description (or ekphrasis), Goehr has also pointed out the tendency of the modern world to adopt the realist viewpoint:

…the more disciplines have been drawn to scientific or analytical method, the more description has been reduced to a reliable accounting of the ‘mere’ or ‘plain’ facts. This way, description – denotative, referential, etc. – has been separated from the less ‘exact’ tasks of interpretation, evocation, evaluation, and justification.

Goehr shared the view that description should not comprise only the “plain fact”: “[description is] not that artificial thing—a form of discourse; it is the use of several moods or attitudes of mind through which a writer or speaker, who has

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46 Ibid., 30.
47 Ibid., 28.
found his world interesting, beautiful, ugly or effective, endeavors to transfer to others his pleasure or his interest in that world." Hence, it is not sensible to expel the emotional elements in descriptivity. We must not forget that art-based description is different from scientific description, as science treats description as a plain indexing of physical appearance or factual attributes. This would form a very narrow sense of description. It is also for this reason that description should always encompass both interpretative and subjective aspects.

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THE GREEK WORD FOR DESCRIPTION – EKPHRASIS

To consider description as an art form is to inevitably touch on what the ancient Greeks called *ekphrasis*, which in modern linguistic terms refers to the description of a real or imagined work of visual art through the verbal medium. In linguistic terms, ekphrasis is a poetical and rhetorical device that involves the verbal depiction of visual art. In ancient Greece, it was an effective aid in political debate, in which rhetoricians aimed to affect and persuade listeners of their political viewpoints. As they share the same nature, ekphrasis has often been translated simply as ‘description.’ Different examples of ekphrasis have long been discussed by literary scholars. The best-known example in classical literature has been the description of the shield of Achilles in *The Iliad*. In musical studies, musical scholar Siglind Bruhn borrowed the concept of literary ekphrasis to develop her idea of musical ekphrasis, which she referred to as the “musical representation of a text created in a non-musical sign system.”

I believe a look into the concept of ekphrasis can broaden our understanding of description and help us define it more precisely. The following gives an account of the word’s ancient Greek origins:

Consisting of the prefix ‘ek’ (or ‘ec’ and even ‘ex’) meaning ‘from’ or ‘out of,’ and the root term ‘phrasis,’ a synonym for the Greek lexis or hermeneia, as well as for the Latin dictio and elocutio (the verb phrazein denotes ‘to tell, declare, pronounce’), ekphrasis originally meant ‘a full or vivid

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description.’ It first appears in rhetorical writing attributed to Dionysius of Halicarnassus and then became a school exercise in rhetoric.51

Ekphrasis refers to giving “a full or vivid description” of an art form. Goehr stated that “description was once what ekphrasis was all about,” and that it aims to “produce images for the mind’s eye.”52 In other words, ekphrasis allows readers to form a visual image of a descriptive picture via the meanings of words.

In his recent book *The Naïve and the Sentimental Novelist*, Nobel Prize-winning novelist Orhan Pamuk expressed the need for a broader interpretation of ekphrasis. Although he is also referring to the transferal of visual image to words, he also places more of an emphasis on producing *vivid images* in our mind’s eye. In this book, Pamuk stated the following:

> Whether we use the classical Greek word ‘ekphrasis’ or the phrase ‘verbal description,’ the problem is how to describe, in words, the splendors of the real or imaginary visual world to those who have never seen them… In brief, the challenge of ekphrasis is to describe something, via words, for the benefit of those who have not seen it.53

By providing an imaginary presence, ekphrasis influences an audience by offering visualization of an object or situation as if it were a real experience. The “as-if present” motif provides a seemingly factual and objective account of an

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external subject,\textsuperscript{54} and in doing so gives the subject a “new or renewed presence in the present.”\textsuperscript{55} Goehr made the following observation:

Originally performed or delivered as speech or writing, an evocative description [ekphrasis] brought to imaginative presence a corporeally absent subject. Either the subject no longer existed, or was not presently in view. Sometimes a description depended on a pure imagining because the subject did not exist or, because it did exist, the description only brought it (back) to imaginary presence. Often, it claimed to do the latter when really it was doing to former. Regardless, by bringing something under a description, the subject was given new or renewed presence in the present.

To render absent things \textit{as if} both present and real served purposes broader than that of ‘mere’ classification: to legitimate the present state of things by bringing the past state of things back, as it were, to life, to generate material, literary, and mythological histories and traditions; to sustain canons rooted deeply in an often idealized Antiquity; and to memorialize and monumentalize heroes.\textsuperscript{56}

Ekphrasis had a civic application for the ancient Greeks—it was used as an oratorical training exercise with the aim “to train listeners in the compelling art of emotive-cognitive response such that they would become seers (perhaps in every sense) and knowers.”\textsuperscript{57} Those who employed ekphrasis aimed to “deliver an example well and the right example as the argument required it.”\textsuperscript{58} Those who spoke through ekphrasis were required to do so “both literally and metaphorically in tune.”\textsuperscript{59} As such, even to the ancient Greeks, a descriptive act like ekphrasis was not merely a summary of plain facts. With the ultimate purpose of producing

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\item \textsuperscript{55} Goehr, “How to Do More with Words,” 394.
\item \textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 395.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 396.
\item \textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
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an image before the mind’s eye of an audience, a description should include anything (apart from objective fact) such as a metaphor or an interpretation that can convince the audience of that image. However, we must note that giving the visual image is not an end, “but has the further effect of producing an emotional impact, involving the listener in the event.”  This emotional engagement, as we shall see, plays a critical role in making one feels as if he could actually see and experience the image as stated in the ekphrasis.

Although it was used as a descriptive act in ancient Greece, ekphrasis gradually moved away from its original purpose and form, and modern scholars have focused more on its medial application. As Goehr pointed out, there has been a tendency to move ekphrasis away from description and toward “re-presentation.” In considering ekphrasis, modern scholars have tended to focus on how to transpose or transform one work of art to another art form. Modern studies have focused more on what one work of art achieves by re-presenting another work of art and how it does so, rather than “the task it once had as a listening and temporal art to render present through words what was absent to the eye.” According to Goehr’s critical review, if a poem has already done the job, then a painting should not be required to do the same, even though the painting is said to be inspired by the poem. It would add no value to the original artwork, and take on the redundant role of “re-presenting” that artwork.  

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61 Ibid., 393.
62 Ibid., 393.
Barthes also mentioned that the subject matter of ekphrasis could be anything, no matter whether it is real or imaginary, but this subject matter is definitely not constrained by realism:

…there was a craze for ecphrasis (the detachable set piece thus having its end in itself, independent of any general function), whose object was to describe places, times people, or works of art, a tradition which was maintained throughout the Middle Ages. As Curtius has emphasized, description in this period is constrained by no realism; its truth is unimportant (or even its verisimilitude); there is no hesitation to put lions or olive trees in a northern country; only the constraint of the descriptive genre counts; plausibility is not referential here but openly discursive.⁶³

Only the modern view of the term has confined its focus to the description of artworks, which was not its original intention.⁶⁴ As Koelb described it, “the modern English restrictive application of the term solely to works of art has no classical precedent.”⁶⁵ Koelb further observed that the essence of ekphrasis is in the vividness of the images it brings to the minds of an audience, a point that modern scholars have ignored:

The modern definitions of ecphrasis, besides restricting the subject matter to art, narrow the ancient definitions in another way; modern ecphrasis (like modern description in the wake of G. E. Lessing’s critique) tends to be formally distinguished from, or even opposed to, narrative. Ancient ecphrasis embraces narrative, but only in its most vivid forms. … What matters to the ancients is that the presentation, whether long or short, have a heightened and credible immediacy.⁶⁶

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⁶³ Barthes, 143.
⁶⁴ See both Goehr & Koelb.
⁶⁵ Koelb, 2.
⁶⁶ Ibid., 4.
As part of an oratory training exercise, the ancient Greek authors of the progymnasmata distinguished between “a simple account of what happened” and an “ekphrasis—a vivid, imaginatively engaging account,” telling “how it happened, how it looked [...] how it sounded and felt.”  

Both the ancient ekphrasis and Wolf’s definition of description share the condition of vividness, indicating that it is always important to create a vivid image rather than just a mere reference, and that this vividness is always the prime concern of the ekphrasis and not the subject matter. In the words of Koelb, ekphrasis has not one but two virtues: vividness and clarity. When discussing the properties of ekphrasis, she explained that “according to Quintilian, Cicero translates enargeia both as illustratio (illumination), and as evidentia (actuality), qualities which make us seem not so much to narrate as to exhibit the actual scene while our emotions will be no less actively stirred than if we were present at the actual occurrence.”This vividness does not relate to the number of attributes provided through a descriptive act; rather, it involves a target audience’s emotional engagement in the qualities of a subject, i.e., to “see [the subject] as if perceived.” Again, this has strengthened the idea of producing not simply an image for the mind’s eye, but a strong, vivid image for the mind’s eye so that the emotions of an audience are triggered and feel as if they experienced the events described. I agreed with Ruth Webb, who in her discussion on the vividness of ekphrasis, stated that “the visual impact is not an end in itself but has the further effect of producing an emotional impact, involving the listener in the events.”

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68 Koelb, 33.
69 Ibid., 30.
By defining ekphrastic description more broadly, we find that the descriptive potential of music has been opened up to new perspectives. If description produces not only a factual account of physical attributes (i.e., object-centered referentiality) but also “vivid images for the mind’s eye” as ekphrasis does, it should be considered in both denotative and connotative contexts, and both the object-centered and subject-centered referentiality. A more comprehensive understanding of description may allow us to truly explore music as a medium for description. We may ultimately find that music has an equal or even greater descriptive potential than words.
Ekphrasis directs us to the essence of descriptive, that is, to create a vivid image in which one may believe. In description, it is more important to depict an image in one’s mind, rather than just laying down the physical qualities of the described objects or phenomena. Involving the audience *emotionally* further helps achieve a vivid description. Thus, the aim of creating a description in art differs substantially from that in scientific disciplines, which emphasizes the object-oriented and materialistic aspects of the descriptive object.

When exploring the quality of musical descriptive in-depth, one must consider its earlier form, *Tonmalerei*, as well as an important ideology in musical aesthetics, *Kunstkritik*—the idea of the adaptation of one art form into another. These two important concepts provide new perspectives on descriptive in music, and further reveal aspects of the fundamental nature of music, particularly its unique features that allow expressing feelings and ideas, even with the incorporation of description in musical works. They also help us to understand the fundamental differences between music and other art forms.

As an early form of descriptive music prevailing in the 1700s and early 1800s, *Tonmalerei* (also known as tone-painting) incorporates the imitation of natural sounds into musical works in order to depict specific circumstances of the human world. A famous example of *Tonmalerei*, Beethoven’s *Pastoral* Symphony,
demonstrates the well-executed incorporation of the sounds of nature (such as birdcalls, storm, and water) into the music to form a masterpiece of the musically descriptive work. However, even though works such as this carry various descriptive musical signs that refer to the extra-musical world, they nonetheless associate or refer to particular moods or emotions, rather than just presenting a pure description of nature. Beethoven’s remark on the *Pastoral Symphony*, “More the expression of feeling than painting” (*mehr Empfindung als Malerei*), explicitly stated that eliciting emotions in listeners, rather than delivering a picture of nature, is the prime concern of the musical work. Beethoven made it very clear that the musical expression is, therefore, of utmost importance in this work. In his study of art and music, Calvin Brown admitted that the prime intention of music is in its expressive function, including those of descriptive nature:

> It is clear that Beethoven went into the composition of *descriptive* music [Pastoral Symphony] with several reservations. The music was not to rival painting, but was to describe or represent *feelings* which the landscape produces. There is, of course, a certain amount of direct description, and even of imitation; the fourth movement certainly represents the storm itself rather than the state of mind of one experiencing a storm, and the same thing can be said of the charmingly burlesqued rustic band in the third movement. But a certain possibility of effectiveness in direct description, or “painting,” is allowed, for it is only when the composer attempts to push it too far that it fails.\(^{71}\)

As Brown pointed out, in writing descriptive music about nature, Beethoven’s ultimate aim was to describe the feelings that are inspired by the landscape. Thus,

the expression of sentiments is the genuine purpose of the music. When Brown further looked into each movement of *Pastoral* Symphony, he concluded:

> Beethoven’s programmatic effects are all in the background and accompaniment, and his principal themes are pure music except in so far as they may be able to suggest the mood of the beholder of a peaceful natural scene. Here he is being true to his characterization of the work as “more an expression of feeling than a painting.”

Similarly, when Heinrich Koch wrote, “*Tonmalerei* is immediately followed by the expression of a specific mood or that it may in and of itself express the ‘impulses of feelings,’” he clearly specified the significance of the role of expression in descriptive musical work. This is also evident in his statement that *Tonmalerei* and musical expression often go hand-in-hand with the “expressive coloration of sound”:

> …Tonmalerei and musical expression were not necessarily opposite elements of the musical aesthetic of that time, but rather that there are two ways to reconcile these elements: their immediate succession or the expression coloration of a sound that is taken up later.

A pure description without the carrying of feelings or emotions is therefore unrealistic in a musical work. Musical description or imitation is usually followed by a musical expression. Placing too great a concern on physical images would therefore “disrupt psychological coherence,” and “distract the attention from a governing mood.”

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72 Ibid., 249.
74 Ibid.
As a result, we can see that the expression of sentiment is of prime importance in a musical work. Musical description is often linked to emotions, and this expressive function is more important than the imitation or description of sounds. Music is a unique medium for expression, and it is expressive even when descriptive or imitative elements are absent:

[Jacques] Barzun makes a similar point when he wonders how so many intelligent people associate music with stories, events, or abstract ideas. The answer – music is expressive in itself: “It is expressive apart from the objects of its imitation and hence can be dramatic apart from the subjects of story-telling.”

\[\text{Kunstkritik}\]

In discussing various issues on musical ekphrasis, Mathieu Schneider suggested \textit{Kunstkritik} as a model of comprehension for understanding how arts inspired by other art could lead to a ‘better’ art form.\(^{77}\) Schneider referred to Fichte’s theory of science, which specified that knowledge often results from an iterative process in which “each thought on a given subject becomes itself the subject of another thought that will later become in its turn the subject of another thought…until it reaches the ‘absolute knowledge,’ which in fact the Truth.”\(^{78}\) In the field of art, according to Schneider, there is also such an iterative process leading to the path of the ultimate \textit{Truth}. In art domains, a work is “itself intended to become the

\(^{76}\) Ibid., 174.


\(^{78}\) Ibid., 176.
subject of another work of art, and the faculty leading from one work to the other, from one form to a higher one, is *Kunstkritik*.™

Given the ideology that was prevalent in the nineteenth century, works inspired by other arts were often not intended to represent the content of the original work. Rather, based on the idea or concept of the original work, artists aimed to develop a higher and enhanced form of art to serve the ultimate purpose of *Kunstkritik*. Under the premise of *Kunstkritik*, musical works inspired by other art forms, such as painting or literature, are not, and should not, be simply a transposition of visual elements into sound. Failure to appreciate this would imply the priority of one medium over the other, as though the literary or social topics are the “true meaning” and the musical one is just a rather inefficient reference. According to Monelle, “this kind of error has lead to the idea that music is a poor and imprecise signifier. But music is perfectly transparent; it is admirably efficient in signifying its own semantic level.”™ More importantly, music is capable of transforming into a new art of more sophisticated interpretation, by filling in what the original work has left unsaid.

In the case of musical works inspired by other art, the new musical interpretation is often concerned with the psychological or emotional content of the original work, which no other art form conveys with the same power. It is this psychological or emotional content (or the ‘philosophical epos,’ which I will discuss shortly) that music brings out which may arguably make the new work a ‘better’ one. In his study of Richard Strauss’s tone poems (*Macbeth* in particular),

79 Ibid.
Schneider evaluated all the descriptive musical elements within the work, concluding that they are not the most critical concern. Rather, he felt that the psychological elements are its essence, making it a ‘better’ work of art compared to the original literary work:

The approach of Kunstkritik allows the tone poem to be based on a literary work without simply transposing it into sounds, but instead giving the drama a new interpretation. Not only the form of the literary model is changed, but also its content, with regard to the focus on psychological elements, as Liszt suggests in his praise of the “philosophical epos.” Among all of Richard Strauss’s tone poem, Macbeth is therefore the one in which the action of Kunstkritik and the necessity to reconcile the poetic logic with the musical tradition is the most obvious.81

This psychological or emotional content, as I have explained, is best described through musical signs. Therefore, when music aims to represent another art form, it embraces and elaborates the emotional content of the original work (that may be latent in the original work), and thus evolves into a more complete and enhanced new work of art.

The discussions of Tonmalerei and Kunstkritik demonstrate that both emphasize the emotional aspects and their unique functioning in the expressivity of a musical work. This subjective aspect of musical work is often the essential and indispensable part of the music. As such, even for musical work of descriptive nature, incorporation of descriptive elements, such as the sounds of nature, should be subordinated to the emotional aspect of the music. In other words, emotional expressivity should always be given prime concern in music. The descriptive content of the work is necessary in a sense that it signifies the extra-

81 Ibid., 189.
musical world and provides a more definite semantic content. It functions to deliver the general plot or picture, therefore supplementing the abstractive nature of music with more concrete and tangible sources of inspiration. The descriptive aspect of a musical work allows the audience to enter into the same state of mind and share the experience intended by the composer. Once again, this brings us back to the concept of creating the mind picture of musical ekphrasis.

In fact, the use of imitation and descriptive content in music not only helps to deliver the intended state of mind or emotion of the composer, it also provides a compelling reason for the popularity of programmatic works of the nineteenth century. Composers of this period, such as Berlioz and Liszt, favored the use of programmatic content in music to convey their message, and they deliberately expressed that incorporating the programmatic content allowed music to express the truth of human emotion. In his *Berlioz und seine Harold Symphonie*, Liszt illustrated the point:

> They [the plastic arts] are not or only approximately capable of expressing their full intensity in an immediate manner, since they are forced to do so by means of images or comparisons. Music, by contrast, renders at once the power and the expression of emotion; it is embodied, tangible essence of an emotion. Perceptible to our senses, it penetrates them like an arrow, a ray, a rope, a spirit, and fills our soul.\(^{82}\)

It is also evident that Liszt believed that music could provide a path to the quest for the Absolute in the arts—an idea implicit in the concept of *Kunstkritik*. According to Schneider, Liszt advocated the autonomy of programme music,

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\(^{82}\) Quoted in Schneider, 177.
believing that music and other art forms could join together not just by combining, but by “building together a new and independent form.”

Liszt emphasized the capability of music in “psychologizing” a piece of artwork—i.e., revealing the subjective elements that are often embedded deeply into various works of art. For example, in uniting the literary and musical work, Liszt proposed “to renew the musical forms by referring to the new kind of epos that was created by the Early Romantic writers (Goethe and Lord Byron, especially) and spread throughout the whole continent in the first half of the nineteenth century.” Liszt called this kind of epos the “philosophical epos”:

The basis and the purpose of the poem [the philosophical epos] is no longer the representation of the hero’s deeds, but the representation of affects acting in his soul. The goal is to show how the hero thinks, much rather than how he behaves.

Although the aim of this paper is not to discuss the transposition of literary work to musical work, a point to note from evaluating Liszt’s ideas is that conveying the likeness of physical objects or phenomena that appear in musical works, or any physical objects or phenomena described by musical works, are not the ultimate goal. The last sentence, “to show how the hero thinks, much rather than how he behaves,” precisely emphasizes that the goal of music is not to represent superficial phenomenon, nor even one’s behavior. Rather, it is in the psychological aspects, or the emotions, that music has the greatest power of

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83 Ibid., 178.
84 Schneider, 185.
85 Ibid. My emphasis.
representation. As Liszt discussed in his idea of the philosophical epos, the value of music lies in conveying one’s thinking, rather than one’s behavior. This relates to my earlier discussion of Tonmalerei, where I indicated that music aims to deliver the emotional content, rather than the physical elements, even though there is the presence of onomatopoeic elements.

Berlioz also commented extensively on the role of music in delivering human sentiments, or the “poetic idea.” Both Liszt and Berlioz promoted the idea of programme music, in recognition of the need to provide content and make people understand the “picture” that each composer had in mind. In their view, such an approach helped listeners experience the emotions that the composer intended, whether inspired by musical or non-musical subjects:

This, it seems, is what Liszt recognized in Berlioz: in the best poetic music, such as Berlioz’s, the program merely makes it possible for the composer to define precisely the thought to which he gives outward form. It helps to understand what picture the composer had in mind. A program enables us to draw an analogy between the emotions the music arouses and comparable emotions aroused by non-musical things: the sight of a forest, the experience of being at a rowdy carnival, the performance of a Shakespeare scene, the dancing of spirits, and so on.86

In his article On Imitation in Music, Berlioz elaborated on his idea on the role of musical imitation. According to Berlioz, musical imitation could be direct (physical) or indirect (emotional). Direct imitation refers to the imitation of sounds of our natural world, which “it is proper for music to imitate, even though it be not its highest prerogative.”87 Berlioz agreed with the opinion that painting

86 Rodger, 40.
is an art for a beautiful imitation of Nature, as opposed to music, which is not an art for imitation, not an art for the reference to physical objects. Berlioz stressed that music has achieved its best potential in the second type of imitation—the emotional or indirect imitation:

He [the composer] knows very well that music can take the place of neither word nor picture; he has never had the absurd intention of expressing abstractions or moral qualities, but rather passions and feelings. Nor has he had the even stranger idea of painting mountains: he has only wished to reproduce the melodic style and forms that characterize the singing of some of the people who live among them, or the emotion that the sight of these imposing masses arouses, under certain circumstances, in the soul.  

The kind of imitation that M. Carpani calls emotional is designed to arouse in us by means of sound the notion of the several passions of the heart, and to awaken solely through the sense of hearing the impressions that human beings experience only through the other senses. Such is the goal of expression, depiction, or musical metaphors. As regard to expressive power, I doubt whether the arts of drawing or even of poetry can equal music.

Berlioz clearly stated that music should exercise its role in delivering indirect imitation, in particular to imitate human expression and sentiments. Thus, when attempting physical imitation, the composers can just focus on tracing the outline of its subject by imitating the physical world, adding to it with delicate color. According to Berlioz, that is enough for physical imitation.

In addition, Berlioz brought to our attention four important aspects of musical imitation or description (including direct and indirect imitations). First, imitation

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88 Ibid., 28.
89 Ibid., 43. My emphasis. Giuseppe Carpani (1751–1825) was a writer on music, and friend of Haydn, Beethoven, and Rossini.
90 Ibid.
should “never be an end but only a means.” It should never be treated as the main musical objective or idea, but rather as a supporting element of the work as a whole, enhancing it in a “logical and natural manner.”

Second, musical imitation should be considered as “something worthy of holding the listener’s attention”; therefore, in no circumstances should it downgrade the aesthetic value of the musical work.

Musical imitation has two other important features, namely the idea that any musical imitation should be “close enough for composer’s intent,” allowing the audience to fully understand the intention of the composer, and the notion that physical imitation should never override the emotional imitation in the work, as it is always the prime objective for music to convey emotions.

Sharing the ideas of Kunstkritik, Berlioz stated clearly that music has its own role in emotional function and is thus not a mere duplication of other art forms. According to Jacques Barzun, Berlioz’s ultimate aesthetic principle was to develop “in sounds certain unnamable elements which life and music hold in common,” doing so through identifying certain “scenes what they contain that is musical.”

The comments presented above confirm that programme, imitation, musical description, and any other extra-musical representations in music, are not the

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91 Ibid., 38.
92 Ibid.
93 Jacques Barzun, Berlioz and His Century: An Introduction to the Age of Romanticism (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 107.
ultimate goals of composers in musical works. The case of *Tonmalerei* and the idea of *Kunstkritik*, as well as Liszt and Berlioz’s views on musical aesthetics, inspire us to realize that all those superficial, factual, and physical account of human world in music are only tools for expressing feeling and emotions. Imitation, or musical description, when adopted in musical work, primarily serves a musical purpose and should thus have a musical function. As Berlioz stated, if any of these are used, it should “never be an end but only a means.”

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TOWARDS A NEWER DEFINITION OF MUSICAL DESCRIPTION

The old Aristotelian idea of giving ‘imitative’ evidence of what we experience in the empirical world used to be the primary motivation for description, and therefore it developed into a long-established background for description, grounded in external reality.\(^{95}\) This view of description is, in my view, rather old fashioned. In chapter two, I have touched on the change of aesthetic view towards the late eighteenth century, when subjectivity was placed in an elevated position. With the rise of Romanticism in the nineteenth century, “the sphere of experience reflected in poetic descriptions becomes more personal and subjective.”\(^{96}\) As a result, nature becomes “a sphere onto which inner feelings and emotional conditions of the speaker can be projected,”\(^{97}\) and art media has taken a role to reflect this inner feelings and emotions. This shifting of focus towards subjectivity is therefore not limited to the art of music, as it has become a trend in literature, visual art, and other art media as well.

Thus, a discussion of descriptivity in aesthetic functions should therefore not strictly confine description to external phenomena. Even McClanahan admitted that writers do not always have to use concrete, physical or visual details to describe characters in literature, and they are not limited to describing ‘actable actions.’ She suggested:

\(^{95}\) Walter Bernhart, “Functions of Description in Poetry,” in *Description in Literature and Other Media*, Werner Wolf and Walter Bernhart eds., vol. 2 (Amsterdam; NY: Rodopi, 2007), 129-152; see. p. 130.
\(^{96}\) Ibid., 140.
\(^{97}\) Ibid.
We don’t even have to follow Aristotle’s dictums of making people “see things” or of “using expressions that represent things in a state of activity.” Aristotle, after all, was schooled in drama and rhetoric, which are public, oral traditions that rely solely on outward signs to achieve their effects. I wonder what Aristotle would have thought of the novels of Milan Kundera, who uses little outward description of characters of their actions. Kundera is more concerned with a character’s interior landscape, with what he calls a character’s “existential problem,” than the sensory description of person or action.\(^98\)

In poetic usage, according to Bernhart, the purpose of description is only ‘verisimilitude,’ indicating that the immediacy of the effect of subjective emotion is of higher importance than a straightforward description of the reality. Therefore, in his view, description takes on a different shape in different circumstances, as it depends on “specific intentions motivating the descriptive representation.”\(^99\)

It is true that description serves to create perceptual reality by providing concrete details that emphasize the sensual and physical aspects of the descriptive object. Therefore, surveying a wealth of observed details is anyhow required in a descriptive work. The inclusion of the observed details also enables the description to achieve vividness, and helps produce an image in the audience’s mind. As discussed, vivid, imaginative evocation is the essence of aesthetic forms of description. However, in music, the “specific intentions motivating the descriptive representation” would certainly be the delivery of emotions and feelings, which I have discussed thoroughly in the section of *Tonmalerei* and *Kunstkritik*. The inclusion of description of the natural world is just there to give

\(^98\) McClanahan, 131-2.

\(^99\) Bernhart, 130.
a hint to the listener about the concept or picture in the composer’s mind, and to improve the understanding of the musical work. In other words, description in music embraces more than just object-centered referentiality as suggested by Wolf. The subjective and affective aspects of music are therefore of crucial importance and cannot be excluded when we consider a definition of musical descriptivity.

Based on the discussions presented above, I would like to propose a refined definition, or to supplement Wolf’s proposal on the definition of description, particularly considering music as a medium for inner life, rather than external reality:

1. Serving the basic function of *identification*. This aspect does not limit it to object-centered referentiality, nor implies a priority over the object-centered referentiality. Both object-centered and subject-centered referentiality are important, and there is no implication of which one holds a more important position. In other words, the description of physical reality and emotional reality are of same importance;

2. *Vivid representation* of an object or phenomenon. This aspect is essential, as it should ensure that a vivid image is created for the audience to generate a mind-picture of what the author or composer intended. In music, this vivid representation of an object or phenomenon is often achieved by retracing the feeling or emotion it induced;
3. Displaying a *plurality of qualities and features* that are not confined to external and physical ones. They could also be qualities or features of subjective or emotional aspect. However, the most important point is that, for a work to be regarded as a descriptive work of aesthetic nature, it should be characterized by a redundancy of features related to the same descriptive object.
Chapter 4  Case Study: Descriptive Elements in Franz Liszt’s Sposalizio (Années de pèlerinage: Deuxième année, Italie, No. 1)

One of the great masters of programme music in the nineteenth century, Liszt’s music is characterized by its richness in poetic elements and the beauty of its art form. As he travelled extensively throughout Europe in the 1830s, Liszt’s works drew inspiration from various sources, including literature, painting, and natural sceneries. The Années de Pèlerinage (original published as Album d’un Voyageur) is a collection of piano compositions written by Liszt during his traveling years. They depict his journey, which was referred as a trip to “quest for truth, beauty and spirit.”

Liszt’s Sposalizio, one of the pieces collected in the second album (the Italy album), was written in 1839, a year after he traveled through Italy in 1837–1838. That was also the time when he became acquainted with a group of litterateurs and artists, including George Sand (1804–1876), Victor Hugo (1802–1885), Alfred de Musset (1810–1857), and other musicians, such as Frédéric Chopin (1810–1849) and Hector Berlioz (1803–1869). These encounters allowed Liszt to develop a taste for literature and visual arts. Liszt’s performance career was flourishing in Paris around 1830. As a renowned virtuoso pianist, he was constantly competing for audience with Sigismond Thalberg (1812–1871), who was also a well-known virtuoso pianist of the time. Tired by the never-ending

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1 Leslie Howard, Album d’un Voyageur and Other Pieces from Liszt’s Years of Travel in France and Switzerland (Hyperion Recording, CDA 66601, 1992), preface.
competition with Thalberg, Liszt decided to retreat from Paris and traveled with his lover Marie d’Agoult, together with other artists mentioned above, first to Switzerland in 1835–1836, and then to Italy in the following years. It was during this trip that Liszt was inspired by the natural scenery, as well as the cultural arts of these places, and wrote the series of piano pieces, eventually collected under the title of *Années de Pèlerinage*.

The works collected in this Italy album reveal that, at the time, Liszt was occupied by two subjects—love and death. In Milan, Liszt was exposed to numerous great Renaissance paintings. One of them was the *Lo Sposalizio della Vergine* (The Marriage of the Virgin) by Renaissance painter, Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino (1483–1520, better known as Raphael). This painting was displayed in the Brera Chapel in Milan, and featured a sixteenth-century scene of Mary and Joseph getting married. It was this painting that stimulated the creative impulse in Liszt, who composed *Sposalizio* in 1838.

Completed in 1504, the painting (figure 4.1) depicts the betrothal ceremony of Mary and Joseph. It has been suggested that Mary’s suitors are presenting rods to the high priest, requesting to marry Mary. One of the suitors is Joseph (at the right side of the priest), who is holding the only flowering rod and a ring, and who has been accepted as Mary’s husband. On Mary’s side, there are other women witnessing the ceremony, while the rejected suitors stand by Joseph’s side, one of whom is even breaking his rod with his knee to indicate his anger at being rejected.
In Raphael’s painting, Mary, Joseph, and the priest are placed at the centre before the background of a Jewish temple. The priest joins Mary and Joseph’s hands together. Under the pastoral background at the far end, the path to the dome-shaped temple is approached by a series of steps rising from the piazza’s mosaic pattern. There is a doorway leading the viewer’s attention to the far end of the pastoral open background and the arcade framing the sky on either side. All the elements of the painting are arranged symmetrically. The pastoral background of the painting creates a very balanced, integrated, and peaceful atmosphere, which matches the general moods and atmosphere conveyed by Liszt’s music (as I will show later). This integration is described by Joan Backus, who has written an in-depth study of Liszt’s *Sposalizio*:

Thus it seems very likely that in writing a work such as *Sposalizio*, Liszt was himself trying to capture the same “double aspect” that so impressed him in Raphael’s artwork – the dual expression of formal integrity and symbolic representation. With this in mind, it is useful to reconsider the extent of relationship between Liszt’s musical conception and the painting by Raphael that inspired it.²

To those knowledgeable about art in the nineteenth-century, Raphael’s *Sposalizio* was “a vision of inspiration personified, a testament to the artistic link between man’s spiritual present and the historic past.”³ With its image of the holy marriage, the painting symbolizes God’s promise for redemption of all mankind. It must have held great meaning for Liszt, particularly during the time when he fell in love with Marie d’Agoult, and the two started living together like a newly

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married couple. It was Liszt who instructed the publisher to print a reproduction of the painting in the printed score. This request signified his eagerness to help the performers understand the piece and share in his experiences.
Fig. 4.1 Raphael: Lo Sposalizio della Vergine, oil on panel, 1.70×1.18 m, 1504 (Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera)
The Music

The music of Liszt’s *Sposalizio* starts with a simple pentatonic motif, which is then contrapuntally transformed into a complex musical architecture that prevails throughout the piece. There are three main motifs—the pentatonic, a parallel third, and a chorale motif. The pentatonic motif opens the music in rhythmically free style—a recitativo-like opening setting the mood of the piece in a peaceful and intimate manner (example 4.2). Without any accompaniment (at the beginning of the music), the modal quality of this pentatonic motif injects the music with a quality of simplicity and ideality, which is often associated with the pastoral in the conventions of Western classical music.⁴

Setting in the warm tenor range of the piano, this motif acts as an indexical and symbolic signifier, enhancing sense of warm and tender affection in the music. In this pentatonic motif, the C-sharp is deliberately held across the barline, which eliminates any strong sense of rhythmic regularity, therefore giving a fluid and lyrical musical gesture to the piano work. This motif later becomes a drone in the bass, revealing a religious and sacred disposition, as the music develops gradually. It is also transformed into different figures (example 4.3 and 4.4), making this motif more authoritative and conveying a kind of statement-like gesture. In sum, this pentatonic motif serves as a musical signifier to represent

⁴Examples found in Raymond Monelle’s *The Musical Topic, Hunt, Military and Pastoral* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 220.
the emotional background of the painting—pastoral and religious—which is interpreted by Liszt as simple and affectionate, and yet with the greatest of commitments. Via this recitative-like pentatonic motif, Liszt has successfully induced the desired moods—peaceful, tender, and sacred—to which Liszt reacted in recognizing the beauty of this painting.

*Example 4.3 Sposalizio: Transformed Pentatonic Motif into Eighth Notes (mm. 75–82)*

*Example 4.4 Sposalizio: Transformed Pentatonic Motif into Eighth Octaves (mm. 92–97)*
Liszt has also exploited the use of this pentatonic motif in a diagrammatic way. By transforming this motif to various textures and developing it with more intensive rhythmic patterns and extreme dynamic levels, Liszt created a formal unity of the piece. Through enhancing the textural complication towards the end of the piece, he also managed to transpose the peaceful state gradually to more authentic religious emotions. The piece, therefore, evokes in the listeners the heart-stirring mood towards the sacredness and majesty of the wedding ceremony, leading us to experience the solemnity of the religious ceremony towards the end of the music. To some extent, the sequential arrangement of the signification—in addition to appropriate musical signs in terms of its dynamic, rhythmic and harmonic elements—contributes to a description of the picture in a seemingly narrative way.

While the pentatonic motif creates the background and sets the mood resembling those conveyed by the painting, there are also other musical signifiers such as the repeated octaves that imitate the bell ringing of churches. This further stimulates our aural senses, suggesting a church environment that helps us imagine a wedding scene of the painting. Backus, in her study of *Sposalizio*, also contended that this melody is likely “directly reminiscent of the bell of northern Italy.” In mm. 53 and 55, Liszt artistically incorporated the sound of bells into the music (example. 4.5), as a type of aural iconicity. By making use of these iconicity and connotations (i.e., the bell-like pentatonic scale and church bell), Liszt managed to convey the scene of the wedding and lead the listeners to the frame of mind of those attending a wedding ceremony.

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5 Backus, 176.
Apart from the pentatonic motif, the parallel third motif (which first appears in m. 3) further establishes the desired mood and tone, helping to depict the scene of holy nature (example 4.6). In contrast to the pentatonic motif at the beginning, this second motif has a clearer melodic, rhythmic and harmonic definition. Its definite rhythmic and melodic presentation contrasts significantly to the pentatonic theme, injecting the music a more definite and firm statement. While this second motif consists of a successive series of parallel thirds, it nonetheless connotes to the idea of pastorality. Like the pentatonic motif, it further helps to depict the pastoral background in the painting where Mary and Joseph get married. As the music develops through intensification of the first pentatonic motif, it comes back in andante quieto (mm. 30–33, example 4.7) to bring us back to the pastoral and peaceful atmosphere. In mm. 30–33 (also mm. 34–37), the third motifs in the right hand are immediately answered by a melodic figure (made up of the first three notes of the pentatonic motif) in the tenor register, and subsequently the two voices move in compound parallel thirds. This gendered ‘duet’ metaphorically illustrates a dialogue between a woman and a man (and here, undoubtedly Mary and Joseph), and the perfect harmony of the two voices here symbolizes the harmonious integration of the couple – the holy marriage.
Another new theme (a chorale-like motif) appears in m. 38 (example 4.8) in the key of G major. This chorale theme acts as an even more concrete symbolic signifier, projecting a religious and harmonious state of emotion to represent the wedding scene through the music. If the former two motifs deliver the emotional background of the painting, this chorale theme, owing to its religious nature, depicts symbolically the foreground of the painting, that is, the religious ceremony of the holy marriage. It intertwines with the first pentatonic theme from m. 75 onwards, and gradually develops to an even more grandiose passage towards the end (example 4.9). Finally, the second motif joins in as well, reinforcing the intensity of music at a more enhanced dynamic level (fff), and thicker texture towards the end (example 4.10). Here, Liszt is heightening an
intense agitated emotion to signify the great significance of holy marriage. Perhaps, through this holy marriage, Liszt intends to signify the God’s promise of redemption to the mankind, as Raphael’s painting implies.

Italian Renaissance artworks, such as Raphael’s *Lo Sposalizio della Vergine*, usually emphasized spatial relationships and symmetry, which in return conveys a sense of balance and harmony. By the juxtaposition of the three motifs and its transformations, as well as creating a somewhat ternary structure in this piano piece, Liszt has further drawn an association between his music and the painting, through its formal beauty and structural balance that match with the layout of the painting.

*Example 4.8 Sposalizio: The Chorale Motif (mm. 38–49)*

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Example 4.9 Sposalizio (mm. 75–85)
Example 4.10 Sposalizio (mm. 92-110)
In this musical work, most of the time Liszt did not specifically tell us through his music what the painting is about; rather, he led us to experience the state of emotion that a religious ceremony would evoke, whereby we feel the ceremonial solemnity and dignity. It is the emotional expressivity which the music conveys that functions as a kind of musical description. In his music, Liszt has employed various musical significations, including aural iconicity, metaphorical illustration, and symbolic connotations, such as the pastoral thirds and pentatonic motif, which reinforce this emotional expressivity and create an association between the music and the painting.

It is not hard to find other types of musical signifiers that further help to develop the emotional expressivity of this piece of music. One interesting example is the tonality of the piece, E major. It is a key that is often associated with religious elements, and was Liszt’s favored ‘religious key.’ Following an extensive study of Liszt’s music, Paul Merrick concluded that Liszt often used this key to convey his religiosity, particularly in many of his later works. In fact, another famous work of similar heavenly disposition, Haydn’s Aus Rosenwolken bricht from The Creation (Hob. XXI:2), also draws our attention to the religious connotations of E major. Apart from the tonality, the meter of Sposalizio (6/4 meter) is a compound time that is of a pastoral quality, and this also contributes to the desired mood of the piece. The chorale and chordal textures, particularly in the section of piu lento (mm. 38–75), further contribute to evoking the religious and harmonious emotions one would typically associate with the feeling and

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8 There is a detailed analysis on the relationship between the meter and pastoral in music in Monelle’s The Musical Topic.
atmosphere of Raphael’s painting. All these musical iconicities, including the symbolic connotations and metaphors mentioned in previous paragraphs, work in combination, each one reinforcing the other to make the impact and association more prominent. The musical signifiers help Liszt to convincingly make this musical work a masterly one, allowing him to ‘repaint’ the great work of Raphael. It is through the various musical signifiers that point towards the same emotional attributes—pastoral, religious, love, and commitment—that Liszt to describe the work of Raphael. In this sense, *Sposalizio* is regarded as a descriptive musical works in which the redundancy of the descriptive features pointing to the above-mentioned emotional attributes satisfy the condition of descriptive work that we discussed in chapter three.
Through the musical examples of *Sposalizio*, I have examined the use of various musical signifiers that facilitate a linkage between the musical work and the painting. In most of these cases, the music evokes the emotion or mood associated with the artwork. Through the use of iconicities, metaphors and connotations, Liszt’s music successfully triggers our stored experience, and puts us in the same frame of mind as appreciation of a painting would. In some sense, Liszt has not depicted the painting or outlined any of its physical features in his music; rather, his music expresses his impression or emotional reaction towards this work of art. Despite his use of numerous signifiers in his music, as I have demonstrated in the examples from *Sposalizio*, his major aim was to share with us the feelings and emotions these artworks evoked in him as an observer (just as Rossetti later did in his *Sonnets for Pictures*). The painting reveals a kind of symbolism; Liszt saw its symbolic meanings and expressed them through his music. As such, the question of whether or how his music could describe the physical aspects of the painting was not his major concern. This premise is supported by his views on music and the manner in which it communicates as an art form, as revealed in his various letters and publications.

In his various articles and letters, Liszt expressed his conviction that music is a medium for expressing one’s feelings, rather than a tool for imitating reality or depicting objects in outside world. According to Liszt, music is a poetic language
and its expressivity transcends poetry or any other form of art. Its power of expressivity does not lie in describing the objective dimensions of the extra-musical objects or events; rather, it lies in other non-objective areas or the ‘ideality’—a dimension in which other forms of art might not be as powerful. It is for this reason that “it [music] has no reality, so to speak; it does not imitate, it expresses.”9 This is exactly what Wolf called ‘subjectivity,’ through which music can provide an aesthetic illusion that leads us to experience the ideal world that might only exist. In his preface to the Album d’un voyageur, Liszt wrote the following passage regarding his views on the potential of music as a medium of art:

The inner and poetic sense of things, that ideality which exists in everything, seems to manifest itself pre-eminently in those artistic creations that arouse feelings and ideas within the soul by the beauty of their form. Even though music is the least representative of the arts, it nonetheless has its own form, and has been defined not without reason as architecture of sound. But even as architecture not only has Tuscan, Ionic, Corinthian etc orders, but also embodies ideas that are pagan or Christian, sensual or mystic, war-like or commercial, so too, and even more perhaps music has its hidden meanings, its sense of the ideal, which the majority of people, truly speaking do not even suspect, because where a work or art is concerned, they rarely rise above the comparison of externals, the facile appreciation of some superficial skill.

The more instrumental music progresses, develops, frees itself from its early limitations, the more it will tend to bear the stamp of that ideality which marks the perfection of the plastic arts, the more it will cease to be a simple combination of tones and become a poetic language, one that, better than poetry itself perhaps, more readily expresses everything in us that transcends the commonplace, everything that eludes analysis, everything

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9 Liszt, An Artist's Journey, 156-7. My emphasis.
that stirs in the inaccessible depths of imperishable desires and feelings for
the infinite.\textsuperscript{10}

…. In contrast to the poet who speaks a language common to all and who,
moreover, addresses himself to those whose minds have been shaped to
some extent by the required study of the classics, the musician speaks a
mysterious language that can only be understood after special study, or at
the very least, extensive exposure. He is also at a disadvantage compared
with the painter and sculptor, in that they address themselves to a feeling
for form, which is far more widespread than the intimate understanding of
nature and the feeling for the infinite that are the very essence of music.
Can this state of affairs be improved? I believe so, and I also believe that
we are moving in that direction in every way.\textsuperscript{11}

He further elaborated this idea in his preface to his \textit{Symphonic Poems}:

It is obvious that things that can appear only objectively to perception can
in no way furnish connecting points to music; the poorest of apprentice
landscape painters could give with a few chalk strokes a much more faithful
picture than a musician operating with all the resources of the best
orchestras. \textit{But if these same things are subjected to dreaming, to
contemplation, to emotional uplift, have they not a kinship with music, and
should not music be able to translate them into its mysterious language?}\textsuperscript{12}

As music is such a ‘mysterious language’ and its power of expressivity
transcends other forms of art, it is not surprising that the general public often
finds it difficult to comprehend it fully. Other forms of art or media are therefore
used as a reference to music, helping to expose the ideas of the composer. Liszt
has long been aware that these intermedial references are needed to facilitate the

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 202.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 34.
\textsuperscript{12} Original cited in Alan Walker, \textit{Reflections on Liszt} (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press,
2005), 226. My emphasis.
understanding of the listeners and their appreciation of music. This is the case for much of the programmatic music written in the nineteenth century. It was a time when middle-class started to participate more actively in the appreciation of music and its activities. In response to this social change, Liszt, among others, started to include these extra-musical elements to assist the understanding of music for the general audience. Liszt’s vision to uplift the taste of the public in music appreciation was evident:

Music, in other words, is too ideal of itself to be truly understood by any but the select few. If it is to flourish, therefore, in the world of the Real, it should have a more comprehensible point of reference for the ideas and/or feelings it means to convey. One way of achieving this is to relate it to another form of art, visual or literary; this is the underlying concept of the symphonic poems or the discussion of program music in Liszt’s 1855 essay “Berlioz and His Harold Symphony”.\(^\text{13}\)

Isn’t it regrettable, for instance, that Beethoven—who is so hard to comprehend and whose intentions are so difficult for people agree upon—didn’t briefly indicate the inner, intimate thought behind many of his great works, and the principal modifications of that thought?\(^\text{14}\)

In this regard, Liszt actually approached the nature of music from an *intermedial* perspective, as he always discussed the potential of music in comparison to other media, such as words or painting. Through borrowing the meaning of other art media, he attempted to make music more accessible to the public. In the example of *Sposalizio*, as well as other works contained in *Années de Pèlerinage*, the painting of Raphael, the sculpture of Michelangelo, and the sonnets of various poets are examples of intermedial references of non-musical media, which are

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\(^\text{13}\) Suttoni, “Preface,” in Liszt’s *An Artist’s Journey*, xxv.

intended to aid the listeners in their understanding of the ideas that Liszt tried to convey through his music. Given this intention, or perhaps mission, it is not surprising to find that some of Liszt’s compositions are quite approachable to the general listening public, among them the various piano works in *Années de Pèlerinage*. 
SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE MEDIAL FEATURES OF MUSIC IN DESCRIPTION

Description in Music – through its power of expressivity and the use of various connotations

If we compare music with verbal media, it is perhaps the least descriptive medium in terms of its ability in describing the physical features of the extramusical world, or in terms of object-centered referentiality. Music has limited hetero-referentiality, as it contains no signifier that can refer directly to the non-musical world of objects or concepts except the acoustic ones. From linguistic points of view (such as Wolf’s), description should involve an object-centered reference, and yet music is primarily subject-centered. As I have discussed in the last chapter, if we uncritically take the literary definition of description, the extent to which music could be explored as a medium for description is limited, particularly in comparison to the extent to the ways in which words or literature can.

As we have already seen in the musical example of Liszt, musical signifiers cannot typically describe concretely the details of the physical appearance of an object. However, and more importantly, the power of emotional expressivity in music brings us to the states of emotion external objects or events evoke. The ability of music to ‘describe’ real world objects or phenomena is, to a great extent, found in its capacity for emotional expressivity. The connection between the extra-musical object and this expression is achieved through various musical
significations that we discussed in last chapter. It is in this sense that music could describe or represent the external world.

As Meyer pointed out, music often arouses affects through the mediation of conscious connotation or unconscious image processes. A sight, a sound, or a fragrance can evoke thoughts and feelings associated with persons, places, and experiences that were acquired in the past. These stimuli can stir up dreams, ‘mixing memory with desire,’ or awaken the conscious or unconscious. In short, these are the stimuli to which the affective response is really made. Thus, music may give rise to images or thoughts that, because of their relation to the inner life of the particular individual, may eventually culminate in affect.

As Wolf has revealed, the hetero-referentiality potential of music lies in the use of various sensory iconicities, connotations and metaphoric illustrations. These musical signifiers can trigger vivid recollections of our past experiences or cognitive frameworks, resulting in an association of the music and non-musical elements or emotions. It is through these devices that music can further exercise its emotional expressivity by representing something extra-musical. For example, connotations are the “associations made between some aspect of the musical organization and extra-musical experience” which are “shared in common by a group of individuals within the culture.” As a result, it is obvious that whether a piece of music arouses connotation greatly depends on the wealth of experiences and training of the listener. Together with other intermedial references given by the composers, such as titles or paratexts, the responses of an

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16 Ibid., 258.
individual towards the connotative meaning could be activated in an effective way:

We must not forget ultimately it is the listener who must make connotation concrete. In so doing the listener may draw upon his stock of culturally established images, including those derived from literature and mythology, or he may relate the connotative complex to his own particular and peculiar experiences. But in either case there is a causal connection between the musical materials and their organization and connotations evoked. Had the musical organization been different, the connotation would also have been different.¹⁷

**Potential and Limitations of Music**

The notion that music may be the ‘least descriptive medium’ might therefore be subject to criticism, particularly from a musician’s point of view. In a broad sense, with respect to its expressivity, the power of music transcends other representational art forms, and makes it a ‘mysterious language,’ as Liszt described it. Moreover, comparison of the descriptive mechanism of words and music reveals that the latter describes or represents the extra-musical world through its power in emotional expressivity. By suggesting the *emotional reality* of the external world, music can represent and communicate the objects or events by evoking the feelings the composer associates with the same. One might argue that this kind of description or representation is ambiguous. In fact, in a letter written in 1842, Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847) pointed out that the ambiguity in representation also exists in other media, such as words. Nonetheless, he argued that music can arouse emotions that words cannot, as they are ‘too

¹⁷ Ibid., 266.
definite’ to initiate feelings that are of a complicated nature. As such, even words might not able to communicate in the way music can:

> There is so much talk about music, and so little is said. I believe that words are not at all up to it, and if I should find that they were adequate I would stop making music altogether. People usually complain that music is so ambiguous, and what they are supposed to think when they hear it is so unclear, while words are understood by everyone. But for me it is exactly the opposite—and not just with entire discourses, but also with individual words; these, too, seem to be so ambiguous, so indefinite, in comparison with good music, which fills one’s soul with a thousand better things than words. What the music I love expresses to me are thoughts not too indefinite for words, but rather too definite.18

According to Mendelssohn, compared to words, music can exercise its expressivity and represent people’s ‘indefinite’ emotions *more* directly and effectively than words. Mendelssohn, indeed, touched the heart of the nature of music, and brought out the key to the potential of music as a medium for representation. Monelle also expressed the same view in his thorough analysis of the pastoral topic in music:

> From the literary point of view, the pastoral world is complex and many-sided...But music is much nearer to its final significations than literature, because it does not have to stop at concepts. The pastoral is about finding perfection in innocence, heaven in the uncorrupted, true morality in the irresponsible, the mystic vision of maturity in an allegory of youth and simplicity. These are the meanings universally expressed by composers of all ages.19

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Can Music Express, but Not Describe?

Whether musical representation through emotional expressivity and the use of various musical signifiers can fulfill the criteria of description from a linguistic point of view might lead to further debate. Music is a medium that speaks to mind; and more importantly, it is a medium better suited for expressivity. Thus, its descriptivity might need to be given special consideration, owing to the unique medial properties of music. Musicologists, such as Kendall Walton, also support the idea that, owing to the importance of expressivity in music, it should be treated as a kind of musical representation:

To be expressive is to bear a significant relation to human emotions or feelings or whatever it is that is expressed. Why doesn’t this itself amount to possessing extra-musical “meanings,” and why shouldn’t expressiveness count as a species of representation?20

For Liszt, music was definitely a mean of expression. Even in his programme music that relates to extra-musical objects (such as paintings or sculptures), Liszt did not aim to reconstruct the non-musical art, but rather to express his emotions towards the extra-musical arts. As we have seen, via various significations, music triggers our emotions. Music does not necessarily have to involve the representation of physical or sensory details to arouse our emotions. This is therefore the crucial difference between description in verbal media and music. As a result, this supports my argument in chapter three that the definition of descriptive in a literary sense needs reconsideration when applied to musical works.

20 Walton, 58.
Chapter 5  Case Study: Ottorino Respighi’s *Trittico Botticelliano*
From New Descriptive Perspectives

This case study of Respighi’s *Trittico Botticelliano*, a multi-movement chamber orchestra work inspired by three paintings, aims to show how the composer achieved musical descriptivity in both object-centered and subject-centered aspects, and how it can be understood to fulfill the requirements of descriptivity, as laid out in my new perspectives on description in chapter three. As discussed, the one-sided focus on the objective aspect of description (in the realist’s definition of description) and the undervaluing of subjective aspects might limit our understanding of musical descriptivity. Music as a medium specializes in expressivity and always works to deliver feelings and emotions, which then becomes an indispensable part of the musical description. I therefore propose to look into both sides of the matter in order to have a fuller understanding of the capabilities of music in achieving descriptivity.

In contrast to Liszt’s *Sposalizio*, in which the composer put a heavy emphasis on the description of the abstractive ‘emotional reality of things,’ Respighi’s work appears to show more than just the depiction of emotional reality. Apart from using musical signifiers metaphorically and connotatively to represent these paintings by Botticelli, Respighi tactically included quotations from other musical works in order to deliver a more concrete semantic content, and to deliver a more profound representation of the visual artworks. Selecting paintings
with mythological content, Respighi creatively depicted a set of three Renaissance artworks using various musical descriptive devices, as well as using musical citations from existing musical works in a symbolic way. His craftsmanship in making use of various tonal and timbral colours of instruments in orchestration adds further credibility, and facilitates his musical descriptions in this work. Respighi’s musical descriptions, as I will show in this chapter, are in the end more vivid and concrete than those of Liszt’s Sposalizio.

As discussed previously, the aesthetic functions of description need particular attention in discussing the descriptivity of music. Description in arts aims not only at the purpose of identification. More importantly, it has an aesthetic responsibility of “producing an image for the mind’s eye.” As I pointed out in chapter three, the transposition of art from one form to another should aim to achieve a ‘better’ and higher form of art—in the sense that it offers a new perspective to the original art, instead of just a re-presentation. As a result, Respighi’s act of musical composition transforming the visual artworks of Botticelli should not be seen simply as a transposition of visual elements into musical ones. Music should add values, particularly in relating to things that were left unsaid in the original work; and in most cases, these are the emotional aspects, which have not been fully revealed in the visual artwork. In this chapter, I shall discuss and see to what extent Respighi’s musical work achieves this according the concept laid out in Kunstkritik.

After all, for a work to be a descriptive one, it has to achieve the major function of referentiality. It must refer to something through some attributes of a physical
nature pointed towards the descriptive topic. This case study, nevertheless, will also evaluate how Respighi made use of various musical signs to refer to the things saw in the visual artworks, so as to fulfill the basic requirements of a musical descriptive work.

A Background Note on the Paintings of Botticelli

Alessandro di Mariano di Vanni Filipepi, better known as Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510), was born in Florence and brought up in a traditional Italian family in the early Renaissance period. He was described as “one of the most esteemed painters in Italy, enjoying the patronage of the leading families of Florence, in particular the Medici and their banking clients.”¹ While he was under the patronage of the powerful Medici family, he often painted family portraits and various religious or secular pictures upon their request. Most of his early paintings are those illustrating biblical stories. However, he also painted a few non-biblical paintings featuring Greek and Roman legends—the best known of which are the two large panels Primavera (Spring, c.1478; Uffizi, Florence), and La Nascita di Venere (The Birth of Venus, c.1485; Uffizi, Florence).²

Botticelli was a student of Fra Filippo Lippi (ca. 1406–1469), who was also an influential Italian painter of the fifteenth century. From Lippi, he acquired a unique sense of beauty and taste in art. Lionello Venturi described the influence of Lippi on Botticelli’s style as follows:

both master [Lippi] and pupil [Botticelli] had the ‘appetite for beauty’, that is to say their art is sensuous and at the same time transcends the senses in its endeavor to attain spiritual grace....[I]n Botticelli it continues on the way towards moral, ascetic and mystical grace.³

Botticelli’s primary interest was in the human figures rather than in sceneries or settings. Therefore, most of his paintings featured human faces and portraits. As a key member of the Florentine School, where artworks were characterized by traits such as simplicity in style and the exquisite portrayal of human emotions with intimate subjects, Botticelli’s style was not a simple mechanical synthesis of the style of his masters.⁴ Instead, Botticelli’s works often featured unique personal expressions and delicacies of body gestures. The faces in his paintings display a kind of melancholic expression—characteristics of withdrawn and introspect natures that are typical of Florentine styles in the Renaissance period. This was believed as the result of the influence of another masters of the time, Antonio Pollaiuolo (1429/1433–1498) and Andrea Verrocchio (1435–1488). Botticelli learned all the styles from them, and finally developed a unique approach of his own:

³ Ibid., 3.
⁴ A humanistic perception of the world was the basic artistic concept of the Florentine School during the Early Renaissance.
In his art he withdrew from the world around him and—unlike his contemporaries—he moved away from the sense of a forceful physical presence that characterizes the works of Pollaiuolo and Verrocchio. His style emphasized line, weaving complex and beautiful linear compositions with such subtlety that the many layers of sixteenth-century polyphonic music come to mind as a parallel.  

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OTTORINO RESPIGHI (1879–1936)

A composer, violinist, as well as an important conductor, Ottorino Respighi (1879–1936) is best known today for his orchestral works, amongst which are Le Fontane di Roma (The Fountains of Rome, 1916), I Pini di Roma (Pines of Rome, 1917), and Feste Romane (Roman Festivals, 1926). His interests in early music were evident in his various compositions based on Medieval and Renaissance themes, such as Vetrate di Chiesa (Church Windows) written in 1926, and Trittico Botticelliano (Botticelli Triptych) written in the following year.

As a versatile composer who mastered the process and craftsmanship of translating visual experiences and feelings to music, Respighi often preserved continuities with traditions while injecting unique techniques of composition into his various works featuring ‘antique’ topics. His profound love of early music, his identification with the Italian musical past, and a deliberate revival of ancient culture set his music apart from his contemporaries. In fact, Respighi showed little enthusiasm in the new techniques of musical composition, even though many of his avant-garde contemporaries began developing new compositional approaches at the beginning of the twentieth century. On the contrary, Respighi exhibited both Classic and Romantic traits in his compositional style, and he was particularly passionate towards poetic and sensuous images. His mastery of brilliant orchestration techniques—the wholly ‘modern’ orchestrations—.injected his Classical musical outlook with a twentieth-century sound. His tendency towards a minutely descriptive art and his ability to handle the orchestra led him
to create pieces of descriptive topics such as *Le Fontane di Roma, I Pini di Roma,* and *Gli Uccelli* (The Birds, 1928), as well as *Trittico Botticelliano* that I am going to discuss. Sergei Rachmaninov also paid tribute to the composer’s masterly skills by agreeing to commission Respighi to make an orchestral arrangement of his *Etudes Tableaux* for piano in 1929.

Respighi’s *Trittico Botticelliano* demonstrated his interest in Renaissance artwork and his dedication to preserving this traditional art through musical medium. He was committed to reviving earlier music, although he never hesitated to inject freshness into his works by exquisite orchestration or harmonic enrichment, as was shown in the three movements of *Trittico Botticelliano. Trittico Botticelliano* is based on the inspiration of three well-known paintings by Botticelli: *Primavera, L’Adorazione dei Magi,* and *La Nascita di Venere.* By further enhancing the emotional appeal and translating the visual sensations to musical ones, his work *transcends* the original works by further uplifting the spirit of the original artwork. His sensitivity in orchestration and remarkable techniques in composition made him an outstanding composer of orchestral works in the early twentieth century.

*Trittico Botticelliano* was composed during the years 1927 to 1930, upon his return from his first tour to the United States. This orchestral suite was dedicated to Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge (1864–1953), an important American patron of many outstanding musicians, who not only sponsored the composition of various chamber works of the twentieth century, but also donated a beautiful chamber music hall to the Library of Congress in the United States. *Trittico Botticelliano*
was one of the works commissioned by Mrs. Coolidge, amongst other leading compositions of the twentieth century. It was first performed in Vienna in September of 1927.⁶ Each movement of *Trittico Botticelliano* is in fact a miniature tone poem, which not only captures but also enhances the Florentine spirit of Botticelli’s paintings. Characteristic of Respighi, he celebrated his love of the Renaissance with a blending of Classical and Romantic elements.

The three Botticelli paintings selected by Respighi for *Trittico Botticelliano* were not intended as a set originally. Respighi wanted to create a kind of musical triptych, a typical form of religious painting that consists of three panels in which the central plane is flanked by two other paintings on either side, like two wings. The oldest Italian triptychs are the famous Roman panels of *Christ the Redeemer*, dating from the middle of the twelfth century. Triptychs became a very common form of altarpiece; hence, most of the subjects in the painted triptychs are of religious nature. In the nineteenth century, the triptych was revived and received more attention, although by then more of this art format was created and even secular subjects were featured in this painting format. It became popular with Naturalist and Symbolist painters towards the end of the nineteenth century, who intentionally used the tripartite form to inject a religious appeal into their subjects. It is hard to prove whether the three movements of Respighi’s *Trittico Botticelliano* were indeed influenced by painting format beyond the association of *trittico* with the genre of visual art. However, Respighi’s fondness for Renaissance art and ancient culture are certainly in evidence.

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Coincidentally, in many of his other works, Botticelli also demonstrated his interest in the triptych form of painting. He often arranged the scene in a triptych format by positioning the figures or subjects of his painting in a triptych way in a single painting:

In each of the surviving frescoes of the Quattrocento cycle, the foreground is almost filled with figures that narrate the principal incidents and are scaled at roughly two-fifths the height of the scene. The vanishing point for the landscape—which should govern the recession of the architecture as well, but does not always do so—is placed one-fifth above their heads. This two-fifth, one-fifth, two-fifths horizontal division of the scenes, crossed by a vertical division into thirds, is respected throughout the series. With typical Florentine rigor, Botticelli treats each scene as a triptych, grouping the figures and vertical masses such as architecture and trees into a central block flanked by two wings.  

Unlike the painted triptych where the three panels are often portraying the same biblical content, the topics of the three movements of Respighi’s Trittico Botticelliano are somewhat different and entirely the result of Respighi’s ‘placement.’ Of the three Botticelli paintings selected by Respighi, the first and last one, Primavera and La Nascita di Venere, are related to Greco-Roman myths, whereas the second one, L’Adorazione dei Magi, is biblical in content. Bruhn suspected that it was Respighi’s intention to formalize a symmetrical layout by surrounding the movement of the scene of the Old Testament story of L’Adorazione dei Magi with the two non-biblical works. This might imply an intention of ‘spotlighting’ the middle movement amongst the three.

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7 Hartt and Wilkins, 373.
**Primavera (Spring)**

Background

Together with *La Nascita di Venere*, both *Primavera* and *L’Adorazione dei Magi* were commissioned by the Medici Family. They were painted for the brothers Giovanni (1467–1498) and Lorenzo de’ Medici (1463–1503), whose father was Pierfrancesco the Elder (1430–1476). Lorenzo himself was a great artist and poet, and he was well known for his extensive knowledge and support of the arts. He was also an active art patron for famous Renaissance artists, including Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), Domenico Ghirlandaio (1449–1494), and Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564), and Botticelli as well.

Originally unnamed, Botticelli’s painting was assigned the title of *Primavera* in 1550, by art historian Giorgio Vasari. Although there was still no consensus on the source of inspiration for this painting, one of the suggested sources was a poem by the Roman poet Lucretius (Titus Lucretius Carus, c. 99 BC–c. 55 BC), whose *De rerum natura* (On the Nature of the Universe) contains lines about spring, Venus, and the other gods who appear in Botticelli’s painting:

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Spring comes, and Venus, and Venus' harbinger
Winged Cupid runs in front, and in his steps
Zephyr and mother Flora walk, bestrewing
Choice flowers and perfumes all along the way.\textsuperscript{11}

\textit{Figure 5.1 Sandro Botticelli: Primavera (Spring), tempera on panel, 2.03×3.14 m, c. 1478 (Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi)}

Botticelli’s painting features a group of eight mythological figures on the background of an orange grove (figure 5.1). The Goddess of Love, Venus, is placed at the center of the painting and is obviously the main character with a reference to its central theme—love (figure 5.2). Amongst the most celebrated goddesses of the Greco-Roman myths, Venus has been a subject of numerous artworks throughout the history of Western culture. As she symbolizes love, beauty, sex, fertility, the divine, and victory, these attributes often connect her with spring, as they all lead to an association with the symbolic meanings of the season.

*Figure 5.2 Venus in Botticelli’s Primavera*

In the painting, the remaining seven characters are positioned on either side of Venus, spreading out somewhat evenly on her left and right. On Venus’s right side are the Three Graces, the female companions of Venus who are often featured in a group to signify charm, beauty, nature, and fertility (figure 5.3). In Botticelli’s *Primavera*, their hands join together in a dance-like gesture,
suggesting a kind of harmony and joyfulness that further signifies the celebration and joy of spring. Next to the Three Graces stands Mercury, the Messenger of Gods, who protects all the characters, as well as the orange grove from any harm or danger. On the left side of Venus, the female figure in the floral-patterned dress is Flora, the Goddess of Spring. In Botticelli’s canvas, the pregnant Flora is scattering flowers in the forest, acting as a symbol of the fertility of Nature. Next to Flora is nymph Chloris with flowers emerging from her mouth, who is pursued by Zephyr, the God of Wind. It represents the transformation of the nymph Chloris into a Goddess of Spring, who scatters flowers as the gifts of Nature. All these gods and their presentations suggest the coming of the new season. Finally, floating over Venus’ head is Cupid, the son of Venus, who is shooting his arrows of love towards the Three Graces. This blindfolded god is often an integral part of the Humanist myth. Although all these figures are positioned in a row and are presented in a static perspective, there is a subtle implication of movement from right to left, as implied by their tilted gesture and direction of their bodies.

*Figure 5.3 Three Graces and Mercury in Botticelli’s Primavera*
The background of the scene is dominated by a grove of dark orange trees, with intertwined branches laden with fruits, forming the backdrop of the whole picture. Many different species of plants and flowers are depicted. The viewer will surely admire the painter’s artistic delicacy, as he painted every flower, tree branch, and plant in great detail. His artistic ingenuity is also evident in the depiction of the figures, whose elaborative costumes and facial expressions are truly impressive. As in other portraits by Botticelli, the facial expressions of the characters in *Primavera* are all melancholic, showing the introverted faces typical of mythological character. In his book on Botticelli, Bruno Santi noted that Venus’ smile in *Primavera* “embodies the ideal of lively intelligence cultivated in the Florentine Humanist environment centering round Lorenzo the Magnificent.”

The color scheme adopted in the painting is yet another example showing the painter’s artistic excellence. By manipulating the light and dark contrasts, the light-colored characters stand out prominently without losing their unity with the dark solid background. Against the forest backdrop, the characters appear to protrude from the background, making them even more distinguished:

Elsewhere, as, for example, in the Primavera, he [Botticelli] attenuates his colours as regards both lightness and intensity, reducing them towards a general scale of grays and blues. The function of these almost neutral tones is to accompany and emphasize the melancholy expression conveyed by the linear rhythm; in other words, their character is predominantly illustrative.

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12 Santi, 21.
13 Venturi, 6.
The overall layout of the painting is largely symmetrical and balanced. Venus and Cupid are placed in the centre panel, surrounded by other gods and goddesses on two sides. It also shows a kind of triptych format in itself. The painting’s theme is the celebration of the arrival of spring and it is filled with mythological symbolism. As the Goddess of Love and Beauty, Venus signifies the Humanistic ideal of spiritual love. The other mythological figures, such as the Goddess of Spring and the Three Graces, further highlight the central themes of love and fertility, which visibly stand out in a harmonious and graceful tone and manner:

Botticelli’s mythologies typify the learning and social graces of a society intent on reviving antiquity on a new scale, but now less for the moral lessons that interested Alberti than for private delight. Botticelli’s painting has given this rarefied ideal a perfect embodiment, and at the same time raised it to the level of poetry.

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14 According to the Florentine Humanist’s concept, Venus’s love is a transcendent love that links the entire system of the universe, and is intermediary between Heaven and Earth. The deepest meaning of Venus and other goddesses lies in their representation as the supreme source of life, controlling birth, vegetation, and fertility.

15 Hartt and Wilkins, 380.
The first movement of *Trittico Botticelliano, Primavera*, is written in E major and is initially marked as *Allegro vivace*. The music is first characterized by its opening of high-pitched trills and repeated ornamental figures (the turns), in which a vibrating sound, rather than a definite melodic line, can be heard at the outset. Eight measures after this strings opening, there is a fanfare call of consecutive intervals of rising fifth by the horn, which is then answered by trumpet, heralding a joyful call to attention at the beginning of the music (example 5.4).
Under such a spirited musical background, the first theme of the music comes in at m. 25 (rehearsal no. 1)—a lively bassoon theme in a dance-like, dotted rhythm (example 5.5)—which is then imitated by oboe and horn in *stretto*, with a richer accompaniment of harp, piano, and strings.

*Example 5.5 Primavera: Bassoon part (rehearsal no. 1)*

At rehearsal no. 2, the meter changes from 3/4 to 6/8 time, where a new theme—a melody borrowed from a medieval troubadour song, *A l’entraide del tens clar*—follows right after the stretto of the opening bassoon theme (example 5.6). This is played boldly by flute, clarinet, and violins in unison *fortissimo*, which immediately draws the attention of listeners. The change from triple to rapid compound duple meter further reinforces the joyful and festive atmosphere.

*Example 5.6 Primavera: Flute and oboe parts (rehearsal no. 2)*

This joyful dance-like theme is perpetuated, as the entire orchestra joins in to accompany and enhance its harmonies. While the texture becomes thicker, a low-sounding melodic line appears in strings and piano parts, while the woodwind and brass sections are still celebrating with the troubadour theme. This low-sounding figure repeats the pitches of E–F–B-flat like an *ostinato*, which
gradually accelerates to an even faster tempo, finally closing off this section and leading the music to a new key of B-flat major (starting from rehearsal no. 4).

A new episode, in F major, starts at rehearsal no. 5, where a substantial change in tempo, meter, and timbre contribute to a more exotic atmosphere. The Allegro is replaced by Allegretto which followed by Vivo (example 5.7). Moreover, the previous compound duple meter is replaced by 6/4 (Allegretto section), followed by a 2/2 (Vivo) section. Interestingly, there are frequent alternations of note-grouping in 2 and 3 in the melody of this section. This hemiola effect further adds metrical interest to this section of music. In this new episode, the brass and string sections fade out, with only the oboe, clarinet, and bassoon playing the new melody, resembling a woodwind trio. As a result, the previous picture of a joyful, dance-like movement is replaced by a pentatonic melodic section of exotic character.

*Example 5.7 Primavera (rehearsal no. 5)*
The exotic musical materials are carried forward to the next section, marked *Allegretto* (rehearsal no. 6). Strings, piano, and celesta are introduced to accompany the woodwinds with arpeggiated figures, enriching both the harmony and texture, as well as adding a special timbre to the pentatonic melodies. This unique section is therefore characterized by even more colorful and exotic flavors.

Finally, the opening trills of the strings section reappear at rehearsal no. 7, foreshadowing the return of the first section (example 5.8). This time, all the thematic materials in the previous sections are combined to create an even more exciting and festive atmosphere. The full orchestra is engaged and the texture becomes denser. The various thematic materials reunite here, either shortened, adapted to varied instrumentation, or embellished with figures, such as *arpeggios* in piano or celesta. This kind of mosaic-like ‘thematic collage’ can be viewed as a Neo-classical compositional technique through which the music is developed into an integrated whole.
Example 5.8 Primavera (rehearsal no. 7)
Discussion

In her book *Musical Ekphrasis: Composers Responding to Poetry and Painting*, Bruhn discussed how Respighi achieved the transposition of painting into his *Trittico Botticelliano*, which made the work an example of musical ekphrasis. She suggested that one possible perspective for understanding the transposition of the elements in Respighi’s work against Botticelli’s painting in the case of *La Primavera* was to match the various thematic materials with the mythological characters that appear in Botticelli’s work. According to Bruhn, we could, for example, “associate the two low-registered motifs with the two male figures—perhaps the playful bassoon melody with Zephyr and the commanding bass ascent with Mercury—and find ways to argue for convincing connections between the other four musical components and the four female figures in the painting.”

This kind of straightforward association of musical elements with characters, however, is not convincing to me, as such relationships are weak and unsound. Unless the composer has deliberately revealed his idea as such, or unless there is a strong rationale to support the correlation between musical themes and extra-musical subjects (such as the case of the leitmotifs of later nineteenth-century opera), drawing such lines may mislead our understanding of the work.

However, the association of Respighi’s work with the topics of the painting *Primavera* is not in itself controversial. The music conveys a kind of graceful,
energetic harmony and the joyful atmosphere of the celebration of spring in general. Various musical signs, as I shall discuss, further point towards the topic of spring. Respighi tactically makes use of various types of metaphorical illustration and connotations to depict the scene of spring through delivering the mood and atmosphere of the season. The opening high-pitched trills in the strings section, for instance, immediately draw the listener’s attention to the atmospheric vitality of the new season, as depicted in the painting. The trills provoke a momentum and dynamic current, where Botticelli’s painting also suggests a sort of motion revealed by the gestures and the direction of the characters’ bodies. The memorable fanfare horn calls of the rising fifth at the beginning (later echoed by the trumpet) act as another musical signifier for the announcement of the coming of the new season (example 5.9). The horn conventionally connotes to a state of nobility and authority, and was used as an instrument for announcing important rural events. These musical signs, therefore, function symbolically to represent the arrival and festive spirit of the season, as well as convey the pastoral environment, as shown in the painting.

Example 5.9 Primavera (mm. 7–19 at the opening)
In this movement, Respighi achieved a close association with the work of Botticelli through the borrowing of distinctive musical devices from pre-existing musical works, which served as a kind of *musical paraphrase*. In particular, the trills and repeated figurations of Respighi’s composition unambiguously remind us of another famous work—Vivaldi’s quartet of violin concertos, *Le Quattro Stagioni* (The Four Seasons), in which the first movement, *La Primavera* (Spring), is also in E major containing such repeated trills on B played by violins (example 5.10 a–b):

*Example 5.10a Vivaldi’s La Primavera, Le Quattro Stagioni (mm. 14–16)*

High-register trills are commonly found throughout the piece in Vivaldi’s *La Primavera*, and thus become an icon for his work. With the use of such high-pitched vibrating sounds, Vivaldi iconically and metaphorically depicts a springtime scene of gentle breezes, with birds singing joyfully and energetically
during the new season. Vivaldi even inserted a sonnet for the work, which is presented as a paratext in the musical score of *La Primavera*. It thus reveals explicitly what he has in mind when composing his work and serves as an intermedial reference for *La Primavera*:

A  Giunt’è la Primavera e festosetti  
Spring has arrived and merrily
B  La salutar gl’Augeri con lieto canto,  
the birds hail her with happy song
C  E i fonti allo spirar de’ Zeffiretti  
and, meanwhile, at the breath of the Zephyrus,
Con dolce mormorio scorrero intanto:  
the streams flow with a sweet murmur:
D  Vengon’ coprendo l’ær di nero amanto  
thunder and lightning, chosen to proclaim her,
E Lamp, e tuoni ad annuntiarla eletti  
come covering the sky with a black mantle,
E  Indi tacendo questi, gl’Augelletti;  
and then, when these fall silent, the little birds
Tornan’ di nuovo al lor canoro incanto  
return once more to their melodious incantation

Of course, one might argue that the trills alone with the repeated figurations of turns do not necessarily create an association to the arrival of spring. The function of this musical signifier would be rather weak and unconvincing without the verbal reference in Vivaldi’s work. Respighi, however, reminds the listeners of Vivaldi’s work by employing the same key of E major, timbre and register, as well as the same pitch on B to draw a closer reference. He thus attempts to direct the listener’s interpretation of his music through this citation. Respighi knows that this kind of musical paraphrase of a well-known work would help clarify this topic (or serve as an intermedial reference to it) of his music. Thus, he can further build upon it to depict his ‘ideal’ description of Botticelli’s painting.

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18 The writer of this sonnet remains unknown, but is likely Vivaldi himself. This English translation is from Paul Everett, *Vivaldi: The Four Seasons and other concertos, Op. 8* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 75.
19 Respighi in fact published various editions of Vivaldi’s music. Perhaps that was the reason why he was so familiar with Vivaldi’s *La Primavera*. 
An actual quotation of pre-existing music is also in evidence in the second episode (rehearsal no. 2), where the melody is borrowed from a troubadour song, *A l’entrade del tens clar* (example 5.11). The quotation of this work has two levels of symbolic meaning here. Firstly, as a traditional song (originating in the late eleventh century), it allows Respighi to convey the ‘ancient’ appeal to match the historical background of Botticelli’s painting. Secondly, the troubadour song conventionally conveys a topic of chivalry and courtly love, which directs us to the symbolic theme of the painting as represented by Venus—the ideal love. As explained by Bruhn, *A l’entrade del tens clar* means ‘at the entry of fair weather,’ which “identifies the song as a hymn to spring and thus further endorses the thematic designation set up by means of the basic Vivaldi reference.”20 Together with other musical signs in Respighi’s work, these two distinctive musical paraphrases convey the intended topic of the composer in a more direct and unambiguous way.

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Apart from drawing an association to the pre-existing works on spring, there are other musical signs that help describe the Botticelli’s painting. The opening bassoon theme of a long-short rhythm in triple meter has a lively dance-like character, which acts as an indexical and symbolic sign of the dancing gesture of three Graces and the festive atmosphere in Botticelli’s painting. Apart from this, the hemiola rhythm and modal characteristics of the wind-trio theme (rehearsal no. 5) are clearly an imitation of Renaissance dance music, at least as it was understood in the 1920s. Together with the transparency of texture and the special timbre created, all these contribute to the illustrations of the scene of the painting metaphorically and connotatively.

As mentioned earlier, Respighi is well known for his excellence in orchestration. His treatments of musical paraphrases and his other thematic materials were also of novel and contemporary nature, which might possibly reflect the exceptional treatment of the characters in Botticelli’s painting. In his discussion of Botticelli’s Primavera, art critic Charles Dempsey pointed out that Botticelli did not attempt to portray the characters in their original (ancient) guises. Rather, Botticelli dressed them in “contemporary vernacular costumes”:

Mercury wears a burnished mallet and carries an elaborately worked and jeweled parade falchion as his sword; the Graces are clad in buttoned chemises adorned with beautiful brooches, the one worn by the right-hand Grace suspended from a braided rope of false hair used as a decorative embellishment and to bind an elaborate coiffure set off by a spectacular hair ornament attached to a string of pearls; Venus is shown in a gown decorated with gold appliqué, over which she wears a distinctly old-fashioned cape, from the hem of which hangs a densely clustered row of pearls; and finally Flora appears wearing a painted dress with gold-embroidered sleeves, tied fashionably across the forearm. The ancient gods are shown, in other words,
as contemporary Florentines and, moreover, are dressed in quasi-theatrical costumes designed for masquerades of the sort that Vasari wrote were invented by Lorenzo de’ Medici for civic festivals and tournaments.  

In *Primavera*, most of the thematic materials are assigned to the woodwind and brass sections. On the other hand, the string instruments, as well as the harp and piano in the majority parts of the work, take up the role of depicting a spring background for the melodic materials. As a result, from a descriptive perspective, the woodwind and brass instruments depict the characters, who sing and dance in the background of the forest (as represented by the strings instruments) to celebrate the coming of spring. Moreover, the use of topically ‘rustic’ instruments without other accompaniment—oboe, clarinet, and bassoon in the second section (rehearsal no. 5), for example— further reinforce the pastoral appeal of the painting through allusions to the traditions of folk or vernacular music. With the thematic materials scattered and imitated amongst various instruments, the *stretti* further creates a kind of spatial effect that simulates the environment in the painting (the forest background). Although a direct association of each of the thematic materials with mythological characters, as mentioned by Bruhn, might be unrealistic, their assignment to different orchestral sections successfully leads the listener to visualize the scene of various characters on the ‘stage.’ Hence, an acoustic ‘gathering’ of different timbres and the ‘thematic collage’ musically depict the staging of those characters against a background, as well as the exciting and celebratory atmosphere as demonstrated in the painting. As confirmed by Bruhn, “the allusion to popular tunes, the bucolic and slightly robust character, and the ‘fairy-tale’ mood seem beautifully

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21 Dempsey, "Botticelli, Sandro," online.
suited to suggest to the imaginative listener that the ‘painting’ shows a rural scene, with figures that, like those in fairy tales, are known to all yet somewhat mythically removed from real life.”22 All these descriptive devices create the desired setting and atmosphere, reflecting both the objective and subjective depiction of the Botticelli’s painting.

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**Background**

*L’Adorazione dei Magi* (The Adoration of the Magi) was a work commissioned around 1476–1477 by Giovanni di Zanobi Lami, a close affiliate of the house of Medici. It was painted for the altar of the Lama Chapel of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, and is now exhibited at the Uffizi, together with other Botticelli’s paintings, including *Primavera* and *La Nascita di Venere*. The topic of the Adoration of the Magi was very popular in the Renaissance art; the scene of the birth of Jesus and the worship of the oriental wise men were very often shown in various paintings or other artworks. Although there might be different presentations or styles, this biblical story—so memorable and symbolic of Christianity—became a favorite subject for Renaissance artists, including Leonardo da Vinci, Filippo Lippi (Botticelli’s most important teacher), Botticelli, and others, because “it offered almost unlimited opportunities for painting splendid retinues and exotic costumes.”

Although the scene of Botticelli’s *L’Adorazione dei Magi* is placed in a setting similar to that of other presentations of the bible story, art historians generally believe that the characters are in fact the members and affiliates of Medici family (who are dressed in the costumes of the Magi). Apart from Joseph, Mary and the baby Jesus, the old man who kneels down at the centre of the painting to touch

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the foot of the baby Jesus is Cosimo the Elder, the most respected founder of the Medici family, who ruled Florence during much of the Italian Renaissance. The other two Magi represent Giovanni de’ Medici and Piero ‘the Gouty’—the two sons of Cosimo. In the crowd witnessing the event, we can recognize Botticelli who positioned himself at the far right bottom corner of the painting. As mentioned earlier, the Medici requested Botticelli to paint this work; therefore, it is not surprising for this painting to feature their most important family members in close proximity to the new-born king, as a “celebration of the family and Florentine nobilities.”

The scene depicted in the painting is set in a rural area, as indicated by the distant background (figure 5.12). There are ruins of Renaissance architecture and arches at the two sides. The sky featured at a distance is clear and bright. Joseph and Mary are portrayed in the centre of the painting, positioned above the other characters. With her gentle and graceful expression, Mary holds the new-born Jesus in her arms, while Cosmo the Elder kneels down before her, holding Jesus’ feet in his hands. The crowds witnessing the event are split into two groups, evenly on left and right. Each of the characters shows different facial expressions and body gestures. Their faces are slightly illuminated, and they are “foreshortened from above, below and behind.” The facial expressions of each of the characters are unique, and “projected with equal sharpness by means of sculptural contours and incisive light.” There are five other versions of the

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24 Hartt and Wilkins, 371. This gesture is similar to that of the priest at the benediction of the sacrament for the adoration of the faithful.
25 Santi, 13.
26 Wadia, 17.
27 Hartt and Wilkins, 371.
28 Ibid.
L’Adorazione dei Magi by Botticelli, and they all have “an equally realistic impression, but he [Botticelli] deliberately distorted the human figure, sometimes to give more forceful expression to an idea, and generally for the sake of creating a more beautiful shape.” As described by an art historian Santi:

His [Botticelli’s] art unifies even the elements taken from other painters and the expression of melancholy pride, to be seen even in the self-portrait in this painting, give the entire work that sense of fairy-tale meditation which will be a constant feature of all his later work.

Like many other Renaissance paintings, this painting follows a symmetrical layout. As in Primavera, the placement of the characters is in equal proportion, with almost the same-sized crowds on the left and right. As Joseph, Mary, and Jesus are elevated above the other characters, the eyes of various worshippers on either side logically turn upward towards the Holy Family. The respectfulness of the worshippers is therefore highlighted. The characters and the crowds are arranged in two arcs, “linked by the second king kneeling in the centre of the picture and providing a firm base for the main group of Mary, Joseph and the first king.” This juxtaposition unifies the numerous characters and visual elements into an integrated whole.

The overall tone and sense of the painting is one of holy and joyful occasion, with a visible degree of solemnity. There is also a touch of pastoral serenity, conveyed by the countryside setting and the blue sky in the background. The costumes of the Magi and worshippers are splendid and delicately designed.

Botticelli painted six different versions of L’Adorazione dei Magi in total.
Wadia, 15.
Santi, 28.
Wadia, 17.
Their clothes are richly colored in the vibrant blue, red, and yellow, characteristic of the refined and exotic taste of the Renaissance. These intense colors contrast sharply to the brown ruined walls and pale-blue sky in the background, thus brightening the scene with a touch of sharp tone. Botticelli further uses color for contrast in a splash of beautiful golden color masking the environment. In all his religious works (such as his famous *Madonna of the Magnificat*, c. 1480–1481), he always uses golden decorative color as a symbol of glorification. It injects the whole work a splendid, warm, and religious tone. As described by Santi, Botticelli’s painting is “drawn with a striking fluency of line and that the golden coloring, rather like a beautifully calm dusk, is one of the most outstanding Botticelli was ever able to achieve, recreating in a more complex but more spacious background the atmosphere of the two Stories of Judith.”

There are, in fact, other symbolic details in the painting, which have become the subjects of extensive analysis and numerous discussions on the latent meaning of the painting. In her analysis of *L’Adorazione dei Magi*, Bruhn pointed out the presence of several pictorial references symbolizing the fall and rise of Christ (or Christianity). For example, there are several symbols of renewal in the painting—the fresh twig sprouting from the trunk, the shoot of laurel in the decaying wall, and the peacock at the right. All symbolize the emergence of new life, signifying the growth of the new-born Jesus as a king and the resurrection of mankind. In addition, the ruin arches in the background might also serve as a reference to the ancient Greco-Roman culture, if not Christianity, which had declined and fallen, but was then being revived under the leadership of the

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33 Santi, 28.
Medici. As a result, perhaps it was the intention of Medici to draw a symbolic connection between the birth of Christianity and the reviving of ancient culture by the Medici. According to their Neo-Platonism, it further signifies the rebirth of Greek culture under the efforts of Medici family.\textsuperscript{34} Regardless of whether these symbolic associations are valid or not, the sense of renewal is still implicitly conveyed in this work.

\textit{Figure 5.12 Sandro Botticelli: L’Adorazione dei Magi (The Adoration of the Magi), tempera on panel, 1.11 \times 1.34 m, c. 1477 (Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi)\textsuperscript{38}}

\textsuperscript{34} Bruhn, \textit{Musical Ekphrasis}, 247.
\textsuperscript{35} Venturi, 8.
The Music

Episode I

Written in C-sharp minor, this movement starts with a sensuous unaccompanied bassoon theme in a compound quadruple meter (example 5.13), serving like an opening recitative. Its distinctive tone color and timbre give a pastoral and folk-like impression that audibly sketches the background and the mood of the painting. Apart from its evocative nature, the bassoon theme is also characterized by its dotted rhythm in compound meter that evokes a kind of siciliana style favored by Baroque and Classical composers as a means to signify a pastoral or bucolic context. This musical ‘setting’ immediately draws the audiences to formulate the scenic picture of Jesus’s birth.

Example 5.13 L’Adorazione dei Magi: Bassoon part (mm. 1-4 at the opening)

The first half of the bassoon theme consists of notes of C-sharp minor (similar to the Aeolian church mode). The melody repeatedly returns to the tonic before moving towards the second part of the theme, where it leaps from tonic to its leading note, before returning chromatically downward to the tonic again. The modal and chromatic natures of the bassoon theme symbolically illustrate both the exotic and rural atmosphere depicted in the painting.
After that, the oboe joins in with another counter melody to the bassoon. There is still no other accompaniment, except the French horn playing the tonic pedal point (C-sharp). The contrapuntal texture of the two rustic instruments (oboe and bassoon) delivers a folk-like character of the music. The transparent texture here also reminds us of the style of early chant-like music. The highly chromatic melody at the end of this theme further injects a taste of exoticism to the music (example 5.14):

![Example 5.14 L’Adorazione dei Magi: Oboe part (mm. 5–10 at the opening)](image1)

The second motivic material of the first section appears in the flute part, following immediately the bassoon theme. The twisting and embellished figure of this flute motif forms a kind of arabesque musical sign (example 5.15):

![Example 5.15 L’Adorazione dei Magi: Flute part (rehearsal no. 14)](image2)

**Episode II**

After the flute arabesques, the well-known plainchant theme *Veni Veni Emmanuel* is played by flute and bassoon in unison (starting from five measures after rehearsal no. 14). In this new section, the meter changes to 15/8. This time,
the clarinet plays the arabesque motif, which acts as a response to the *Veni Veni Emmanuel* theme played by flute and bassoon:

*Example 5.16 L’Adorazione dei Magi (mm. 5–9 after rehearsal no. 14)*

The second part of the *Veni Veni Emmanuel* theme is played by flute, oboe, clarinet, and bassoon in melodic and rhythmic unison (example 5.17). This section is akin to a woodwind trio, where each of the woodwind instruments either takes part in the melody or in the accompaniment. The second phrase of the *Veni Veni Emmanuel* theme played by oboe and clarinet is then ‘harmonized’ by flute and bassoon in parallel fifths. Like the octaves, such a highly consonant interval does not provide much color for harmonic support, thus further reinforcing a sense of emptiness and vagueness in the music:
Example 5.17 L’Adorazione dei Magi: Woodwind parts (rehearsal no. 15)

The entire Veni Veni Emmanuel theme is then answered again by the flute arabesque, after which string section takes over the theme. Played in a rather low register, this string section compounds and reinforces the dark and mournful colors of the theme (example 5.18).

Example 5.18 L’Adorazione dei Magi: String parts (starting from m.6 after rehearsal no. 15)
Episode III

The next section *Moderato*, is in G-sharp minor, the (minor) dominant key of C sharp minor, and in 5/4 time (rehearsal no. 17). In this episode, in addition to a substantial change in key, tempo, and meter, the instrumentation of this section contrasts dramatically with the previous section, therefore turning the scene into a new one (example 5.19).

Led by the strings, with a repeating ostinato throughout the section in the lower register, the music of the *Moderato* section starts with a dark and mysterious color, emphasizing the solemnity of the occasion. Moreover, its march-like rhythm also develops into a new atmospheric scene. This is the first time that the music is given a definite rhythmic pulse, one that possibly symbolizes the journey of the Magi from the orient. The celesta, triangle, piano, and harp contribute to the uniquely colorful and exotic characters in this section, before the melody is picked up by flute and bassoon. The oboe is next to take up the melody, adding a more ‘oriental’ and chromatic flavor against the background of the string’s ostinato. Finally, the entire orchestra joins in, providing a more intense dynamic and richer texture until the music gradually recedes. Although this section is rather short, its exotic character is impressive and extraordinary, making it highly memorable.
Example 5.19 L’Adorazione dei Magi (rehearsal no. 17)
**Episode IV**

The next episode, *Più mosso* (rehearsal no. 18), is even more colorful and charming (example 5.20). The mode changes to A-flat major (the enharmonic of G-sharp minor of the previous section). The new melody expresses a tender and affectionate character. This time, the melodic role is given to the violin, playing a beautifully thrilling melody in very high register containing arabesque-like ornamental figures. This is then picked up and answered by the oboe, bassoon, and flute. Other orchestra members join in, each taking its unique role in accompanying the sweet melody, infusing the music with distinctive colors. This section seems perfectly balanced, demonstrating the composer’s exquisite orchestration and mastery of poetic emotion through various musical devices.
Example 5.20 L’Adorazione dei Magi (rehearsal no. 18)
**Episode V**

The music, however, soon turns to another ‘scene’ in G-flat major and in 6/8 meter. The melody is borrowed from an Italian Christmas carol, *Tu scendi dalle stelle* (You Who Come Down from the Stars). It is first played by bassoon, before being picked up by oboe:

*Example 5.21 L’Adorazione dei Magi: Bassoon part (mm. 4–16 after rehearsal no. 20)*

While the oboe is taking over the Italian carol theme, the bassoon echoes it with motivic idea from the first theme at the beginning of the work (example 5.22).

*Example 5.22 L’Adorazione dei Magi: Woodwind parts (rehearsal no. 21)*
Fragments of the previous motifs appear in this section to answer the carol theme, which includes the oboe echoing in the first section, as well as the flute arabesque.

Finally, the opening bassoon theme returns in the same unaccompanied way at rehearsal no. 22, symmetrically ending the movement with the evocative emotion conveyed in the beginning:

*Example 5.23 L’Adorazione dei Magi: Flute and bassoon parts (rehearsal no. 22)*
Discussion

Like *Primavera*, this movement demonstrates Respighi’s vivid use of composition techniques to represent a visual art form, particularly that of an pre-modern culture. One of his outstanding techniques is his juxtaposition of various colors and timbres of instruments to convey images through unique and exquisite tone colors. Unlike other large-scale orchestral works of the same period, Respighi’s music does not require a huge orchestra to do this. For example, he made use of the acoustic characteristics of flute, oboe, clarinet, and bassoon—the traditional rustic instruments—to provoke an extraordinary poetic atmosphere in the music. These instrumental colors induce a pastoral and rural quality that perfectly matches the background and the mood of Botticelli’s depiction of *L’Adorazione dei Magi*. However, in contrast to the conventional orchestral practice of the Classical or Romantic eras, he abandoned the usual reliance on the string section for primary melodic functions. Instead, he allowed the woodwind and brass section to depict the scene of the adoration of the birth of Jesus Christ in a rural and pastoral environment, while the string instruments often taking an accompanying role. This also provides an audible contrast to the previous movement, in which the string section plays a much more prominent role in depicting the aural background of *Primavera*.

When analyzing Respighi’s orchestration, one would not forget the charm of the third episode (rehearsal no. 17), where his mastery of percussion and keyboard instruments give this episode an exquisite favor. It injects his music with unique

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36 Like Igor Stravinsky, Respighi studied orchestration with Nikolai Rimskii-Korsakov (1844-1908), and was an orchestral violin player himself.
exoticism that is perhaps best used to describe the appearance of the oriental kings, the apparent key characters of Botticelli’s *L’Adorazione dei Magi*. Not only does this enhance the beauty of the music, it also vividly depicts the scene of the coming of the Magi from ‘exotic’ countries. He tactfully manipulated the sensuous and exotic colors of various percussive instruments against the background of the march-like ostinato. The various musical devices are perfectly juxtaposed and interwoven to describe the scene of holy adoration. Again, Respighi’s highly imaginative instrumentation is evident in his decision to employ various timbres and colors of the instruments, as well as other musical elements. Respighi’s reputation as a supreme master of the orchestra has never been disputed, however unfashionable his music may sometimes appear to academics.

Through the adoption of pre-existing recognized tunes, including *Veni Veni Emmanuel* and *Tu scendi dalle stelle*, Respighi again displayed his intent to draw a kind of direct association to the meaning of the existing artworks. Similar to his reference to Vivaldi’s music in *Primavera*, Respighi provided “for the identification of the subject matter of this movement a cue that is as unambiguous (and less learned) than the Vivaldi quotation in the first movement.”37 At the same time, Respighi also added to it his own treatment of the quoted tune, such as “composing an original counterpoint and avoiding the most predictable melodic formulas, thus allowing the popular component to blend harmoniously into his orchestral piece.”38 This kind of musical paraphrase has also helped in bringing the music (as well as the painting) created in the past into the present,

38 Ibid.
through his various twentieth-century treatments of the traditional tunes. More than that, the Italian Christmas carol, *Tu scendi dalle stelle*, further establishes a connection to the Italian national characteristics, through which Respighi’s work implicitly associated with the Italian painting, since people outside Italy would be unlikely to recognize it.

Respighi’s music offers other musical characterizations, including the arabesque figures, *siciliana* rhythm, and chromatically-inflected melody—all of which are intentionally arranged to depict the emotional appeal of the painting. Besides, the harmonization of the thematic material is mostly subtle and minimal. Accompaniment in this movement, if present (as some of the themes are unaccompanied), could be as simple as just the tonic or dominant pedal point providing very minimal harmonic support. Otherwise, the melody is often ‘harmonized’ with its dominant forming a perfect fifth interval in the style of organum. In general, the transparency and simplicity in texture synchronize with the textual characteristics of ‘ancient’ music, such as plainchant and folk song (at least, as they are popularly characterized). Respighi again added in aspects of styles of pre-Common Practice Period music in order to bring the listeners to an environment simulated by the paintings of Botticelli.

The overall reference to a style of plaint chant characterizes much of the thematic material, further injecting a touch of Renaissance flavor. For example, the bassoon theme in the opening section harmonically goes nowhere and repeatedly returns to the tonic (example 5.24). The motivic figure actually repeats three times, adding further embellishment with every repetition, before finally
returning to C-sharp. Such a static and non-directional motion of the theme enhances the sense of loneliness and mournfulness that connotes to the pastoral character of the painting, foreshadowing the coming of Jesus in our world.

![Example 5.24 L’Adorazione dei Magi: Bassoon part (mm.1–4 at the opening)](image)

As in *Primavera*, Respighi showed his preference for using various thematic or motivic materials to depict different aspects of the painting. The great varieties of thematic materials in this movement also earn credit in creating a descriptive musical work within such a concise length. Each of these themes in different sections acts as a musical signifier that helps to symbolize a visual aspect of the painting. Table 5.25 summarizes his use of various thematic materials and the representation of the pictorial elements in various sections:
Table 5.25 L’Adorazione dei Magi: Thematic Materials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Episode</th>
<th>Thematic materials / Musical elements (Signifier)</th>
<th>Representation of Painting (Signified)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Bassoon Theme – Modal, <em>siciliana</em> rhythm, chromatic melodies, unaccompanied texture</td>
<td>Pastoral, rural setting, Renaissance, mournfulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Opening)</td>
<td>See image for notation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Flute Arabesque – arabesque figure, embellishments, chromatic</td>
<td>Exotic, folk-like gesture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Opening)</td>
<td>See image for notation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>Veni Veni Emmanuel Theme – Quotation of chant, <em>Veni Veni Emmanuel</em></td>
<td>Religious moment, solemnity, the birth of Jesus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(RN 14)</td>
<td>See image for notation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>Ostinato March – String ostinato with percussive elements, including celeste, triangle, harp and piano, takes up part of the melody</td>
<td>More exoticism, 'oriental' favor, arrival of the kings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(RN 17)</td>
<td>See image for notation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>New theme in A-flat major, played by treble instruments, including violin and flute</td>
<td>Affectionate atmosphere, a kind of warm and passionate emotion – symbolizing the birth of Jesus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(RN 18)</td>
<td>See image for notation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>Carol Theme – Quotation of Italian Christmas Carol</td>
<td>Delightful and joyous mood – Celebration of the birth of the new-born King</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(RN 20)</td>
<td>See image for notation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Once the association between the thematic materials (signifier) and their relevant representations (signified) is established, it reveals two important aspects worth discussing here. First, it appears that the five episodes of the music are arranged in a somewhat teleological order, implying that there may be a plot in composer’s mind. The first episode provokes the desired pastoral atmosphere that is visible in the painting, as well as depicting the setting of the rural scene of the birth of Jesus. The second episode starts with the citation of *Veni Veni Emmanuel*, which explicitly helps to inform listeners about the religious occasion, particularly related to the birth of Jesus Christ. Next, the contrasting exotic character and ostinato marching rhythm of the third episode portrays the ‘Kings of the Orient’ arriving to adore the new-born King. The fourth episode is characterized by the affectionate themes, conveying spirited and passionate emotions that suggest the touching moment of Jesus’ birth. Finally, before the music ends, the citation of Italian Christmas carol helps to inform us about joy of Christmas that signifies the celebration of the birth. The various chronologically linked scenes therefore depict the story of the adoration of the Magi at the birth of Jesus as revealed in the painting of Botticelli.

Apart from an implication of narrativity (which I will discussed in detail in next chapter), the relevant symbolic meanings of each of the thematic materials exhibit the subject-oriented aspects of this musical description. As summarized in table 5.25, most of the themes, in fact, correspond to specific emotions or the mood of the painting. In other words, Respighi translated the visual elements into relevant emotions and moods via different thematic materials and musical
elements. In doing this, he is also *depicting* the emotional reality of things that have been shown to occur in the visual artwork.
**La Nascita di Venere (The Birth of Venus)**

**Background**

*La Nascita di Venere* was commissioned by the Medici Family after the completion of *Primavera* and *L’Adorazione dei Magi*. It shares a similar mythological background with *Primavera*, in that Venus is the central subject, representing the theme of love. It has been said that *La Nascita di Venere* is the expression of love in a newer form, where “the idea of love first given painted form in the *Primavera* naturally required a new style for its expression, the lineaments of which reached their full form in Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus.*”

Unlike *Primavera*, in *La Nascita di Venere*, Venus does “not appear as the humble garden goddess she was for the primitive peoples [such as in *Primavera*] but resplendently nude and in her Classical form, in fact so shown for the first time since antiquity.”

Painted in a slightly smaller size than *Primavera* on canvas, *La Nascita di Venere* was found together with *Primavera* in Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco’s villa at Castello in the sixteenth century. Frederick Hartt explained in his book *History of Italian Renaissance Art* that:

> Although the Birth of Venus corresponds to a passage in Poliziano’s *La giostra*, Ernst Gombrich related to Fincino’s interpretation of the mythical birth of the full-grown Venus from the sea, who had been fertilized by the severed genitals of her father Uranus. Fincino interpreted this birth as an allegory of the birth of beauty in the mind of humanity. Botticelli has

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39 Dempsey, "Botticelli, Sandro," online.
40 Ibid.
41 The size of *La Nascita di Venere* is 1.72m×2.78 m while Primavera is 2.03m×3.14 m.
42 Poliziano was also under the patronage of Medici. *La giostra* is a poem in Italian written upon Giuliano de’ Medici’s victory in a tournament. It was written between the years of 1475 and 1478.
created from the myth an image of grace and beauty which in composition can be likened to the traditional format of the scene of St. John baptizing Christ.43

The classic and heavenly beauty of Venus is what was made Botticelli’s *La Nascita di Venere* so attractive and everlasting. It was generally believed that the source of the scene of *La Nascita di Venere* is derived from the Neo-Platonist myth on the creation of nature. As described by Santi,

> Humanitas is about to be created by Nature, while the life-giving spirit, united with matter, gives it vital force and the Hour (or Time), symbolizing the historic moment of humanity, offers her [Venus] the cloak which will make her ‘modest’ and able to distribute goodness….44

In the painting, Venus is featured on a big seashell, indicating a movement from the sea to the shore (figure 5.26). Positioned at the centre of the painting plane, Venus dominates with “an imposing yet modest and somewhat aloof figure.”45 Zephyr and Aura, a heroic group of winds representing the life-giving spirits, are on her right blowing her to the shore, where Hour, one of the attendants of Venus, is holding a robe for Venus, as she awaits her arrival (figure 5.27). The sea surface is rough, flowers are floating in the air. A heavenly yet poetic scene is portrayed for the arrival of Venus:

> Botticelli dreams fantastic arabesques, slow and continuous dance-rhythms, the gracefulness of line; and he knows how to realize them in their function of relief and movement. Nothing can take from his line its contemplative value, its fairy-like delicacy, even when it is based on natural vision. And natural vision thus becomes the form of his dream.46

43 Hartt and Wilkins, 380.
44 Santi, 31-32.
46 Venturi, 5.
Through various visual treatments, Botticelli leads the audience to experience the dynamic motion of the painting. By appreciating the flying motion of her robe and hair, the floating of flowers in the air, and the waving of the sea, we can feel the movement of the air as well as the gentle sea breeze. Even though Venus has no action in the painting, we can still sense the strong energy of the picture.

Figure 5.26 Sandro Botticelli: La Nascita di Venere (The Birth of Venus), tempera on canvas, 1.72×2.78 m, c. 1485 (Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi)\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{47} Venturi, 9.
The overall mood of the painting is elegant, charming, and yet simple. The colors are soft and delightful. There is no exaggeration or excessive elaboration of details and colors, thus avoiding the overflow of expression. It is exactly its simplicity that arouses the viewer’s sympathy towards the painting. Despite its ingenious approach, Botticelli’s precision is still found in the details, including the melancholy expression of Venus (figure 5.28), the waves of the sea, the flower pattern of the robe, and the golden hair of Venus. Santi, again, commented that:

Remarkable is the way in which the delicate colors of dawn are portrayed in the flesh-tones of the figures rather than in the background, and in the colors of the clothing, so delicate and enlivened by the decorations of cornflowers and daisies. The optimism of the Humanist myth is here blended harmoniously with the calm melancholy so typical of Botticelli’s art.48

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48 Santi, 32.
As in the other two paintings of Botticelli discussed here, the layout of the painting follows a triptych format—the nude Venus is placed at the central panel, while Zephyr and Aura are on the left, and Hour on the right:

Venus is framed by the surrounding figures, two hovering over the sea and one on land, but she is isolated from them and from the viewer. On the one hand, she relates formally to each set of figures—tilting her head toward the winds while her hair flows toward the woman with the drapery; on the other, she occupies the private space of the scallop shell. Its unnaturally large size, along with her inward gaze, endows the painting with a dream-like quality that has never been fully explained.49

Elements of the painting therefore are presented and correlated with each other proportionally and systematically, thereby creating integration and unity.

49 Adams, 114.
The Music

This movement is a delicately colored piece in 6/4 time, predominantly in the key of E major. Unlike the previous two movements in which the music is rich in varieties of thematic materials, the musical materials of this movement are rather minimal, or perhaps economical. The concise use of thematic materials generates the unity of the piece, which sets it apart from the other two movements.

The music starts with repetition of dotted tremolo-like figure on two neighboring notes (example 5.29). Being one of the signature musical elements in this movement, this ‘breeze-like’ tremolo figure prevails throughout the entire piece, infusing the music with a sense of motion and vitality:

Example 5.29 La Nascita di Venere: String parts (mm. 1–3 at the opening)

There are two major themes in this movement. After an introduction of two-bar trills, the first melody (Theme A) appears subtly in cello, celesta, and harp. This long melodic phrase (example 5.30), a highly recognizable melody, returns in a later section, after which, it prevails throughout the latter part of the music.
This theme is then answered by flute with an arabesque-like melody. It is followed by clarinet, playing another arabesque melody marked with ‘*come un soffio*’ (meaning ‘like a breath’):

*Example 5.31 La Nascita di Venere: Clarinet part (mm. 4–5 after rehearsal no. 23)*

With its twisting and swirling figures, this ‘*come un soffio*’ arabesque inspires us to imagine Zephyr and Aura, whose *breath* blows Venus to the shore, as demonstrated in the painting.

The second, completely new, pentatonic theme (Theme B) of modal character arises in the flute, clarinet, celesta, and harp, while the strings section is still playing the tremolo-like figures (with cello playing the pedal point of C-sharp) as the background (example 5.32). This pentatonic melody comprises of two short figures, the second actually being a transposed figure of the first. Flute and clarinet arabesques then follow (also in a transposed key) as a response to this
new modal theme, while the horn rounds off this section with the motif of the main theme (Theme A).

*Example 5.32 La Nascita di Venere (mm. 8–11 after rehearsal no. 23)*

A new section marked *Un poco animato* follows, with new key signature of A-flat major (rehearsal no. 25). This melodic theme is actually a modified and transposed version of Theme B (example 5.33). This time it is played by flute, clarinet, piano, cello, and double bass, accompanied by all the other instruments (bassoon, horn, trumpet, harp, violin, and viola). The breeze-like tremolo figures are still played by the string instruments (violin and viola parts), while the arabesque figures respond to the theme once again. In other words, the same melodic materials are now being heard in a new key, with more intense texture and animated tempo. Further markings of *animato* and *crescendo* on the score help reinforce the vitality of the music through enhanced dynamics and lively tempo.

*Example 5.33 La Nascita di Venere (rehearsal no. 25)*
This intensification of the music continues, as in addition to Theme B getting more intense, Theme A comes back in the *Più mosso* section (example 5.34). This time the roles of strings and the woodwinds are reversed. The string instruments are responsible for the main melody (Theme A), while the woodwind plays the tremolo figure. A substantial crescendo is maintained, the music is gradually building up to the final climax. During this process, the tonality returns to E major and the tempo and dynamic levels become even more lifted up (the composer marked *animato a sempre crescendo* here). The texture is thickened; celesta, harp, and piano are involved more actively to support the heightened emotions. Finally, the music gradually slows down and subsides before the marking of *Tempo I*, where the coda begins and the trill tremolo of the first section returns.

In the coda, there is no new material. It starts with the same strings’ breeze-like tremolo figures, softly and gently, as at the beginning of this movement. Theme A appears in cello, while the string tremolo continues lightly as a background before a shortened statement of Theme B comes back. The harp responds to it with a series of E major arpeggios. Finally, only the tremolo figure remains, and gradually it diminishes and fades.
Example 5.34 La Nascita di Venere: Più mosso (mm. 10–17 after rehearsal no. 25)
Discussion

Respighi did not create as many thematic or melodic materials in *La Nascita di Venere* as in the previous two movements. In this movement, there are only two major themes (Theme A and Theme B) and two prevailing motifs (the tremolo and the arabesque motifs). The orchestration of this piece is also rather economical and far less complex than *Primavera* and *L’Adorazione dei Magi*. However, the conciseness in thematic materials and orchestration does not diminish the artistry and charm of this movement. Rather, if we compare the music with the painting, it is evident that simplicity, gracefulness and an unexaggerated manner matches the artworks of the two media well, confirming that the charm of Botticelli’s simplicity has been transposed in Respighi’s work, one that excels with a similar charm of modesty.

Even though there are very few thematic materials in *La Nascita di Venere*, the thoughtful designs and arrangement of thematic materials are evident, making this work a unified and well-structured one. One of the key motifs in this movement is the opening tremolo figure, which pervades throughout the entire movement, acting as a ‘sound wall’ for the background of the thematic materials, or setting a *scene* for the other musical description. Metaphorically, it illustrates a kind of gentle movement of air, or as a kind of aural iconicity to describe the light breeze, as suggested on the painting. It also helps to portray a musical *space* in which the main characters act. The painting conveys the presence of gentle breeze through the floating of flowers and the way Venus’ hair and robe fly in the
air. In fact, I agree with Bruhn’s observation that this string tremolo figure is possibly borrowed from Vivaldi’s *La Primavera*. Bruhn posited that the second movement of Vivaldi’s *La Primavera* is similar to Respighi’s *Primavera* with respect to string accompaniment and the pitches employed. Again, Respighi has explicitly drawn an association between his and Vivaldi’s work, so as to convey the intended topic to the ‘educated’ listeners and provide a cognitive frame for understanding his work. In doing so, he has adopted what Wolf has called an *inter-musical* reference.

Bruhn has noted other similarities between *Primavera* and *La Nascita di Venere*, including that both movements are written in E major. Bruhn regarded this as a symmetrical approach, as Respighi has intentionally drawn a tonal connection between the first and third movement, both of which convey mythological content of the painting, as opposed to the biblical content of the second movement.⁵⁰ According to Bruhn, Respighi intended to “call the listener’s attention to the inner connection of the two Venus-centered paintings: their related mythological and allegorical background and their shared protagonists (besides Venus herself also the springtime-suggesting Zephyr).”⁵¹ Bruhn’s inference does make sense here. However, irrespective of Respighi’s intention, the tonality of E major is also historically used for music of religious and spiritual character (as I discussed in the case of Liszt’s *Sposalizio*), which certainly fits best as a musical symbolic signifier to connote to the mythological content of the two paintings.

⁵⁰ Although the second movement is in the relative minor of the first and third movements (C-sharp minor).
The musical depictions of the painting are also visible through other thematic materials. The flute and clarinet arabesques serve as aural metaphors, or more specifically, the iconic and metaphorical illustration of the breath of Zephyr (as Respighi himself marked this *come un soffio*—like a breath). Together with the exotic pentatonic Theme B, they give an aural reference to a Renaissance art via their modal characteristics. Respighi’s treatment of modality in the first and second movements is similar, where the flood of modal qualities keeps reminding the listeners on the Renaissance character of the scenes in the painting.

In addition, the rhythm of the melodic materials also projects a Renaissance dance style, which acts as another symbolic connotation to describe the mood and character of the painting. Melodic notes of the 6/4 meter are sometimes grouped as compound duple and sometimes simple triple time (3+3 or 2+2+2). This hemiolic gesture, as in the previous two movements, occurs frequently and sometimes alters from one bar to next. Bruhn points out that this hemiolic ambiguity occurs not only in horizontal line, but also “as vertical juxtaposition, whereby a segment of the melodic line that is heard as metrically defined in one way is superimposed over a metrically differing segment of the Vivaldi accompaniment [the tremolo figure in strings part].”\textsuperscript{52} This further exemplifies the level of detail in Respighi’s music, which may be perceived as ‘simple’ at first glance. However, when one looks into the music more deeply, many precise and thoughtful metaphoric illustrations emerge.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
The dramatic development towards the climax in this movement is also designed in a way to depict the *arrival* of Venus. The intensification starts at ‘*un poco animato*’ (rehearsal no. 25), where there is a gentle increase in tempo and dynamics. The texture is then thickened with additional parts adding to the melody and accompaniment. While the music moves forward to the *più mosso* section, the composer adds in the first theme (Theme A), while the accompaniment figures are further enhanced by adding additional instruments. The music finally bursts into a heightened emotion that acoustically and metaphorically illustrates the arrival of Venus to this world, not just emotionally but also physically from the sea to the shore. The louder dynamic and intensive texture metaphorically represent this action of the character approaching the listener. This corresponds to Venus being blown by Zephyr’s wind to the shore, as depicted in the painting. Emotionally, Respighi was especially touched and aroused by the visual stimulation of having the Goddess of Love arrive in this world. In his music, the intensification of the passionate emotions is a reflection of his emotional response towards the painting of Botticelli, or in particular towards the arrival of Venus, who symbolizes sacred love and beauty.
SUMMARY

As stated earlier, this case study of Respighi’s *Trittico Botticelliano* aims to show how the composer achieved musical descriptivity, particularly in both the object-centered and subject-centered aspects. This, in turn, increases our understanding of descriptivity in music as a semiotic mode of representation, and helps us comprehend an all-rounded perspective of the descriptive potential in music. In addition, I have tried to evaluate to what extent Respighi’s work can achieve a ‘higher’ form of art, according to the ideal of *Kunstkritik*, by transposing the visual elements from the original source and adding into unique features at the same time.

Regarding object-centered descriptivity in Respighi’s work, it is not surprising to find that there are actually very few adoptions of aural iconicity, or direct imitation of the sounds of physical world. Nonetheless, there are still aural iconicities found in Respighi’s work that help creating affiliation between the musical elements and the physical objects. In *Primavera* and *La Nascita di Venere*, the opening trills act as the iconic musical signs that imitate the natural phenomena of the physical world. On one hand, they imitate the gentle wind or sea breeze, as depicted or implied in the painting. On the other hand, they are also understood as a symbol for spring and its vitality, especially with reference to Vivaldi’s *La Primavera*. Moreover, the arabesque figures in *La Nascita di Venere* iconically imitate the blowing of wind by Zephyr and Aura. Its twisting figures
imitate the swirling movement of air in nature, which has been explicitly delivered through the strokes as well as the frozen movement of Botticelli’s painting.

Apart from the direct iconic imitations, Respighi has adopted several other musical descriptive mechanisms to represent the related object-centered aspects of Botticelli’s paintings. Firstly, the quotations of musical elements from established works and tunes from traditional music help to convey the intended object or topic, as well as the relevant moods and emotions. They serve as a frame of reference for listeners to understand the meaning of the musical works. As I have discussed, Respighi borrowed the tremolo/trill figures from Vivaldi’s La Primavera in the first movement to depict Botticelli’s painting of the spring. He also quoted the famous tunes—such as the troubadour song A l’entrede del tens clar, Veni Veni Emmanuel, and the Italian Christmas carol, Tu scendi dalle stele—to depict the images associated with the visual elements and the atmosphere of La Primavera and L’Adorazione dei Magi. This kind of inter-musical reference generates the referential meaning that helps to represent the picture more vividly and concretely, as opposed to other types of musical description that rely on metaphorical or symbolic signs. The borrowing of musical reference not only helps to draw an association with the musical topic, it also imports all the related emotional attributes that have already been established in and attached to the original works. Although listeners are required to possess a certain degree of understanding of the quoted works, these famous tunes do not require a very sophisticated level of musical knowledge or experience.
The quotation of existing works contributes to providing interpretants to Respighi’s work, and serves as a reference for the listener to understand the meaning of the work. As a result, Respighi’s music achieves a more concrete and precise description despite the abstractive nature of musical signs. This is similar to the function of a programmatic title that also functions as an intermedial reference for a descriptive musical work. The references to title and musical quotations indeed help to offer a context for listeners to understand the meaning of the work. More importantly, this context serves to create a framework for other abstractive musical descriptive signs, such as metaphor or symbolic connotations, to deliver their meanings. With the reference to title or pre-existing works, it would be easier for listeners to ‘decode’ the meanings of other abstractive musical signs of the same work.

Other stylistic references found in the work also contribute to the generation of musical meaning. For example, imitations of the Medieval and Renaissance music styles, or allusions to folk or vernacular music, help describe the setting, as well as the mood of the painting. For example, Respighi heavily adopted metaphorical and symbolic descriptive devices to illustrate the visual style and background of the painting. To convey its Renaissance character, he used modal melodies extensively in his three movements of music. He also skillfully incorporated the hemiolic rhythm to depict a kind of Renaissance dance style. Moreover, the transparent and polyphonic textures further add to a favor of medieval musical style in his work. All these demonstrate Respighi’s extensive knowledge of the styles of early music (at least as understood in the 1920s) and his masterful usage of these stylistic elements in drawing a symbolic association
with the style of the painting. As Respighi himself was a devoted musicologist, he was also an enthusiastic scholar of music of sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. It is therefore not surprising that his knowledge of Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque music served as inspiration for and contributed to his style through combining early modes with new harmonic language of his time.53

Respighi’s use of instrumentation is another remarkable device for his musical descriptions. As shown in this work, he tactically employed different instruments not only to produce special timbral effects but also to create meanings. He was familiar with the conventions and symbolic meaning of different instruments, and he used this signification to further draw an association with the style and elements of the painting. He also explored different timbres and tone colors of various instruments. For example, he relied on the ‘rustic’ instruments to create the pastoral scene of Primavera, and his use of horn signified the announcement of the coming of spring, as it is conventionally used as a ‘message transferal instrument’ in hunting. More importantly, instead of writing for a full-scale, post-Romantic orchestra, such as the one he used in Pines of Rome, the use of chamber orchestra in the three movements of Trittico Botticelliano may perhaps reflect Respighi’s intention of creating a more transparent timbral effects that reflect the style and mood of the painting.

Structurally, each of the three movements is cast in a somewhat ternary structure, which synchronizes with the triptych layout of each Botticelli’s painting. As we have discussed, Botticelli’s placement of the visual elements in each of his

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53 Whether Respighi’s ‘Medieval’ or ‘Renaissance’ music bears any real connection to the historical styles of those periods is not relevant here. For his references to succeed, Respighi needs only to conjure up an association with such styles.
paintings follows a triptych plan, with the key figure(s) placed in the central position and the other characters evenly distributed on either side, similar to the two panels of the triptych wings. By adopting this ternary structure in his music, Respighi simulated the physical layout and the symmetrical style of Botticelli’s paintings.

With respect to the subjective aspect of Respighi’s musical representation, the description of moods, or his emotional interpretation of the visual work, is still an essential part of the music. In Respighi’s work, he vividly depicted the moods of each of Botticelli’s three paintings, and created unique atmosphere that allows us to experience the various scenes Botticelli depicted in his art. For example, in *Primavera*, the joy and delight of spring is apparent in the music, through its various musical elements—including tonality, thematic materials, and rhythmic patterns. The music conveys a kind of vitality and joyfulness that leads the listeners to experience the miracle of nature as well as the joy of the new season. Once the strings tremolo begins, the spirit is lifted up and one can visualize the dancing of the goddesses in the forest. In *L’Adorazione dei Magi*, the extraordinary exoticism that one can experience in the music is actually delivered by its modal themes and other stylistic elements adopted from Renaissance music, as I have already discussed. Listeners would be immediately drawn to the unique exotic atmosphere of the music, and visualize the arrival of the Magi from the East to worship the king. The solemnity and grandeur of a religious ceremony are also conveyed. Finally, the enchanting atmosphere in *La Nascita di Venere* results from a combination of various musical signifiers, which create a beautiful picture of the arrival of Venus. In fact, as discussed in relation to each movement,
we can see that Respighi has put great effort in designing the atmospheric characters to achieve the scenic depiction of each of the paintings. He draws upon all musical elements and compositional techniques to create the emotional reality the paintings convey, and his ability to simultaneously depict both the physical and emotional aspects of the painting helps his work provide a more concrete and vivid description of the paintings.

From this discussion of Respighi’s work, we can see how he managed to depict both the physical and subjective aspects of the painting, achieving a more definite content, as inspired by the paintings. Unlike Liszt’s *Sposalizio*, which contains solely the description of the subjective aspect of the painting, Respighi put more effort into presenting the external aspects of the painting. He accomplished this through the use of different musical signs and elements (although he used very few direct iconic imitations), as well as by borrowing music from other existing musical works that have already acquired a particular symbolic meaning. With a more balanced adoption of a definition of musical description in both its objective and subjective aspects, the pictures depicted in Respighi’s work prove to be more vivid.

As I have discussed in chapter three (on *Tonmalerei* and *Kunstkritik*), the description of physical object or phenomenon in music has to serve a musical purpose; and this musical purpose is often an expression of emotions or sentiments, that offers music as an art medium a unique position amongst other arts. Music has its unique role in delivering the subjectivities of human being; thus, Respighi’s music could be perceived as a new form of art in terms of
enhanced aesthetic values (as opposed to the original source of art). As a result, even though Respighi put more effort in delivering the objective aspect of the painting, the subjective descriptions have never been undermined. The atmospheric description in Respighi’s work is still a significant part. The reference to objects in a descriptive piece of music is to provide a reference for meaning, so that the listener is able to understand the composer’s intent more clearly and feel the same way that the composer feels. In other words, the priority has always been given to the description of emotional aspects, while artfully incorporating the description of the object. In fact, Respighi’s use of various musical signs to evoke images and emotions related to the scene of Botticelli’s paintings are prominent and multifarious. His music encourages listeners to experience the subjective states in Botticelli’s paintings, and therefore succeeds in depicting their emotional reality. Ultimately, this achieves the aesthetic purpose of description—to ‘produce an image for the mind’s eye’—whereby his work becomes an enhanced (if not better) form of art.

Finally, one interesting finding in Respighi’s work, particularly in his *L’Adorazione dei Magi*, is its implicit narrative aspect suggested by the teleological arrangement of different scenes derived from the painting. As I have discussed, a sequential and logical arrangement of various thematic materials and sections is evident in the music—from the lead-in background for setting the scene, to the arrival of the Magi and the birth of Jesus. In large-scale musical works on extra-musical topics, there is often a narrative implication. In the next chapter, I shall explore this narrative perspective in more detail, particularly on how it could assist us in understanding the descriptive potential in music.
Description and narration are two related but distinct genres of discourse. Between the two, narratives have been thoroughly studied in linguistics whereas description is comparatively less researched. In musical studies, however, most previous music researches have neglected even to define and to distinguish clearly between narrative and descriptive forms of music. Music scholars generally use the term ‘narrative’ to describe all musical works that relate to extra-musical topics, regardless of whether narratives are actually involved. Some of these ‘narrative’ musical works may not be narratives in the literary sense, and some may even be descriptive. Owing to the fact that both description and narrative involve referential aspects of musical signs, a discussion of musical narrativity will add to our understanding of the referential potential of music, and reveal the deeper nature of music as a medium of description.

Formalists and structuralists in the social sciences, especially in linguistics, were the first to advocate the study of narrative. Their collective aim was to understand cultures through studies of patterned narrative activities. It was not until the late twentieth century that scholars started to explore the possibility of narrativity in instrumental music, aiming to uncover an alternative to technical analysis for the understanding of musical meaning that had been adopted in the previous centuries. In the 1970s and 1980s, numerous scholars—including Carolyn Abbate, Jean-Jacques Nattiez, Susan McClary, Anthony Newcomb, Eero Tarasti,
and Lawrence Kramer—examined various aspects of musical narrativity, borrowing concepts of narrative theory from literary studies. As Nattiez stated, the concept of narrative originated in literature, and “there is a clear ontological difference between literary narrative and musical narrative, [such] that we cannot tackle the question of narrativity in music without taking literary narrative as a point of reference.”

**Key Concepts of the Narrative Approach in Music**

Narrative is commonly found in all forms of human art. Like description, narration is also one of the major rhetorical modes of discourse, one that connects a sequence of events or actions in an organized and logical way. Claude Bremond, a French semiotic and narrative scholar defined “all narrative consists of a discourse which integrates a sequence of events of human interest into the unity of a single plot.” In literature, a narrative work is usually comprised of **core narratemes**, “the intracompositional factors that render texts and artefact narratives and determine their degree of narrativity.” Core narratemes do not only include time, actions, or events, anthropomorphic characters, but also causality, teleology, and chronology that help to organize and connect the actions

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or events in a reasonable and meaningful way.\textsuperscript{4} In a narrative work, there involves simultaneously a linear orientation in which various events happen at different moments in time, and supposedly there are cause and effect relationships between these various events. To put it in another way, narrative therefore “presupposes anthropomorphic characters as promoters and experiences of multiphase actions that unfold in time, are causally interrelated and developed towards some teleological outcome.”\textsuperscript{5}

\textit{Plot and Agent}

In literary study, \textit{plot} is one of the key components in narrative, which helps to organize the actions and events in a logical manner. The literary definition of plot is “the pattern of events and situations in a narrative or dramatic work, as selected and arranged both to emphasize relationships—usually of cause and effect—between incidents and to elicit a particular kind of interest in the reader or audience, such as surprise or suspense.”\textsuperscript{6} Adopting this idea from literary narrativity, musicologists generally agree that plot is also a crucial component for a musical work to be a narrative one. Anthony Newcomb, an American musicologist who contributed extensively to the study of musical narrativity, talked about plot in his discussion of the narrative strategies in his well-known article, “Schumann and Late Eighteenth-Century Narrative Strategies.”\textsuperscript{7} Taking

\textsuperscript{4} Amongst all these core narratemes, the presence of character is most problematic in music, which I will discuss later.


a more structuralistic approach, he emphasized the importance of a plot paradigm that organizes those elements of narratives; and he pointed out that this plot paradigm actually resembles the formal patterns in music, in which the temporal nature of music allows events to unfold in a linear manner. Newcomb illustrated this by using Schumann’s String Quartet, Op. 41, No. 3 as the case study.

Newcomb’s idea of plot has also been supported by Douglass Seaton. Seaton suggested that for a musical work to be narrative, it should satisfy the two requirements of narrative that transcend artistic medium: plot and voice. He explained how these two factors achieve in musical narrativity:

Plot is established in instrumental music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by the definition of character through harmonic patterns of stability, rising tension, climax, resolution, and dénouement. Voice—the narrative persona—is created in various ways, sometimes embodied in musical forms but often, too, in verbal cues, in musical behaviors surrounding the performance and hearing of a work, or in reception.²

Plot therefore brings music elements together in various intensities and contributes to the formation of meaning. Like a metaphor, it links together all those unrelated elements in the formation of meaning.³ It provides a way of making sense of the world, or even creates that world. The idea of plot is in fact not new. Aristotle developed the first theory of narrative in his Poetics, where he pointed out that a good plot should have a beginning, middle, and an end; and its events should form a union by building connections between each event. There are often causal and teleological relationships in a plot that govern the sequences

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³ Klein, 116.
of events. This causality and teleology therefore differentiate narrative from just a collection of unrelated events or actions, which also sets up our expectations for the subsequent events/actions and develops the relationship between this chain of events. In music, the same causality and teleology are facilitated by musical elements including tonality, structure, texture, and harmony, and in cases such as “we are pulled along tonal pathways, and we anticipate events to come, encountering detours and obstacles which, in retrospect, have a logic of connection after all.”\textsuperscript{10} The temporal order in music therefore provides a favorable environment for the unfolding of events and the presence of plot.

Indeed, the idea of narrativity and musical plot provide new perspectives for understanding music. Listeners can rationalize musical works as story-like because they can find something \textit{like} actions, events, characters, and metaphors in music. Musical elements, such as themes, tonalities, repetitions, and variations, for example, can be imagined as characters or gestures, responses, motions, or emotions. As Seaton has pointed out, apart from plot, \textit{voice}, or the presence of a \textit{subject} (which he called “the narrative persona”) is also essential in developing the musical narration. Even Wolf recognized that there is some potential for music to ‘speak’ of some characters or actions, despite the fact that there are constraints in this medium in terms of representation. When he discussed the narrative potential of music, not only did he affirm the potential of teleology in music, he also admitted that there exits “the possibilities of suggesting experientiality”:

Through different ‘voices’ or instruments and their combination, juxtaposition, or opposition music can evoke something like individual

\footnote{\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.}
‘characters’ (through individual themes but also through the voices of polyphonic compositions); it can also suggest ‘events’, conflicts, and the overcoming of obstacles indicated by, for instance, surprising developments, sudden rests, and climatic progressions.  

The discussion of the presence of ‘voice’ in narrative music is complicated, and cannot be covered in great depth here. Scholars such as Lawrence Kramer have even more in-depth discussion on the presence of “persona” or musical narrator in narrative music. They all generally agreed that musical elements have some possibilities of representing characters or events. If these musical elements can represent characters or events in narrative music, the same referential capabilities should also be applied in descriptive works. However, in descriptive musical works, without the causality relationship implicit or explicit in narrative, it seems that the musical signifiers do not help in delivering clear and concrete descriptions. What are the fundamental differences, then, between description and narration, particularly in music as a medium of representation?

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**Anthony Newcomb’s Concepts for the Study of Musical Narrative**

In his article “The Polonaise-Fantasy and Issues of Musical Narrative,” Newcomb brought to our attention the two central aspects of musical narrative, one intra-musical and one extra-musical. On one hand, it is the elements or characteristics *within the music* that suggest or stimulate a narrative interpretation. In this sense, music should possess some internal properties that facilitate narrativity, not something extra-musical. On the other hand, narrativity involves the *listener or reader* who identifies and interprets the music narratively. It is the tendency of listeners to interpret the elements of music via a narrative approach, and they therefore might also act as a “gap-filler,” filling in the necessary missing parts of the plot that have not been suggested or implied by the composer. In this sense, the comprehension of musical works in a narrative manner is regarded as an *intentional* human action, a constructive activity through which we make sense of a musical work. Newcomb proposed that these are the two major perspectives that we should have taken when we discuss musical narrativity.

The intra-musical and extra-musical aspects of narrative that Newcomb raised (i.e. elements within music and the listener’s involvement) are illuminating for the study of musical narrativity, and reminding us of the major areas of concern when we discuss musical description. When discussing the internal aspects of music that give rise to musical narrativity, Newcomb placed great emphasis on the intra-musical elements, particularly the structural elements that lead to

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narrativity. Besides, he emphasized that “the narrative aspects within music may occasionally make direct reference to the world outside music (especially via direct imitation of sounds), but they are themselves purely musical.”

He reminded us to treat all musical references, particularly the musical imitations, from a musical point of view, even if a narrative approach is adopted. Musical narrativity is not a totally extra-musical subject. It is developed by musical means, which will be “different from and unobtainable by narratives in other media.” This medial specificity is worth our attention, particularly when we look at the issue from an intermedial point of view.

In his study of Chopin’s Polonaise-Fantasy, Op. 61, Newcomb further identified four major musical elements that would help a musical work to develop into a strong narrative quality. His concepts provided a very good model for the study of musical narratives. These four musical elements promoting narrative quality include, first, the formal segmentation and formal function of the segments; second, the rich patterning of thematic transformation, interrelation and deviation within a work; third, the generic and formal signals that evoke certain moods or culture that are implied with the genre or formal types of the musical world; and finally, the direct referential sounds that imitate the natural sounds of the world. (I have discussed the referentiality of natural sound in music through various descriptive devices in the chapter three.) Newcomb is by no means aiming to offer a theoretical framework for the study of musical narrativity, but his identification of the four areas of musical narrative concern do enlighten us on our study of narrative aspects of musical works.

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14 Ibid., 86. My emphasis.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 87-88.
Other Views on Musical Narrativity

Whether narrative is inherent in music, or due to the human intention of making sense of musical events, is always a controversial topic. Music scholars generally agreed that the temporal nature of music exhibits a nature similar to discourse, as both musical and verbal discourses are placed against the dimension of time. Nattiez described in this way:

Musical ‘discourse’ is placed in time. It comprises repetitions, returns, preparations, expectations, resolutions, and, on the level of melodic syntax, it is without doubt Leonard Meyer who has gone farthest with the inventory of what one might call techniques of continuity. One is tempted to speak of musical narrative on account of the existence of this syntactical and temporal dimension of music.¹⁷

Regarding the human intention of narrativization, Nattiez also admitted that we often take the initiate to reconstruct a narrative. Composers may purposefully lay down a chain of musical events in chronological order when composing, but Nattiez stressed “only when the listener decides to link the succession of sound events according to a plot does he build up the musical work as a narrative.”¹⁸

Kofi Agawu considered that there are various degrees of narrativity in musical works that are captured in traditional music analysis.¹⁹ There are numerous factors contributing to the degrees of musical narrativity. For example, the thematic or motivic processes, which repeat logically within a musical work, either in its exact or varied form, guide the listeners to experience a chain of

¹⁷ Nattiez, "Can One Speak of Narrativity in Music?" 244.
¹⁸ Ibid., 242.
“events” from moment to moment. Besides, the interpretation of tonal process of
departure and return, and the harmonic tension and resolution created throughout
the musical work, also conform to the logic of narrative. According to Agawu,
“music rules formed from habit, precedent, and convention serve as the
scaffolding for such an investigation, not a documentary or narrative impulse.”

Another musicologist, Susan McClary, who has also studied musical narrativity
comprehensively, claimed that “even the most austere, apparently self-contained
of the pieces produced within this repertory attain their coherence and effectively
as cultural artifacts through processes aligned with narrative.” She brought to
our attention how tonality helps to suggest narrativity, and states that the tonality
of each musical works sketches a teleological model of time organized in terms
of beginning, middle, and the end (at least in tonal music). It forms an overall
linear framework for the music and that various events, such as obstacles,
conflicts, surprises, anticipations, and delays, will occur while the tonalities
develop.

McClary persuasively argued that “classical instrumental music depends on two
interlocking narrative schemata, tonality and sonata,” and these schemata of
tonality and sonata persisted in European music for about two centuries, although
certain degrees of the transformation occurred in that period. In McClary’s
words, “the security of the tonal background makes possible the staged
confrontation and negotiation between many kinds of cultural dichotomies, which

20 Ibid., 104.
21 Susan McClary, “The Impromptu That Trod on a Loaf: or How Music Tells Stories,”
22 Susan McClary, "Narrative Agendas in ‘Absolute’ Music: Identity and Difference in Brahms’s
Third Symphony," in Musicology and Difference, ed. Ruth A. Solie (Berkeley, CA: University of
vary according to time and place.”  She studied narrativity in sonatas and found that the sonata procedure “focuses on the constitution of subjectivity out of dynamic processes of ‘becoming’ and unchanging, authentic interiority.” Therefore the tonal background and tonal progression of each musical work facilitate “the staged confrontation and negotiation” of various musical elements which in return make it possible for a narrative to be developed in a work.

McClary has written a very interesting case study on the narrative aspect of Schubert’s *Impromptu*, Op. 90, No. 2 in E-flat Major. She has compared Schubert’s Impromptu to a literary work—a fairy tale “The Little Girl Who Trod on a Loaf” by Hans Christian Anderson. She concluded:

> Clearly, the two [music and literature] differ enormously in the means they use to convey their plots: Anderson’s story is far more *concrete* with respect to characters and actions. Yet this is not to admit that music suffers in comparison, for what Schubert offers is great specificity of *affection* when we hear the piece, we aren’t simply *told* about events, but we actually experience blitheness, the exhilaration of motion, anxiety, a very long episode of unrelenting brutality, the pleasure of reconsolidation, and the unexpected and devastating return to hell, just when our ABA norms have all but ensured a happy ending.

McClary has in fact reminded us that although musical narrative could not convey a plot as definite as a literary one, yet the case study of Schubert’s Impromptu has informed us that music is of great specificity of *affection*. Listeners are not simply told about the events, but they experience the emotions and sentiments as if they are experiencing the events of the story. In this sense,

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24 Ibid., 23.
musical narrative should not be regarded as less effective when compared with a literary narrative. Again, McClary brought our attention to the unique positioning of music as a medium of affect.

Although many musicologists recognize the potential of musical narrativity, the extent to which narrativity helps to deliver musical meaning should not be overstated. Narrativity may not be inherent in music quite as much as some musicologists have proposed. Among scholars who have discussed about musical narratives, Carolyn Abbate is skeptical towards the narrativity of music. She suggested that people often mistake their own narrative intention of what they perceive in music’s temporal unfolding for music ‘itself’ narrating. Some scholars like Nattiez believed that the narrative is not in the music itself in strict sense, but “in the plot imagined and constructed by the listeners from functional objects.”26 He stated, “I have tried, in fact, to show that in itself, and as opposed to a great many linguistic utterances, music is not a narrative, that any description of its formal structures in terms of narrative is nothing but superfluous metaphor.”27 He further gave an example, “I may well hear a march in Mahler’s Second Symphony and imagine that it concerns a group of men, but I don’t know which men. The march can come closer and then recede, and two processions even, as in Ives’s Three Places in New England, may cross, but I don’t know where they have come from or where they are heading.”28

According to Nattiez, music has no semiological possibilities to link a subject to predicate. He emphasized the limitations of referentiality in music. Even if

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26 Nattiez, "Can One Speak of Narrativity in Music?" 257.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 244.
there are some degrees of narrativity to music, often they are fall into
“metaphorical illusion.” Nattiez quoted Edward Cone’s saying that “if music is
a language at all, it is a language of gesture: of direct actions, of pauses, of
startings and stoppings, of rise and falls, of tenseness and slackness...Instrumental
utterance, lacking intrinsic verbal content, goes so far as to constitute what might
be called a medium of pure symbolic gesture.” He pointed out that it is this
‘symbolic gesture’ that makes narrativity in music possible:

If, in listening to music, I am tempted by the ‘narrative impulse’, it is
indeed because, on the level of the strictly musical discourse, I recognize
return, expectations and resolutions, but of what, I do not know. Thus I
have a wish to complete through words what the music does not say
because it is not in its semiological nature to say it to me.... No doubt it is
for this reason that the word which appears in the writings of authors who
recognize in music a sort of ‘inferred narrativity’ is ‘gesture’.

Scholars who support the narrative approach to music also warn us not to explain
everything in music from a narrative perspective. Agawu explained, for example,
the excessive repetitions in music are sometimes unavoidable, and that they
might not aim for narrative purposes. In musical narrative, such repetitions, or
retellings, even though they vary in different forms and extent, are generally
necessary, partly because “the stance of music is very much geared to the
present, to the phenomenal moment, not to an unspecified future or to a past of
doubtful relevance.”

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29 Ibid.
164.
31 Ibid., 245.
32 Agawu, Music as Discourse, 104.
Michael Klein raised the problem of a narrow, literal definition of narrative as the representation of characters performing a sequence of actions. In music, there are often no definite characters. He also questioned the extent to which music can narrate. He stated, “overstated claims about music’s power to tell a real story often result from confusion over the extent of representation in music—its capacity to imitate the sounds of a limited number of real-world objects.”

As a result, he reminded us that “for many who study musical narrative, it is the expressive dramatic content of music that is the real object of analysis. The impulse to narrativize music is a motivation to find the expressive logic within both the individual composition and the repertoire that supports it.”

This is inline with Newcomb’s idea that we should always treat all these kinds of musical representation, whether or not a musical narration, from purely musical point of view.

We can see that the scholarly arguments over whether music is narrative by nature often touch on the question of representation or referentiality in music. Again, as I have discussed in the previous chapter on description, this debate can never be fully resolved. The key issue in the argument is whether music is narrative by nature. However, no matter whether music is narrative or not, the narrative approach to understand a musical work does provide us a new perspective to musical signification. Musicologists adopting narrative approaches aim to propose a new framework to reach out to grasp the meaning of music. They treat music as a kind of discourse and try to organize the musical elements of a work in a logical manner in order to make sense of various musical

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33 Klein, 114.
34 Ibid., 115. My emphasis.
elements under a more structured framework. This also addresses a natural human instinct, the ‘narrative impulse,’ that is, to interpret musical events through connecting the individual musical elements and events with a logical and casual relationship. Thus, even Nattiez agreed that “music and language share the linearity of discourse and the use of sound objects. Music is capable of imitating the intonation contour of a narrative.”

To facilitate subsequent discussion in this paper, I will adopt the narrative approach to evaluate my third musical case study, *The Isle of the Dead*, Op. 29 by Rachmaninov, to see how it facilitates the understanding of the meaning of the work. More importantly, I will assess how it helps in representing the visual elements of the original visual artwork, and achieves both musical signification and description.

35 Nattiez, "Can One Speak of Narrativity in Music?" 251.
As discussed by both Agawu and Wolf, narratives are _gradable_ concepts that may have various degrees of intensity. Narrative literature allows “for a more or less intensive narrativity, depending on the number and nature of narratemes occurring in concrete cases.” As it is closely related to the temporality of the medium, I believe the length and complexity of work are also relevant to the degree of narrative. In the similar manner, description, I may say, can also reveal various degrees of descriptivity. There may be such thing as a highly descriptive work or a fairly descriptive work. This is important, because the awareness of various degree of descriptivity would lead us to recognize the possibility of musical descriptivity of various extents. But what factors determine this degree of descriptiveness? For narratives, the presence of what kinds or how many narratemes, as well as the length and complexity of the work, could affect the degree of narrativity. For description, the only criteria, perhaps, is the ‘detailedness,’ or the degree of redundancy of the descriptive features of the object or subject. The more the referential features listed for an object or pointed towards the same phenomenon, the higher degree of descriptiveness of the work. In the case of short character pieces of the nineteenth century, such as Liszt’s _Sposalizio_, these could possibly be regarded as ‘moderately’ descriptive works.

For literature there is no problem with narrative identification, because the presence of core narratemes guides us right away to its narrative nature. Although we were not taught, we can recognize a story at once when we read...

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36 Wolf, “Cross the Border,” 86.
through the first few sentences. However, when we talk about description, there
seems no such analogous thing as “descriptemes.” It may due to the fact that
description can be anything ranging from an object to a phenomenon of various
forms and natures, and the referential features of a descriptive object or
phenomenon can be anything from superficial, such as appearance, size, or
materials, to something internal such as ingredients, taste, or emotion. More
importantly, there is no patterned way of organizing the descriptive elements.
Whereas the author follows a causal and teleological flow to develop the
narrative, in description the author follows “a referential drive of exhausting the
object or referent.” Even though there might be some order in description with
regard to organizing various descriptive features, it could be in many different
sequences – spatially, temporally, or in terms of certain attributes. There is no
single rule about this organization of details in description. As a result, it creates
difficulties in the identification of any intra-compositional elements of
descriptive works of music, as well as problems in identifying the meaning of the
description given the abstractive nature of musical signs.

Both descriptive and narrative trigger the cognitive frames of human beings that
help to make sense of this world. The cognitive frame of narrative is regarded as
a composite concept that “pivots on the perception, concatenation and
representation of temporal experience, especially action.” Hence, it involves a
constructive process in the human mind when understanding a narrative work, in
which the recipients have the tendency to fill the missing parts when confronting
several events or actions that are assumed to have a causal relationship. It

37 Ronen, 279.
38 Ibid., 84.
addresses the human desire of giving meaning to life. In music, similar constructive activities prevail for human being to find meaning in music or to draw associations between musical elements. The idea that music has the capacity to narrate, or that a listener can impose a narrative account on the musical events of a musical work is something that, according to Agawu, “speaks not only to an intrinsic aspect of temporal structuring but to a basic human need to understand succession coherently.” This is also in line with Nattiez’s stand that music is not narrative in itself, but that the plot imagined by the listeners helps to narrative the musical elements. There is always a natural urge in humans to make sense of a temporal sequence of sounds. This also explains why narrative theories are so popular in the field, and why they have been studied and adopted by so many musicologists.

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DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MUSICAL NARRATION AND MUSICAL DESCRIPTION

Although both narrative and descriptive are genres of discourse where certain degrees of logic or patterns can be found, there are fundamental differences in terms of their individual natures. They are similar in terms of discourse patterns and media specificities, and yet, they are often treated as opposite concepts in linguistic studies. For narrative, its temporal nature allows for a kind of teleological flows of events. However, descriptive work displays the descriptive details in a spatial orientation. It is more static in its nature as opposed to the dynamic character of narrativity. Thus, it is the first critical difference between narrative and description, where one concerns time and the other concerns space, which further leads us to recognize again the distinctive medial nature of the two media, i.e. music and painting, under discussion. Music is a temporal medium that fits best for narrative whereas painting is more of a spatial nature that naturally suits descriptive better. Given these medial specificities, are their possibilities for media to extend their potential in narrative and descriptive?

To look into it more closely, music as a temporal medium could still have a capacity to portray space. There is, however, a great discrepancy in the ways in which music and painting portray space. Pictures represent spatial properties of things, but music favors the temporal dimension. Kendall Walton argued that music has potential in spatial representation, at least in some such instances—when melodies rise and fall, when there is movement or section from one key to another, arrivals and departures, dense textures, open fifths, and so on. But he reminded us that, “musical space, unlike pictorial space, usually presented in a
When a rising melody makes it fictional that something rises, do I imagine something rising up toward me from below, or something above me rising away from me?\textsuperscript{40}

The time and space issues induce an oppositional force between narration and description. Description does not contribute to the logic or sequence of a story. Its structure or function is purely to 	extit{summarize}, and it “does not contain that trajectory of choices and alternatives which gives narration the appearance of a huge traffic-control center, furnished with a referential (and not merely discursive) temporality.”\textsuperscript{41} However, this is only one side of the coin. In most of cases in literature, a narrative story would include descriptions for the purpose of elaboration and provision of details. In cases where an action or event is unexpected or abnormal, it requires more details to make it intelligible and believable. Description is therefore incorporated into a narrative to elaborate the details of the story, or more importantly, it provides and reinforces the image of the scene of the story. Although description might interrupt the flow of the story, it helps to rationalize the story and make the audience believe in it. It therefore helps to establish a link between various elements of the story and a world of objects.\textsuperscript{42}

As such, description also plays a critical role in creating the fictional “reality” of “a world of objects.”\textsuperscript{43} Description in art domains (excluding scientific description) may or may not be fictional. As I have discussed in chapter three,
description often serves to create aesthetic illusions, to make one believe in the intended fictional world created by the composers or authors. It is exactly the function of ekphrasis, that is, to produce a vivid image for our mind’s eye, as I have discussed in chapter three. According to Ronen, “description is kept a distinct category because it is assigned, in one way or another, the role of linking text to object (or world).” However, as I have pointed out, we need description in a narrative to provide context or reinforce senses of reality for an action to make sense, as where Ronen pointed out “that what details in a description signify is reality itself…Description is admitted to be narratively (or indeed thematically) redundant, but this redundancy increases our sense of the reality of the scene before us.” It is for this reason that an author might include lots of description into a story, even though it might interrupt the flow of that story, or even create a “narrative pause” in the action. It is how description and narrative work together in literature to give us an experience of a story. It is also for this reason that it is “practically impossible for any narrative of length not to contain description.”

The relationship between description and narration is indeed interesting and complicated. The contrasting natures of description and narration contribute to the canonical opposition between narratives and descriptive. Another major difference between them is that description often has no implication of action. In a narrative, there should always be something happening as the plot has to advance. However, the existence of description would terminate all actions in a story. Description leads the audience to focus on the details of certain objects or

44 Ibid., 280.
45 Fowler, 26.
46 Ibid., 26.
phenomena, giving a spotlight to those points of attention. While narrative is regarded as a meaning-imposing structure (by rationalizing a sequence of actions through establishing its causality and a teleological order), description, on the contrary, does not create meaning. It only provides reference. As a result, description stands apart within a sequence of events, which creates an interruption to the flow of story. Narrative theorists therefore regard description as “narrative pause”.47

Yet description in themselves can only represent or refer; to partake in the overall organization of texts they are either appropriated into the structure of the narrative or they are integrated into a theme or into a higher order of signification. Following this problem of integration narrative theory identifies description as the place of pure reference and hence as resistant to meaning.”48

The notion of description as pure reference on the one hand, and of narrative as tied to the imaginative, not necessarily referential construction of a text – seems to underlie the very opposition between narrative and description.49

I have discussed that the presence of character (or voice) in a narrative work is necessary to drive an action or event. A story can never be without actors or subjects. In music, the presence of character can be a problematic assumption. Newcomb therefore advocated the anthropomorphic interpretation of musical themes, and associates various musical themes with characters of different qualities. As Newcomb suggested, “we do well to think of the thematic units partly as characters in a narrative, transformed by the requirements of various different contexts while remaining recognizable related to their previous

47 Fowler, 25.
48 Ronen, 280.
49 Ibid, 281.
However, whether character is a necessary requirement in narrative music is debatable. Some scholars argue that it is not necessary to have a determined actor or character in a musical ‘story.’ They focus on the plot, the succession of events or emotional states, rather than actual characters or agents. Fred Everett Maus, in his article, *Music as Narrative*, reaffirmed that “though it would be possible to add specifications of agents to the story, it is not necessary to do so, and in fact it seems best to give an account...that leaves the determination of character vague.” The narrative effect, as a result, may be independent from determinate actors in this sense.

In descriptive work, the presence or existence of character is clearly not a necessary condition. Description usually requires “an anonymous observer, almost no verbs of action, predicates of state, present tense, a constructed simultaneity, etc.” In description, there is often no subject—‘I’, ‘he’, ‘she’, or ‘it.’ We are only concerned about the object being described, not the one who describes. In this respect, it is substantially different from narrative, where the presence of characters is generally necessary for a sensible and logical story, as narrative requires action, and actions need characters to proceed. According to Ronen, this is one of the major reasons for a conceptual opposition between description and narrative throughout the history of literary development. It is also in this sense that Fowler has positioned description as anything that narrative is not. In his view, “narrative is about people, description deals with things.” Fowler further raised out that description is never ‘pure.’ Even though

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52 Ronen, 274.
53 Fowler, 26.
description deals mainly with things rather than people, it bears the perspective of the observer (usually the author). There is no purely objective descriptive account, especially in works of art. In other words, description involves, to a certain degree, the value judgment of the observer, and is influenced by the social or cultural background of the observer. On the other hand, the way that narrative is possible is also through the “figure of an observer.” This creates a way for description to infuse into narrative—the description could be, or often is, linked with a character (or a character’s perspective) or an action of the story.

In sum, the relationship between narrative and description is contradictory on one hand, and yet complementary on the other. Description may sometimes be regarded as something in a counter-acting position to narrative, but in fact in most literary works they often co-exist. Narrative relies on description for elaboration and substantiation on its events or actions. Amongst them, the most important of all is to make use of description to reinforce an aesthetic illusion in order make readers believe. Given the long history of development in literary works, authors work out various ways to integrate description and narration in a story, so that it succeeds in becoming a work of art. Description therefore becomes part of the narrative work in literature. For a medium of a temporal nature, music is said to have the potential of narrative. In music, however, does a narrative work require description in order to comprehend it in the same way as a literary work? Can it even incorporate description in the same way as literary works do? Is it, in fact, and by analogy, impossible for narrative music of any length not to contain descriptive sections?

54 Ibid., 27.
It is not difficult to understand that time is a crucial factor in music in determining its narrative qualities. As a result, the length of musical work does matter when we consider its potential for narrativity. For a musical work to be narrative, its substantial length (that involves a greater or lesser time factor) is what allows various musical signs to function and develop into a plot. In other words, only a longer work could allow musical signs to repeat, develop, extend, and transform, so that they could develop into structural forces by which the musical work narrates. Large-scaled works also allow for more varieties of musical elements, such as texture or orchestration, which further provide a favourable background for narrativity. We seldom regard a short work (such as character pieces for piano like Liszt’s *Sposalizio*) as musical narratives. For short works, musical signs may not have the time needed to facilitate the development of a plot. The usual ternary structures only allow a brief recapitulation where the musical elements cannot be truly developed. Narrativity, therefore, rarely exists in such works. For longer works, such as symphonic poems, even if it is only of the length of the three movements in Respighi’s chamber orchestral work, *Trittico Botticellinano*, time allows for musical signs to develop into various actions or scenes. Narrativity therefore is feasible, along with descriptivity, when the factor of time or the length of the work provides more temporal ‘room’ for musical signs not just to describe, but also to narrate. Although description is concerned more with space rather than time, it is not difficult to understand that a fresco of a larger size would naturally allow the painter/composer to include more details of the descriptive object. It is also for this reason that three different
genres of musical works have been selected in this study, to encompass a more rounded analysis of works of different genres in terms of these descriptive and narrative natures. It is also for this reason that I chose to look at the longest work, Rachmaninov’s *The Isle of the Dead*, last, and to study its narrative aspect against its descriptive potential (and why I have included this chapter here, and not at the beginning of this study).
Narrative Through Intermedial References

As I have explained, music as a medium of a temporal nature fits narrative better than description. Even if musical description can be integrated or regarded as a part of a narrative piece of work, as I have discussed the case of literature, problems might still arise owing to the fact that music has limited potential of representation or referentiality, for music could not refer to things as concrete as words do. In most cases, either the composer or the listeners needs to fill in the gap of uncertainties. The degree of the recipient’s share, or the involvement of recipient to create the meaning of the work, is therefore essentially of the highest degree. Owing to the specific limitations of different media, particularly with respect to the limits in narrative or descriptive capacity, artists (including writers as well as composers) therefore often prefer to employ intertextual or intermedial references to supplement the insufficiency of their individual art media. In the case of music, composers employ titles, lyrics, literary works (such as Vivaldi’s sonnet), and paratexts, in their musical works to suggest or draw an association with the desired topic. This became a very common practice, especially in the nineteenth century and onwards, where music was infused with programmatic or extra-musical content. Musical works inspired by paintings are thus also a sub-type of these kinds of compositions.

In the case of painting, visual images can only represent a certain point in time. Even if narrative is possible, the painter could only narrate in a spatial dimension, rather than a temporal one. They can only depict a frozen moment on their canvas. Although it can represent reality more directly and concretely than music,
at the same time its lack of the temporal dimension restrains its narrative capabilities. The temporal dimension, including its causality and teleology can at best be only inferred. In many cases, the intermedial reference to a well-known story would provide incentive to narrativise the painting, with the benefit that viewers may easily recall the story when it is associated with the image, thereby minimizing the ambiguity of meanings. Through references to established stories or other literary sources, even though a picture may have limitations in terms of time, it may extended its time frame and in some cases it can even represent more than one event. A narrative is therefore often “read and understood intertextually with other narratives.”\(^5\) Narrative, in this circumstance, is possible even within a static medium. It is in this way that painting can achieve narrativity, or we can say, it becomes indexically narrative by pointing to stories:

A single picture can in fact never actually represent a narrative but at best metonymically point to a story by selecting one of its characteristic phrases, so that one may qualify this type and degree of narrativity not as genuinely narrative but only as indexically so.\(^6\)

When the story and context are given (or implied), audiences or viewers can fill up the missing parts of ‘before and after’, forming a kind of story-like idea by performing the narration on their own. When confronting a piece of visual artwork, these intermedial references induce the recipients to infer a temporal dimension and extend the time frame of the visual image. The aesthetic experience would therefore be varied, as it would depend on the background and exposure to other arts that trigger the cognitive frames of individual audience members.

\(^5\) Klein, 114.
\(^6\) Wolf, “Cross the Border,” 95.
As such, through the use of intermedial references, recipients are further motivated to narrate the picture (apart from the natural narrative impulse of human beings). When Wolf discussed the Swiss painter and writer, Henry Fuseli (1741-1825), and his illustration of the first scene of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, he also agreed that intermedial references of a picture to drama would help to deliver narrativity in visual art:

…in such an intermedial transposition of performed drama, a source medium which in itself comprises both a story as its content and a visual component in its transmission, one would in fact expect the appearance of narrativity in the target medium, too.\(^{57}\)

Fuseli’s illustration provides an interesting example of intermedial reference, in which a picture refers to a popular drama, showing the possibilities of a transposition of a narrative art form into a static medium. When a musical work is said to be inspired by painting, it is another example of intermedial reference, where the source medium (painting) supports the narrativity (and description) of the musical work. The source painting provides the context, story, character, or topic for the musical work, and the composer deliberately indicates the source painting in order to suggest the topic behind. Therefore, a critical orientation to paintings or the visual elements of the painting can inform us much about the ways in which a composer intends to represent or express in his musical works. In the case of Liszt’s *Sposalizio*, as I have already demonstrated in chapter four, the music cannot be said to represent the story or any visual elements of the painting in any direct way. Instead, by topical reference, it suggests certain

\(^{57}\) Ibid., 92.
emotions or affections that are perceived in Raphael’s painting, and/or the composer’s response or impression towards the topic of painting (in this case—marriage). The recurring pentatonic motive, for example, becomes an indexical and symbolic sign for the marriage of Joseph and Mary, and it keeps inflecting the listener’s response to the piece as a whole.

Intermedial references, therefore, expand the possibilities of narrativity in painting. When this story of a painting is transferred to a narrative-oriented medium such as music, it potentially creates a new form of art, particularly when we consider incorporating the two media into the same stage performance. The two different media are actually complementary to each other; each filling-in the missing parts that either medium is lacking, therefore assisting (if not dictating) the interpretation of the audiences. Painting might serve as a visual supplement to music, whereas music serves as an aural supplement to painting. We are now living in a world of constantly moving images, sound bites, and rapid information. The incorporate of two media simultaneously in performance (such as displaying the visual image of painting during a concert) is not only capable of carrying out the function of “gap-filler”, with each medium exercises its strength in representation, it also achieves a unique and entertaining experience to the audiences of contemporary performances.
Summary

Narrative and descriptive help people to organize experience, and to make sense of the things happening in our world. The narrative impulse of human beings seems to be inborn. The abstractive nature of musical signs urges listeners to find ways of making sense of them through certain modes of organization. Musical signs are vague, but they are purposely so. When listening to music, we tend to rationalize the unrelated musical elements in the same way that people make up a narrative. It is therefore through narrativity and descriptive that we try to understand the signification of the musical signs.

The study of narrativity has in fact led us to understand more about description. Unlike narrative, description contains no internal logic or pattern of organization. There are neither core elements nor intra-compositional elements in descriptive work. In contrast to narration, where an actor must be present in a story, a subject is not essential in description. As such, the features of description, including referentiality, vividness, and mind-picture that my earlier discussion concerns are of utmost importance for a work to be descriptive. Apart from pure descriptive work that stands alone as an art in itself, description also exists in narrative work. When description is part of the narrative, it functions in elaborating and rationalizing the events of a story, therefore making the story more convincing and fulfilling. As Fowler explained, description is recognized to be narratively (or indeed thematically) redundant, but this redundancy enhances our sense of the reality of the image. Description in narrative work can
also acts as a control for the pacing of the narrative—either pushing forward, by increasing the tension, or slowing down, by reinforcing the details and the development of the plot. The narrative-situated description as such is important for our understanding of musical description because of the fact that music has its narrative capacity and any description in it seems to be a narrative-situated one.

The discussion of musical narrative further reflects the nature of referentiality in music. According to Nattiez, music has no semiological possibilities “to link a subject to predicate.” Even if there are some degrees of narrativity to music, often they are fall into “metaphorical illusion.” 58 Musical meaning is often metaphorical and can only be ‘inferred’ through ‘symbolic gesture.’ For all studies on either musical narrative or musical description, it is important to note that it is always the expressive content of music that is the real subject of analysis. What we are concerned is actually “about the expressive states evoked by the music and the ways that their unfolding implies a narrative.” 59 The impulse to narrativize music is a motivation to find the expressive logic within both the individual composition and the repertoire that supports it. 60 When Leo Treitler discussed how Mozart made use of various musical elements to create the scene where the Commendatore’s statue arrives in the finale of Act Two of Mozart’s Don Giovanni, he reminded us that all those tutti chords, chromatic ascent, and dotted rhythms, for example, are “purely musical signs that yet together have in their meanings a very specific psychic state and dramatic condition. But that state and condition is musical and only musical; they are not imitative of or borrowed from some other domain, they are the expressive face of

58 Ibid., 244.
59 Klein, 115
60 Ibid.
those musical gestures.” The same logic would apply to musical description. It is also the expressive content in descriptive music that should occupy most of our attention. The physical details of the descriptive object should not overwhelm our attention, and should not divert our aesthetic consideration and evaluation of a musical work.

The discussion of narrative and description reminds us that there always exist some fundamental differences between different media, as each medium possesses different orientations regarding the dimensions of time and space. Lars Elleström, a linguistic scholar who specializes in intermedial studies, supported this view when he stated “if one does not acknowledge these differences, one cannot understand the complexity of interpreting media in terms of clashes, fusions and mutual exchanges between the categories of time and space.”

The opposing positions of narrative and descriptive also draw our attention to the potential and limitations of music as a medium of representation. Music as a medium for description encounters problems of object-centered referentiality, as description requires a spatial capacities and precision in terms of the referred features. Yet, the temporal features of music endow it with a favorable platform for narrativity, assisting the musical signs to deliver their semantic content, through providing a frame with causality and teleological relationships. Even a musical sign that does not mean anything in itself may become meaningful when it relates to what comes before and after. As such, we could assume that the

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narrative capacity of music might help to compensate for its insufficiency in description, as its narrative orientation would help to generate the meaning of the work. Together with the intermedial references offered by the composer, the potential of referentiality in musical work definitely requires reconsideration. The following case study of Rachmaninov’s work aims to elucidate this aspect of my research.
Chapter 7
Case Study: Sergei Rachmaninov’s *The Isle of the Dead*, Op. 29

The main objective of this final case study of the symphonic poem *The Isle of the Dead*, Op. 29, written in 1909 by Sergei Rachmaninov, is to explore the descriptive potential of music by examining the various descriptive mechanisms that I have discussed in the previous chapters. By looking into various musical signs, including iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs, I aim to evaluate the means by which musical works can describe the visual elements of the painting and deliver the hetero-referentiality that I have established as a central feature of a descriptive work. Moreover, as a symbolist work, Arnold Böcklin’s painting *Die Toteninsel* is said to be a kind of mood painting that conveys not only a mimetic image of an island, but also represents above all the subjectivity of the painter. Such a painting is actually quite similar to a musical work in that it ultimately aims to convey moods or emotions, and therefore I would like to examine how the composer transfer the symbolic meaning of the painting into musical signs, ultimately achieving an artwork of a newer form.

In addition to the above points, I will also evaluate the temporal aspect of this musical work to see how it affects our understanding of the work, particularly from a narrative perspective. As I have pointed out in the chapter six, music as a temporal medium facilitates narrative capacities, thus providing a favorable
context for description to develop. The discussion of its narrative aspect is further intended to reveal its deepest referential aspects, as the descriptive and narrative concepts are often intertwined, owing to their similar features and characteristic in representation. As we have seen, works of art, including visual and musical ones, often contain both descriptive and narrative elements at the same time. It is particularly common for narrative musical work to include descriptive aspects, because descriptive elements are essential in enhancing the illusion or ‘images’ of the story of the work, thus helping the audience to understand its message. *The Isle of the Dead* is an excellent example for demonstrating the co-existence of both narrative and descriptive elements. However, with a more precise definition of a descriptive work borrowed from language studies, and a deeper understanding of the relationship between descriptive and narrative, this case study will serve to support a refined definition of both dimensions of the musical work.
THE PAINTING – ARNOLD BÖCKLIN’S DIE TOTENINSSEL (FIVE VERSIONS, 1880–1886)

Born in Basel in 1827, Arnold Böcklin was a well-known Symbolist painter of the late nineteenth century, who established the Symbolist trend in the visual art circles and introduced this form of artistic expression to the general public in Europe. Following the eighteenth century tradition, Böcklin began his career as a Romantic landscape painter and initially earned fame for his painting of natural landscapes and architecture. His paintings of nature, including rocks, sea, and trees, were particularly ‘sentimental.’ Even though he started out as a naturalist, his strong affiliations to Romantic style were evident from the very beginning. His early works already displayed a very distinctive personal style. His depictions of landscape scenes were atmospheric and moody. His works were described as “going beyond the essentially Düsseldorf tradition to suggest an understanding of nature as the embodiment of unseen supernatural powers. Typical of this approach are the curiously glowing sky and rearing silhouettes of the group of trees in Proud Firs.”¹ Seeking to achieve otherworldly effects in his paintings through the use of colors and the interplay between light and shade, his works “exhibited the neo-romantic tendency, a tendency of infusing nature with human passion, and in many ways his mature style was simply a blending of emotive landscape.”²

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² Suzanne Marchand and David Lindenfeld ed., Germany at the Fin De Siècle, Culture, Politics & Ideas (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 139.
Böcklin’s early works were characterized by lyrical naturalism. When he was only twenty-three, he went to Italy where his preference shifted to the creation of mood, in landscapes, figure compositions, and mythological subjects. Towards the end of 1850s, he focused on delivering various kinds of mood pictures, usually with some sort of mythological or spiritual content. His incorporation of mythological figures within his landscape paintings, together with a touch of lyricism of mood in his lines and colors, represented a typical approach of Symbolism in the nineteenth century. Böcklin had thirty years of artistic experience before his work was of a truly Symbolist character, but his Symbolist production is certainly “the result of a gradual maturing of his approach both to the landscape and to mythology.”

**Symbolism**

Symbolism first emerged in literature before spreading to other arts. Between 1885 and 1910, it flourished in Europe, and was characterized by a denial of direct, literal representation in favor of evocation and metaphorical representation. It was partly a reaction against the domination of Positivism during the entire nineteenth century, which had imposed great influence on the general norms and values, as well as the artistic trend in Europe. Under the influence of Positivism, art aimed to replicate reality, or a true representation of the material world. Hence, artists strove to explore the forms and laws of the natural phenomena—an approach similar to that of the scientists. This kind of realism dominated the sphere of art nearly for a hundred years. Towards the end

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of the nineteenth century, Symbolism sought to define itself in opposition to, or beyond, Positivism and Realism. Symbolist artists “attempted to open the door to the unconscious and to depict the world from a completely new viewpoint—from beyond visible reality.”  

Hence, it was described as “part of a broad anti-materialistic and anti-rationalist trend in ideas and art towards the end of the nineteenth-century and specifically marked a reaction against the naturalistic aims of Impression.”

Symbolist painters, therefore, emphasized their emotional experiences, addressing dreams and other spiritual topics, rather than the physical and materialistic features of the world, as bases for their art. One basic feature of Symbolist art is “an interest in spiritualism and in the Platonic notion that an ideal world lies beyond the world of appearance.” They focused on the soul, and “sought to create a ‘beyond’ that was only for the initiated or was purely imaginary, hence unreal and incapable of gaining recognition by society as a whole.” The Symbolic images do not mean to signify what they represented, but rather to convey “a deeper or higher level of consciousness.” In other words, Symbolist artists used colors, lines, and shades symbolically to express ideas, rather than to imitate the physical objects. Symbolist painters believed that behind the shapes and colors presented on the surface of the physical reality was

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7 Gibson, 11.
8 Kaplan, Symbolism, Online.
something deeper. This ‘something deeper’ usually creates another level of meaning that, when combined with the physical dimension, helps forming a more complete representation:

Symbolism rejects traditional iconography and replaces it with subjects that express ideas beyond the literal objects depicted. The notion of the expressive potential of simplified forms and pure color provided the freedom and directness that young, academically trained students were looking for.\(^9\)

Symbolist art was therefore an introverted art of an intensely personal nature, characterized by the symbolic use of objects aims to express subconscious ideas or meanings, which often transcend physical or materialistic features, and to reveal truths about the world. The Symbolist artists aimed to “reconcile matter and spirit through a language of signs and hidden meanings.”\(^10\) It is thus not surprising that religious topics of spiritual and intense features were the preferred subjects for Symbolist painters, as well as philosophical issues, such as life and death. They were often interested in depicting fantasy, nightmares, demons, and dream landscapes.\(^11\)

Amongst various symbolist works of Böcklin, *Die Toteninsel (The Isle of the Dead)—a painting widely circulated through numerous reproductions in the late nineteenth century—was one of the most popular. Although there are five different versions, painted between 1880 and 1886, the original was produced for

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\(^{9}\) Kaplan, *Symbolism*, Online.
\(^{11}\) Thomson, 91.
Marie Berna, who requested a picture about dreams in 1880, following her husband’s death. Like his previous works, Böcklin’s Die Toteninsel is a kind of mood painting of a truly Symbolist nature. Although the painting contains a scene of nature, the scene is not depicted as it is shown before the eyes of people. It looks like an ordinary scenic painting, with no definite programme. However, like other Symbolist arts, symbolic artists projected their own viewpoints or subjectivities into the scenery and painted through their mind. The landscape paintings of Böcklin incorporated human sentiments, and his “moody landscapes go a stage further in their intensity.” He combined the aspects of an island and architectural elements of an English cemetery, conveying a dark and solemn atmosphere. In the case Böcklin’s Die Toteninsel, the mood of the painter, as reflected in his work, was “one of withdrawal, of rejection of reality.” The painting was infused with the overwhelming impression of immobility and silence:

The representations of nature was always central for Böcklin, and in images featuring mythological demigods or sacred scenes, the trees, grasses, water, and rocks often seem to absorb more of the painter’s (and the viewer's) attention than the figures. That the natural details often seem out of proportion with respect to the scenes depicted (as in the enormous cypresses in Isle of the Dead or the towering birches in Holy Sanctuary) adds to the uncanny sensibility these images convey and suggests a kind of cultural pessimism that characterizes at least part of Böcklin’s corpus…. Nature, for Böcklin, served as critique and promise, a sign of endurance in times of suffering as well as an incitement to revelry—but it was never merely a backdrop.

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[12] It is believed that the model for the scene was likely Pontikonisi, a small island near Corfu according to Max Harrison’s Rachmaninoff: Life, Works, Recordings (London, UK: Continuum, 2005), 159.
Fig. 7.1 Arnold Böcklin: Die Toteninsel (Island of the Dead), oil on wood, 0.7×1.2 m, 1880

Fig. 7.2 Arnold Böcklin: Die Toteninsel (Fourth Version: Black and White), oil on copper; 0.81 x 1.51 cm, 1884
At first glance, the painting features a tall and rocky island across an expanse of dark water. The narrow isle in the middle is surrounded by a grove of tall, dark cypress trees—a conventional symbol of cemeteries. All these natural visual elements—huge stones, cypress trees, dark water, and gloomy sky—help depict the natural world in a dead and somber manner. These visual elements suggest a mood by taking the role of the symbols of death, providing a dramatic background contrast to the white figure and the coffin on the boat. This stark contrast of tone further conveys a somber and mournful atmosphere. The island is deserted and isolated, with no signs of human or animal life. Together with the static quality of the air, the desolate surroundings further reinforce the deadness of the ruin-like environment. Situated in the middle of the sea, the island is isolated and appears foreboding under the background of a dark sky and stormy clouds. Richard Thomson provided the following description of the painting:

A landscape of stillness typically engenders a feeling of calm in the viewer, and so does The Island of the Dead, but here it is tempted with implicit paradoxes which are gently menacing: the unwelcome doorways, the uncultivable landscape, the eternal habitation of those who are no longer alive.16

In the painting, we can find a small rowboat in the middle of the sea, maneuvered towards the islet by an oarsman. The subtle shading of the water reminds us that the boat is crossing the water quietly and slowly. On the boat, a figure dressed in white is standing before a white box that is generally interpreted as a coffin. Art commentators generally associated this scene with the River Styx that, according to Greek mythology, divides the Earth from the Underworld inhabited by the

16 Thomson, 44.
deceased. Though Böcklin himself did not explicitly inform us about his thoughts, interpreters relate the scene to the Greek myth of the ferryman Charon, who is transporting the soul of the dead across the River Styx to the Underworld.

Böcklin’s paintings often include mythological figures; yet, his figures did not need to tell or represent a known story, as is the case with his *Die Toteninsel*. It was Böcklin himself who argued that painting does not have to tell a story, although there might be something to say.\(^{17}\) The ability of a painting to speak to the spectator’s heart, through its pictorial elements, is more important than whether the spectator could recognize or read a known story from the work. Thus, we can see that Böcklin rarely employed a programmatic content of a well-known tale. Nonetheless, his paintings could still touch the heart, or reach out to the mind, of the spectator by evoking varieties of powerful and sensational moods. Whether or not one is aware of Greek myths about the mystery after death and understands that Böcklin’s *Die Toteninsel* is grounded in ancient Greek mythology, one can still be stunned by the emotive effect of the painting.

The major visual elements in the painting—the tall rocks, featureless water, pillars of trees, dark cloudy sky, misty thick air—combined to create a kind of synergistic effect, or mood, that prompts the spectator to feel the mournfulness and somberness of the occasion. Without too many dramatic or extraordinary treatments of the visual, Böcklin delivered in his painting a kind of mood that cannot be easily described by words, which has deeply attracted many spectators’ attention and fascination. Every visual element points to the same mythological

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\(^{17}\) Marchand and Lindenfeld eds., 157.
atmosphere, which consequently multiplies the effect. Behind the frozen scene of the boat crossing the dead calm sea, the spectator can feel the grief and melancholy of the painting. In this respect, Böcklin’s *Die Toteninsel* is one of the finest examples of the Symbolist nature of a visual art form.
The symphonic poem, *The Isle of the Dead*, was written in 1909 by Sergei Rachmaninov, who was in his mid-thirties at the time. At this stage, he could actually enjoy the success of his career, as he had just completed several other popular works, including the Second Symphony (1906–1907), the Piano Sonata No. 1 (1908), and the Piano Concerto No. 3 (1909). He chose Böcklin’s painting, *Die Toteninsel*, as the inspiration of this symphonic work after he saw its black and white reproduction in Paris in 1907, which left a strong impression on him. It was once said that, if he had not seen the black and white version of this painting (as opposed to a color reproduction), he would not have composed this musical work. This implies that he was moved by the enchanting mood and effect of the monochrome version of *Die Toteninsel* in a way that the original would never achieve. This was not surprising actually, as Rachmaninov’s compositions always display a kind of darkness and sorrowfulness, perhaps reflecting his views of life and death. As he wrote in a letter to the poetess Marietta Shaginian, he preferred subjects that were sad, rather than joyful; thus, light, gay colors never come easily to him.\(^\text{18}\) He was deeply moved by the monochrome reproduction of the painting, and he managed to represent in this work not only its visual elements through various musical signs, but more importantly, he expressed his emotional reaction towards the painting—towards life and death in particular. As Christopher Palmer described it in his programme note to *The Isle of the Dead*, “resignation, despair, the awareness of death at the

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centre of all life—few artists have treated this subject with such intelligence, elegance and grace as Rachmaninov.”\(^{19}\)

Written in the period when his other works (such as the Second Symphony and Third Piano Concerto) started receiving tremendous attention, *The Isle of the Dead* is full of Rachmaninov’s typical chromatic harmonies, as well as sophisticated orchestration influenced by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844–1908). There is an enhanced richness of sonorities and varieties of orchestral texture that strengthen the representational power of the music. This is true of not only this work, but also his other symphonic works, such as the Second Symphony and the Second Piano Concerto. Together with his effective mastery of texture and orchestral colors, the emotional power of this work is exceptionally impressive. As demonstrated in *The Isle of the Dead*, Rachmaninov’s skills in orchestral writing, as well as his sensitive tone-painting qualities, are extraordinary and affirmative.

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A Brief Outline of the Musical Structure of *The Isle of the Dead*, Op. 29

The overall structure of *The Isle of the Dead* reveals a large-scale compound ternary form, comprising three thematically linked sections. The principal materials of the first section include a figure in 5/8 meter, and a motif deriving from the famous medieval chant, *Dies irae*, with its starting four-note pitches to develop into a highly recognizable melodic motif. The first section (Section A) itself is in an open form with significant repetitions.

**Section A**

Rachmaninov starts the music in *Lento* and in the key of A minor—a ‘colorless’ key that immediately suggests the pathetic mood of the scene. The music opens with a low and somber atmosphere. The uneven 5/8 rhythmic figure by lower strings suggests the movement of the water (example 7.3). This 5/8 rhythm is sometimes in 2+3 grouping and sometimes in 3+2, and the first notes of the two or three eighth-note group, punctuated by the woodwind instruments, form a stepwise melody that has accompanied this 5/8 rhythm most of the time (example 7.4). It further reinforces an image of the ebb and flow of the movement of water. A sustained tonic pedal provides a stable harmonic support to the passage throughout the first part of Section A. Together with the static harmonic background, these musical ideas help to depict the dead silence of the scene, with a subtle movement suggested by the 2+3 and 3+2 figures.

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20 Like C major, without sharps or flats, A minor is also regarded as an ‘uncolored’ key. This idea is supported by tables of key characteristics, including C. F. D. Schubart (1739-91), who conducted a thorough discussion on characteristics of every key. See Rita Steblin, *A History of Key Characteristics in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2002), 119.
Once the scene is set by the 5/8 motif, the implied *Dies irae* motif (example 7.5) is first heard in the horn part in m. 13 after rehearsal no. 1. The oboes respond to it with a more recognizable *Dies irae* motif (example 7.6) in m. 38, after which the entire orchestra is activated. A dramatic echo effect is found in m. 61, with flutes intoning another modified fragment of the *Dies irae*. Oboes and clarinets immediately respond by imitating the same motifs, and are followed by the English horn (example 7.7). Finally, the horns round off this episode in m. 69 with a loud fanfare statement of the *Dies irae* motif, with added chromatic
harmony (example 7.8). Once the same 5/8 motif appears again, the music takes us back to the image of the dark undulating water scene.

Example 7.5 The Isle of the Dead: Horn part (mm. 13–17 after rehearsal no. 1)

Example 7.6 The Isle of the Dead: Oboe part (mm. 2–5 after rehearsal no. 2)

Example 7.7 The Isle of the Dead: Flute, oboe, English horn, clarinet, and bass clarinet parts (mm. 7–16 after rehearsal no.3)
The next episode (episode 2) starts when the first theme of the 5/8 rhythm returns at rehearsal no. 4 (still in A minor), which reminds the listeners of the open water environment. While keeping the tonality in A minor, more orchestral members are involved, building up a more intensely emotional scene, as a denser texture and enhanced loudness are developed out of the 5/8 motif. The 5/8 motif then subsides and the music becomes more gentle. After that, the violins play a counter-melody carried by staccato sixteenth notes, accompanied by other string members, woodwinds, and horns (starting from m. 4 after rehearsal no. 5). Flutes and oboes respond to violins with the similar staccato figures in dialogue. Following that, a very long and high-pitched cantabile melody is attractively scored for violins (example 7.9), initially with a sense of C major/A minor (rehearsal no. 6). This section stirs up another ‘chilling’ emotion and brings listeners to a new ‘scene’ (episode 3). At first glance, this melodic material seems new, but a closer look reveals that it is actually derived from the Dies irae motif. In m. 2 after rehearsal no. 7, the oboes respond with the same melody transposed down a major second. Finally, the violins pick up the melody again at rehearsal no. 8, but this time in E-flat major.
What follows are fragments of chromatic melodies that sweep through different instrumental parts. The music then swells into another heightened *un poco più mosso* section (rehearsal no. 10), before the water motif is revisited (from m. 5 after rehearsal no. 11). This time, the final recapitulation of the water motif becomes even fiercer (episode 4). Now in C minor, the orchestral tutti participates actively in the same 5/8 water motif. The entire orchestra demonstrates its full strength and power with the music thickly scored. Finally, a flute solo of *Dies irae* motif breaks off the climax (rehearsal no. 13). Here, the *Dies irae* motif (example 7.10) is transformed by augmentation, which leads the music to a transitional *tranquillo* section before the second large division commences (Section B).
Section B

The second section starts in m. 16 after rehearsal no. 14 in triple meter and the new, ‘romantic’ key of E-flat major (example 7.11). The mood and the atmosphere create a considerable contrast to that of the first section. For the first time, a very distinctive, lyrical melody appears in a dance-like triple meter, as if filling the air with a passionate and intimate atmosphere. Most of the time, the string section is doubled by the woodwinds in this melodic theme, this added resonance possibly suggesting a more harmonious state of emotion. Here, the harmony is far more diatonic than in Section A. The E-flat tonic pedal is sustained throughout most of the section, except in the later part, where the melody and harmony become more chromatic. Starting from m. 4 after rehearsal no. 15, the lyrical melody develops intensively, thickening in texture and growing in dynamic level. The emotions become more anguished and agitated. Finally, the music bursts into another climax in the allegro molto section (m. 11 after rehearsal no.18) before fading, allowing the Dies irae to reappear (from m. 5 after rehearsal no. 19), imitated by different instruments in a stretto. The struggle continues, while the music again grows even more intensely to its full strength, until it reaches its final, overwhelming climax—the allegro molto. There is a sudden long pause followed, freezing the scene into motionlessness (example 7.12). Here, we know that the dream is over. The Dies irae death theme gradually marches in, this time being repeated in quarter notes, not only in the clarinet part, but also as a bass drone carried by low strings. At this point, the solo violin joins in with the Dies irae motif played in triplets and in an accelerated tempo. Interestingly, this Dies irae motif does not take over the

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21 The ‘romantic’ characteristics of the E-flat major have been thoroughly discussed in Steblin’s A History of Key Characteristics in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries.
scene entirely, as it gives way to the lyrical theme of Section B, which is again scored as an oboe solo with light accompaniment.

*Example 7.11* The Isle of the Dead: Flute, oboe, English horn, clarinet, and bass clarinet parts (mm. 16–25 after rehearsal no. 14)
Example 7.12 The Isle of the Dead (starting from 2 measures before rehearsal no. 22)
Finally, after a transitional passage, the 5/8 motif reappears, bringing us back to the dark, water scene of the first section (m. 8 before rehearsal no. 24). The thematic materials of Section A return in the next recapitulatory section (Section A), albeit greatly abbreviated. As we shall see in subsequent sections, this part represents different stages of events that take place after death, perhaps also embracing the composer’s view on life and death.

The overall structure and the related musical events are listed in Table 7.13.
Table 7.13 The Isle of the Dead: Musical Events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Rehearsal No R [No]</th>
<th>Tonality</th>
<th>Thematic Materials</th>
<th>Musical Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>1-24</td>
<td>&quot;Lento&quot;</td>
<td>A minor</td>
<td>5/8 motif</td>
<td>1. Strings and harp begin the music with 5/8 figures, in very low and soft sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25-</td>
<td>m.13 after R [1]</td>
<td>D minor</td>
<td>5/8 motif</td>
<td>2. 5/8 motif continues in low string section</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>74</td>
<td>R [1]</td>
<td>Dies Irae (implied)</td>
<td>Dominant pedal point (D minor)</td>
<td>3. Dies Irae first implied in Horns (m.25 and echoed by Oboes at m.38)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4. Texture gradually enhanced. There are fragments of chromatic melodies with a crescendo leading to a first climax at m.59 (m.4 after R [3])</td>
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<td></td>
<td>5. Music subsides immediately. Dies Irae motive in flutes, then echoed by oboe, clarinet and English horn at mm. 61-69</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>6. A chordal Dies Irae motif by 6 horns of authoritative signature nature (m. 69) to end the episode</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>75 R [4]</td>
<td>A minor</td>
<td>5/8 motif Staccato high-pitched melody</td>
<td>1. 5/8 motif in A minor reappears in strings section. It is soon accompanied by all other instruments. A crescendo leads to a small climax at R [5].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Violins begin a new staccato high-pitched melodic figures as a kind of counter-melody (m.98 /m. 4 after R[5]) under the background of 5/8 motif</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. The staccato high-pitched figure is soon imitated by flute and oboe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>115 R [6]</td>
<td>C Major</td>
<td>5/8 motif</td>
<td>1. A long melody with hints on Dies Irae figure by first violins in C major, with leaps and arabesque figures, while 5/8 figure still in second violin part (from m. 115/R[6])</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A flat Major</td>
<td>Long and cantabile melody with leaps and arabesque figures</td>
<td>2. Horns imitate violin melody, as a contrapuntal part (m. 119/m.5 after R[6] onwards).</td>
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<td>Dies Irae Motif</td>
<td>3. Tonality starts in C major but soon becomes unstable, searching for a new key.</td>
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<td>4. Oboes then take up the violin melody (m. 132 / m. 2 after R[7]) and horns imitates contrapunctually. Tonality shifts to C minor.</td>
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<td>5. At the same time the Dies Irae motif in flute part (m. 133-136/ m.3 after R[7])</td>
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<td>6. Violins take up the long melody again, this time in A-flat Major and with thickened texture (m. 147/ R[8] onwards)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
7. Dies Irae motive in flutes, echoed by oboes, clarinets, bassoons (m.153 /m.7 after R[8], and varied at m.157/ m.11 after R[8])

8. Cello starts a new melody made up of chromatic Dies Irae figures at Un poco più vivo section (m.165/ R[9]), leading to more intense emotion towards m. 181/ R[10] (un poco più mosso)

9. More orchestral members join in, towards a climax at m. 197/ R [11]. The ending of this section is very chromatic.

1. 5/8 water motif again. This time it comes with an enhanced dynamic and ever-thickened texture. Tonality is C minor. It becomes more diatonic.

2. All members join in the water motif (m.213/ m.17 after R[11]). The whole orchestra is awakened, building up to another climax of more fierce character (from m.217 / R[12] to m.227)

3. Music dies down suddenly at m.228. Flutes take up the role with Dies Irae motif in augmented form and solo manner (only very subtle accompaniments).

1. Meter changes to 3/4 at m.233

2. Dies Irae motif in flutes, oboes, horns, only lightly accompanied by strings and on pedal point of E

3. Music fades out (mm. 248-252/ m. 4-5 after R[14])

4. The same chordal Dies Iraes in F minor (as in episode 1) forcefully wakes up the scene again, by horns, trumpets, trombones, and tubas, in diminished 7th chords.

5. G# is then spelled to A-flat foreshadowing the change from A minor to Eb major (m.253)

1. A lyrical and gentle dance-like melody (Life motif) in flutes, English horns, clarinets and violins in unison

2. Texture thickens from m.284 / m.12 after R[15] onwards. More brass members join in to accompany the lyrical melody

3. The same Life motif again at m.291/ R[16], with the dynamic level enhanced to ff, flutes and violins play an octave higher, and more brass to support the harmony.

4. Then it develops into even more intense texture and dynamic from m.321 / R[18] onwards. The whole orchestra involved in full strength driving the music to the climax of section B.
5. Subsequently, Dies Irae motif in brass section takes over the scene (mm.323-324 / mm.3-4 after R[18]). It repeats as rising sequences as more instruments such as English horn and bassoons joining in (mm.325-328/ mm.5-6 after R[8])

6. The whole orchestra plays the Dies Irae motif together finally to close the scene with full strength. It modulates to F# minor at m.331/m.11 after R[18]. Then music subsides.

1. The Dies Irae motif turns into cantabile motivic fragments (m. 5 after r[19]). It rises chromatically and continuously in sequences, with enhanced dynamic and texture.

2. The music grows its texture and strength, finally the whole orchestra is involved in the Dies Irae motif, from m. 363/ R[21] onwards

3. The most heightened emotion reached at m.377 / R[22], where the whole orchestra is in rhythmic unison at an explosive dynamic (fff).

4. A sudden halt follows at m.386/ m.10 after R[22]

1. Dies Irae motif in clarinets (in quarter-note rhythm) almost in solo (with very subtle accompaniment). The 4-note Dies Irae motif keeps on repeating from m. 387 to m.397/ mm.11-21 after R[22].

2. It is then picked up by solo violin. This time the Dies Irae motif is varied in a rapid triplet figure.

3. Then the lyrical life motif returns in solo oboe, with almost no accompaniment (m. 402/ m. 26 after R[22] onwards)

4. The Dies Irae takes over the scene again in m.410/ m.4 before R[23].

1. 5/8 motif first in low strings and harp, then with violin II as well.

2. At the same time, stepwise motif first in bassoons and contrabassoon, then clarinets and bass clarinet join in.

3. After just six bars of 5/8 motif and stepwise motif, the long violin melody (previously starts in m.115/ R[6]) returns. This time in A minor.

4. Dies Irae motif subtly in bass clarinet, bassoons and celli, on a tonic pedal sustained by timpani and double bass

5. Finally, music gradually fades out. This section lasts for 50 measures only.
A NARRATIVE MUSICAL APPROACH TO THE ISLE OF THE DEAD

The Isle of the Dead undoubtedly has its narrative qualities. Its duration of about 20 minutes, and its complexity allow musical events to unfold in a sequential order. In Rachmaninov’s work, a number of core narratemes are located, facilitated by the presence of intermedial references and the known source of inspiration. The title and the painting have already provided powerful verbal and visual narrative frames. Clearly, Die Toteninsel is about a place—whether an imaginative place created by the painter, or the place the dead soul enters after death according to Greek mythology. The visual elements of the painting provide detailed image of the island toward which the dead soul is heading, implying that this is a place of misery. The intermedial references to Böcklin’s painting, therefore, provide a very strong incentive to the listeners to narrativise Rachmaninov’s work. As a result, time, place, action, and characters have already been suggested by the painting—Charon (or a Charon-like figure) is taking the recently deceased soul across the River Styx (or similar body of water) to the place of the afterlife.

The Isle of the Dead is written in an audible ternary structure, which provides a clear formal segmentation—the first musical aspect of a narrative work that Newcomb has identified as necessary for a narrative to develop. Each of the three main sections of The Isle of the Dead contains sequences of musical events

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22 The musical events have been listed in table 7.13.
arranged in logical and causal relationships. And yet, these three sections are also logically related to each other. In Section A, the low strings open the music with dark and mysterious mood. The 5/8 meter figuration conveys the image of a stillness of water, while its asymmetrical grouping of eighth notes suggests a steady subtlety of the sea, or the rocking of a boat on its surface. The A minor ‘colorless’ tonality, the very low range of pitches, the soft and mournful dynamics, all lead the listeners to experience the darkness and misery of the atmosphere. At the same time, the unchanged figuration and harmony convey ‘deadness’ in the air of the moment. All these musical signs immediately take the listeners on a journey, allowing them to experience the scene of rowing on the undulating, dark water. Next, the Dies irae (the ‘death theme’), with its obvious extra-musical associations, appears and informs us of the purpose of the journey. A constant series of threatening crescendos (such as starting from rehearsal no. 3, rehearsal no. 11 and 12) further inject the music with forward motion, provoking an image of the forward-moving direction of the boat towards the island. To put it another way, the series of crescendos develop into various dynamic arcs that help create actions metaphorically (through the tensions and releases). In return, this musical sign drives the flow of the story, and furnishes constant excitement to the development of the narrative.23

While the growth of the music implies that the boat approaching the island, there is a moment when we experience fragments of high-pitched sound of unearthly creatures (example 7.14), making one feel horrified when confronting such a mysterious and strange environment. After that, the tempo accelerates, and the

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23 This approach of structuring ‘open form’ with a series of dynamic arcs was probably borrowed by Rachmaninov from the Prelude of Act I of Tristan und Isolde.
texture thickens and intensifies. The entire orchestra is activated (m. 4 before rehearsal no. 11). As the music reaches the climax of the first section right before rehearsal no. 12, the listeners are brought to a state of agitation as they imagine the boat getting closer and closer to the island. We could extend this scenario by imagining the sheer nervousness of getting to a place inhabited by dead souls, or maybe this uneasiness can also be interpreted as the soul on the boat struggling with Death, unwilling to accept the end of earthly life. The giant crescendo, which brings us to the explosive dynamic at four measures before rehearsal no. 13, is then followed by a sudden dramatic pause, halting all actions, disputes and struggles. At this point, the dead soul, as generally interpreted, has reached its destination (the Isle of the Dead). Tensions and releases arranged in such a linear order suggest a causal chain of events. The sequences of musical events in Section A are therefore logically laid out to mark a journey from start to the end.

Example 7.14 The Isle of the Dead: Violin I, II, and viola parts (mm. 3–12 after rehearsal no. 5)
Rachmaninov, however, does not stop here; he takes us on further to experience something behind the scene. The second section starts in triple meter in the new key of E-flat major. As discussed before, the mood and atmosphere have changed substantially, creating a great contrast to the first section. The very distinctive lyrical melody in this section, in which the first four notes are derived from the *Dies Irae*, evokes a warm and joyful atmosphere. It is here that the scene of Böcklin’s painting is left aside, allowing Rachmaninov’s own ideas towards life and death to emerge. With such a great contrast—in tonality, rhythm, tempo, other new musical materials, as well as the mood—to the darkness of the first scene, one cannot avoid thinking of something *contrary* to death. Hence, it is very natural to interpret this section as something earthly, or something related to illusion. Here, we are prompted to imagine the blissful earthly memories that the dead soul is looking back on. Indeed, this section is often interpreted as the memory of life on earth, or the image of an ideal paradise that contrasts to death. In fact, Rachmaninov himself gave a hint on his intentions in the second section. In his letter to the famous conductor, Leopold Stokowski (1882–1977), who was going to conduct *The Isle of the Dead*, Rachmaninov stated:

> It should be a great contrast to all the rest of the work—faster, more nervous and more emotional—as that [sic] passage does not belong to the ‘picture’, it is in reality a ‘supplement’ to the picture—which in fact makes the contrast all the more necessary. In the former is death—in the latter is life.²⁵

²⁴ See references by Geoffrey Norris, Barrie Martyn, Max Harrison, and Patrick Piggott. They all agree with the interpretation of the second section as something earthly.
²⁵ Piggott, 19.
Once the lyrical dance-like melody is introduced in Section B, the emotion becomes more passionate and agitated along with the development of the music, suggesting some turbulent moments coming on. Perhaps the memories of rise and fall of earthly life are reviewed here. Yet, this earthly existence is temporary, or *illusory*. While the music grows even more intensely to its full strength from rehearsal no.21 onwards (marked with *più vivo e poco a poco accelerando e crescendo*), the scene is suddenly voided by a great overwhelming pause. The *Dies irae* theme gradually resumes again, this time it is in quarter notes in the clarinet part. It is followed by the dance-like ‘life’ theme of Section B again (example 7.15), but this time appears in a very solemn and lamenting manner. Finally, at m. 15 after rehearsal no.23, the return of the water theme suggests that the soul has been transported across the river, while Charon returns to bring another dead soul to the Underworld again.

*Example 7.15 The Isle of the Dead: Oboe part (from m.12 before rehearsal no.23)*

Apart from the formal segmentation, the second internal musical aspect that Newcomb mentioned—the presence of patterns of *thematic transformation, interrelation, and derivation*—is also apparent in Rachmaninov’s work. The 5/8 motif serves as a water theme, which not only depicts the water scene, but also unifies the entire work in various episodes, reinforcing the logical sequences.
With its variations in texture and dynamic levels, the 5/8 water motif helps create the image of the dynamic motion of the boat approaching the island. Other thematic materials include the lyrical dance theme in Section B (also derived from *Dies irae*), as well as the *Dies irae* motif that prevails throughout most of Section A and the latter part of Section B.

As I have discussed in the chapter on musical narrativity, the tonalities of a musical work help to sketch a teleological model of time and develop an overall linear framework for the music. Various events—such as obstacles, conflicts, surprises, anticipations, and delays—can be said to occur while the tonalities and harmonies develop. In Rachmaninov’s work, there is also a kind of tonal teleology, a tonal plan from A minor for the ‘lifeless’ water scene, passing through C minor at episode four in Section A where the water scene returns, to the ‘Romantic’ key of E-flat major in Section B. From the lyrical E-flat major section, the tonality modulates to F-sharp minor (from m. 11 after rehearsal no. 18 onwards) and finally to A minor again, where the Section A returns. This tonal plan, A minor–C minor–E-flat major–F-sharp minor (enharmonic of G-flat minor)–A minor, is clearly a deliberate one, outlining the diminished seventh chord, and progressing by minor thirds that follows a teleological trail from a ‘tragic’ key to a ‘lyrical’ key, then back to the original key. It provides a tonal plan for the musical events to flow and develop, as well as conveying a metaphorical ‘circular’ tonal journey.

The presence of plot, a necessary condition for a narrative work, is therefore evident here. As Seaton suggested, “the harmonic patterns of stability, rising
tension, climax, resolution, and dénouement.” help a musical work to be narrative. From the above plotting of musical events and the tonal plan, the outline of the musical plot is established. It is facilitated not just by the temporal nature of the music, but other musical elements as well, such as the thematic materials, the formal segmentation, and the tonalities, compounded by the constant tension and dynamism while the music develops. Consequently, musical elements or events are connected both logically and meaningfully. The temporal nature of music allows the above events to unfold in a linear manner within a plot paradigm, so that we could derive a Beginning (Section A), a Middle (Section B), and an End (end of Section B and the Recap of Section A), following the Aristotelian plot requirements. It further facilitates the construction of meaning of the musical work in a narrative approach.

In fact, one may say that Rachmaninov did not create his own view in Section B—his view towards life and death—but rather extended and elaborated the thoughts of Böcklin. As I have mentioned, Symbolic art was a movement that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, as a reaction against the growth of positivism and rationalism. There were tremendous social changes (or development, in some opinions) in Europe during the nineteenth century, especially after the two Industrial Revolutions. Historians note that the rapid social and technological developments created great anxieties and discomfort in society, especially in the last few decades of the century. Symbolist artists, therefore, wanted to escape from it, searching for a utopia by way of returning to

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26 Douglass Seaton, "Narrative in Music: The Case of Beethoven’s ‘Tempest' Sonata,’ in Narratology Beyond Literary Criticism: Mediality, Disciplinariness, ed. Jan Christoph Meister in collaboration with Tom Kindt and Wilhelm Schernus (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), 65-81; see p. 66.
the ancient world. As a result, “the imagery of landscape, and in particular the idea of Arcadia, the mythic land of peace and plenty rooted in Greek mythology, was used by [Symbolist] artists to provide balm and escape from such pressure.” As a key Symbolist artist himself, Böcklin might have created this fantasy world of *Die Toteninsel* as an escape from reality and a release of the pressures of life. It is obvious that Rachmaninov was deeply touched by Böcklin’s fantasy, as he too had his own fatalistic philosophy of life, as revealed by many of his previous musical works. In this sense, the two artists were connected; therefore, Rachmaninov tried to extend Böcklin’s ideal world in the second section of *The Isle of the Dead*. It could, nevertheless, just be Rachmaninov’s own projection of his own utopia, prompted by the painting. Rachmaninov was also confronting a social environment that was similar to Böcklin’s. Therefore, it is plausible to assume that he also experienced the turbulence of the contemporary world and was as disoriented as Böcklin was. Hence, there might be chances that the release and happiness reflected in the second section was Rachmaninov’s own ideal of life (or death) and has nothing to do with Böcklin’s idea. Nonetheless, the interpretation of the second section of Rachmaninov’s work as something ‘heavenly’ is logically derived from the first section, and from Rachmaninov’s own comments, although it may not follow chronologically from the previous section.

The other two internal musical aspects that Newcomb mentioned as facilitators for a musical narrative are the various *generic and formal signals* and the *direct*

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27 Thomson, 41.
28 As mentioned by Rachmaninov himself, the black and white version of *Die Toteninsel* that inspired him is even dreamier and more melancholy than the color versions of the painting.
29 See Rachmaninov’s letter to Leopold Stokowski, stating that the first section of *The Isle of the Dead* was about death and the second section described life.
Cultural worlds and implied continuation associated with these generic and formal types.\textsuperscript{30} I would interpret this in two aspects. First, it is the style or genre that induces listeners to refer to some kinds of narrative work. Newcomb illustrates this point with the case study of Chopin’s \textit{Polonaise-Fantasy}, Op. 61, which possesses a kind of ballad-like opening that informs the listener about its narrative nature. Second, it could refer to kinds of symbolic signs whose meaning is derived from cultural codes or conventions. The \textit{Dies irae} in Rachmaninov’s work is an example of this, as it is conventionally associated with death. Rachmaninov knows this musical sign well and his obsession with using this musical motif is visible, as he often included it in some form or other in various compositions to suggest meanings about death.

Finally, the fourth musical aspect that induces narrativity in music that Newcomb mentioned, the direct referential sounds, is worthy of a more extensive discussion. In Rachmaninov’s work, directly imitative sounds appear to be absent, as do the iconic signs and sounds that imitate objects of the physical world. However, the metaphorical signs, such as the 5/8 motif, which represents the flow of water, would have the referential functions that Newcomb speaks of. While Newcomb has not stated clearly whether the metaphorical signs or symbolic ones are considered as the referential signs that he is thinking of, I believe that he is referring to \textit{any} musical signs of referential nature. He stated that:

\textsuperscript{30} Newcomb, “The Polonaise-Fantasy and Issues of Musical Narrative,” 88.
Of the four internal musical aspects suggesting narrative interpretation that I listed above, the last—direct reference to the extra-musical world via imitation of sounds—is both the simplest and the one with the highest degree of semantic content.  

From the above statement, we can see that he would regard anything with semantic content that pointed towards extra-musical world as this kind of referential sounds. (I will discuss these referential sounds in detail in the next section, focusing on the descriptive aspect of this case study.)

To conclude, we can see that Böcklin’s painting served as a source of inspiration, and was merely a starting point for Rachmaninov to further pursue the meaning of life and death through his musical composition. In this sense, Rachmaninov’s music is a “free and expanded interpretation of the painting.” The composer did not just transform the visual elements of physical nature into musical ones. He emphasized the expression of his own emotional responses and subjective ideas towards Böcklin’s painting, embedded with his own views towards life and death. Although the painting served as an intermedial reference to Rachmaninov’s work, the emotional reaction of the composer cannot be fully inferred from the original source of inspiration. Once again, the emotional side of a musical work is of greater aesthetic value in an art form such as this.

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31 Ibid., 89.
DESCRIPTION IN A NARRATIVE WORK — FROM A DESCRIPTIVE POINT OF VIEW

The temporal nature of music offers the possibility of taking a narrative perspective for the understanding of the meaning of a musical work. Whether we are taking a narrative perspective or dealing with musical description, the question of representation or referentiality—i.e., how musical signs convey meaning with reference to extra-musical objects or phenomena—remains the cardinal issue. As I have discussed previously, a descriptive work aims to provide reference to an object or a phenomenon, supplying a vivid image for our mind’s eye. A descriptive musical work inspired by a painting should therefore have to achieve this aim by providing reference to the visual elements of the painting, through which it assists listeners to develop a vivid image in their minds. As a result, when we come back to the discussion of musical description, we need to examine the issue of referentiality again. In other words, we need to identify musical signs or symbols that (1) point towards extra-musical objects or features that the painting is revealing; and (2) establish the type of musical ekphrasis they serve (that is, identify their role in producing an image for the mind’s eye). In the subsequent discussion on the descriptive aspects of The Isle of the Dead, I would take into consideration and focus on these aspects of musical descriptivity.

When one listens to the symphonic poem The Isle of the Dead, he or she will immediately be drawn into the dark and somber atmosphere, adumbrating something unearthly. The low strings initiate the movement by playing a
repeated rocking 5/8 figure suggestive of stable water movement, while conveying a dark and thrilling atmosphere. Here, the 5/8 motif, with its repeated figure of five eighth-note, serves as an indexical sign, or in Wolf’s terms, acts as a metaphorical illustration of the uneven waving sea, upon which the boat is moving. It gives a sense of a rocking current, moving in a somewhat rhythmic and steady pattern, serving as the background for most of the first section. In some sense, this 5/8 musical sign can also be regarded to bear an imitative or iconic nature because it has an ostinato pattern that evokes a kinetic gesture of the wave. It presents graphically in the score a two-dimensional wave pattern to illustrate the slightly undulating sea. Furthermore, the combination of 3+2 and sometimes 2+3 of eighth-notes in this ‘unnatural’ meter adds a spice of irregularity to the music, thereby reinforcing the image of the rising and falling movement of water while the boat is traveling over the sea. This 5/8 motif therefore serves as a sign for the description of water scene, and together with other indexical signs, such as the lower and darker sonorities and timbres, it creates an image of a boat riding the waves in a dark and shadowy environment.

In addition, while the 5/8 motif unifies the entire work, there is often an accompanied stepwise melody, which is actually derived from the first note of the two or three eighth-note group, played by a woodwind or brass instrument (example 7.16). This gently undulating melody in adjacent steps connotes to the style of liturgical music, which by convention usually consists of stepwise motion (avoiding odd intervals between adjacent notes). As such, this musical sign not only helps to reinforce the undulating motion of the water, its ‘chanting’ nature also signifies religious and spiritual qualities.
Another descriptive element that Rachmaninov uses consistently (not only in this work, but several of his other compositions as well) is the *Dies irae*. The melody of the *Dies irae* has obvious extra-musical associations that become an unambiguous symbolic sign to connote ‘death.’ It has long been used in many major and well-known musical works relating to ‘death’ ever since Mozart’s *Requiem* (1791). Other programmatic works, such as Liszt’s *Totentanz* (1849) and *Dante Symphony* (1857), Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique* (1830), Mussorgsky’s *Songs and Dances of Death* (1875–1877), and Tchaikovsky’s *Symphony No. 5, Op. 64* (1888), all deliberately adopted *Dies irae* in their musical content for the symbolic association with death or tragedy. Coincidentally, Rachmaninov conducted all these works during his lifetime. Perhaps this explained partly why this melody appealed to him and why he favored using it in his compositions. His somber view of life might be another reason behind his affinity towards using the *Dies irae* in his works. As stated by musicologist Barrie Martyn, Rachmaninov’s character and attitude to life often reflected in his works and in his fondness of using *Dies irae*:\(^{33}\)

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\(^{33}\) In addition to *The Isle of the Dead*, there are several other works in which Rachmaninov adopted the *Dies Irae* as motivic element, including his Sonata No. 1 (1908), *The Bells* (1913), *Etudes Tableaux*, Op. 39, no. 6 (1916), *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, Op. 43 (1934), *Symphony No. 3* (1935-6), and *Symphonic Dances*, Op. 45 (1940).
Rachmaninoff’s fascination with Dies Irae naturally implies that his philosophy of life must have been fatalistic, and yet, while this is certainly true, his fatalism did not express itself in a morbid terror at the inevitability of death—for whether in The Isle of the Dead, The Bells or the Symphonic Dances, death brings release and peace—so much as in the poignant realization that all human happiness is ephemeral.34

Given its continuous citation in musical works with programmatic content throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Dies irae does not only bear a symbolic meaning, but also symbolizes various supernatural or mortal topics. In Rachmaninov’s The Isle of the Dead, the Dies irae serves as a symbolic musical sign of death, or representing the supernatural subject (the Soul), that unifies the whole work programatically with its four-note figure. This four-note Dies irae motif is developed into various figures, adapted into various instruments, and varied in different forms that constantly foreground the melody and its associations for the listeners throughout the work (examples 7.17 a–f). This kind of acoustic connotation, like the musical paraphrases that are used in Respighi’s works, rides on the convention of Requiem music. It thus serves as a major descriptive element through which the listener can directly imagine a solemn scene or a serious moment associated with death.

Example 7.17b The Isle of the Dead: *Dies irae* motif with slight modifications (mm. 7–16 after rehearsal no. 3 in flutes, imitated by oboes, clarinet and English horn)

Example 7.17c The Isle of the Dead: *Dies irae* motif incorporated into violin melody (rehearsal no. 6)

Example 7.17d The Isle of the Dead: Augmented *Dies irae* motif in flutes (rehearsal no. 13)
As I have explained, the water and death motifs prevailing throughout the first section contribute to the *scenic description* of the painting. In the second section, these motifs are replaced by another contrasting thematic material—the more lyrical and sentimental melody first played by the flute, clarinet, and violin in unison (example 7.18). The water and the death themes are more like figurative
motifs, this new theme in second section contains a more definite melody. It builds up a tenderly and passionate atmosphere that creates a great contrast to that of the first section. Moreover, the tonality of the second section, E-flat major, not only contrasts to the A minor of the first section, it is also a key used in many other nineteenth-century musical works of sentimental and romantic qualities. Furthermore, it is also “a key of love, of devotion, of intimate conversation with God, through its three flats.”35 It is also the key that is tonally furthest from A minor, and therefore it is used possibly because the composer desired to make the second section the greatest contrast to the first one, both in topic and key. More importantly, the interval between A and E-flat is a tritone, which traditionally connotes to the devil.36 Rachmaninov exploited this symbolic connotation to depict a scene related to death.37 In addition to that, the use of triple meter, which is commonly found in dance music, also shows the intention of Rachmaninov to make use of a dance-like gesture to convey the joyful affection. As a result, the use of a lyrical melody, the \( \frac{3}{4} \) meter, and the key E-flat major, are all symbolic connotations that the composer adopted to describe the reminiscence of a beautiful moment of life, and to express his ideal moment in life. It seems Rachmaninov intended to wipe out the previous lifeless scenery, and bring the listeners to a new stage of experience.

35 Steblin, 116.
37 Other musical works using tritone include the dungeon scene in Act 2 of Beethoven’s Fidelio, where the timpani are tuned A–E flat. Franz Liszt also used the tritone to suggest Hell in his Dante Sonata, among countless other examples.
Example 7.18 The Isle of the Dead (mm. 16-21 after rehearsal no.14)
Rachmaninov’s work contains other musical signs that give references to the visual elements of the painting. With respect to the tonality and harmony, the use of A minor, as I have discussed, together with the use of constant tonic pedal point throughout the first section of the work, helps to suggest a mourning atmosphere, as the ‘colorless’ tonality and anchor on the pedal point avoid any drastic motion. The pedal tone, the static harmonic movement, as well as the tempo *lento*, further provoke a kind of stillness and pathetic mood across the most of the first section. The lack of harmonic movement allows the 5/8 figure to be the central focus and support the music with a sense of pendulum motion. This kind of metaphorical illustration further helps to reinforce the image conveyed by the various motifs throughout the work.

As discussed in the previous narrative section, Rachmanninov has tactically used various orchestrated crescendos that develop into various dynamic arcs to promote the development of the ‘plot.’ However, these dynamic arcs also achieve in the description of action of the painting by acting as the acoustic connotation which describes the forward movement of the boat. As Max Harrison has pointed out, the explosive crescendos, such as the one at rehearsal no. 22, also help to depict the arrival at the precipitous cliffs of the island where the music explodes into towering chords that triggers our imagination and emotions when confronting to such a breath-taking environment.\(^{38}\) At the same time, the composer used the overwhelming acoustic effects, together with the enhanced texture and thickened orchestration, to create the *virtual space* acoustically, so that listener can experience the terrors of Death, as if landed on

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\(^{38}\) Harrison, 150.
The Isle of the Dead. In a similar manner, the gradual diminution of thematic material (conjoined with the dissolving dynamics) later helps to convey an image of departure. Again, these demonstrate a mix of several metaphorical signs to illustrate the action and the space, as depicted in the painting, with the use of various musical elements to lift up the intensity. All of them developed into a spatial description of the environment, which is essential for creating a vivid image of the spiritual landscape.

When we come to examine Rachmaninov’s orchestration in this work, his refined techniques have contributed to the depiction of both the physical and subjective aspects of the painting. For example, at one crucial point (m. 11 after rehearsal no. 22) after the loudest climax at the end of second section, the Dies irae appears in solo violin, playing perhaps on the traditional association of the Devil with this instrument. In addition, the heavy use of brass instruments further builds up the images of broadness and grandeur that connotes to the solemnity when one is confronted by the huge stones and tall pillar of trees on the island. Examples such as the fanfare tutti chords (diminished seventh chord of F minor) by brass instrument in dotted rhythm—which first appear just before the second section (at mm. 9–12 after rehearsal no. 14, example 7.20)—announce the arrival at the island. When they later reappear in mm. 7–9 after rehearsal no. 22 as a signature of the situation of death (example 7.21), the effect is so powerful that they act as a kind of rhetorical statement, utilizing a grand gesture to make an authoritative declamation, possibly made by Death himself. Conventionally, brass instruments have often been considered as capable of conveying status and authority. The horn as a traditional hunting instrument signifies some kinds of
authoritative statement and nobility. Its natural timbre—together with the other low sounding instruments, such as bass clarinet—symbolizes the expanses of nature, wide-open spaces, yearning and solitude. This demonstrates another type of musical description, riding on the use of instrumentation as iconicities, to depict a forceful scene as imagined by the composer.

Example 7.19 The Isle of the Dead: *Strings part (rehearsal no. 9)*

Example 7.20 The Isle of the Dead: *Horn, trumpet, trombone, tuba, and timpani parts (mm. 9–12 after rehearsal no. 14)*
Description involves a redundancy of referential features, there is often various referential signs pointing towards the same object or phenomenon. In Rachmaninov’s work, the multiplication of such referentiality is obvious. For example, when describing the boat on the water, the 5/8 meter gives a metaphorical illustration, which appears throughout the whole of Section A, in the same form, albeit in varied keys. Rachmaninov uses musical signs, such as low strings timbre, soft dynamic and minor tonality, in addition to sometimes making use of the brass instruments to enhance the mournful and haunting atmosphere to the scene. To describe the topic of death, not only he continually uses the Dies irae motif in varied forms and varied instrumental parts, the low strings timbre, the 5/8 motif, the sonorities of brass instrument, and the minor tonalities are the musical signifiers that all point towards death. Some have a stronger associations and some a more remote one, some are metaphorical and some are connotative; nonetheless, they all reinforce the same experience or
emotion relating to what we have experienced in the painting. I have
summarized how different musical signs help to describe the same objects or
phenomena in Table 7.22. We can see that the redundancy of the referential
features is so extensive, that it certainly puts this work in the category of a
descriptive musical work.

*Table 7.22 The Isle of the Dead: Musical Descriptions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Musical Descriptions</th>
<th>Musical Signifiers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Water/ boating scene</td>
<td>Continued use of ¾ meter, 3+2 or 2+3 grouping of eighth notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Constant crescendos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Static harmony, pedal point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dark scene, haunting &amp; dreamlike atmosphere</td>
<td>Low register sound, Low strings timbre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dark orchestral colors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Minor tonalities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tutti chords and brass instruments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death</td>
<td>Dies Irae motif (in varied forms and keys)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Minor tonalities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stillness conveyed by 5/8 meter and through static harmonic progression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chordal fanfare statement by brass instruments (mm. 253-259)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Instrumentation, i.e., use of brass instruments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joyful memory of life</td>
<td>E-flat major, dance meter, triplet and dotted rhythm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Long and lyrical melody</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flute and violin in unison to create a resonant blend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Instrumentation—woodwind as the melodic instruments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forceful and chilling moment</td>
<td>Tutti chords in full strength</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thickened texture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Explosive crescendo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sudden halt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acceleration of speed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Through the diagrammatic use of the various musical icons that have been discussed, the composer has created an illusion of a musical environment, one that is depicted on the painting. The composer has used all these musical iconicities to illustrate metaphorically the environment depicted in the painting—both its physical and its subjective reality. In the same way, Böcklin not only portrayed the physical components of the environment. He also made use of various visual treatments, such as color, shade or proportion, to convey the mood of his painting. This Symbolist painting style, when transferred to music by Rachmaninov, not only reflects the mood conveyed by the painter, but Rachmaninov has also projected himself to the environment and included his own emotional response towards Böcklin’s \textit{Die Toteninsel}. The subjective responses of Böcklin and Rachmaninov are entangled in the symphonic poem, and it is not possible to distinguish or separate them clearly. As a result, we can see that the musical description of the painting is no longer just a reference to its physical features, as a large portion is devoted to the description of the subjective side of the painting. Thus, it seems that this subjective portion is indispensable in a musical work, even in a descriptive work such as this. It also fulfills the ‘vividness’ requirement of a description, in that it should involve the ‘emotional engagement’ of the audience in the qualities of the subject.
**DISCUSSION**

*The Isle of the Dead* reveals how the temporal nature of music facilitates a narrative approach to make sense of various musical signs of the work, and to present the content not visibly displayed in the original painting. This temporal nature allows us to put different scenes in a meaningful or teleological order, therefore making sense of the second section against the first one. This facilitates listeners in searching for the meaning of the work, and becomes benefits for music as a medium for representation. As Charles Rosen said, “the portrayal of change, the representation of a reality that is fluid, ever in motion, is generally acknowledged as typical of Romantic style, and it is indeed *no less powerful* in music and painting than in literature.”

In addition, the temporal nature of music also allows us to transcend the original source of artwork, and in Rachmaninov’s case, to extend the painting further. In Böcklin’s painting, there is a sense of despair associated with the withdrawal from life. Rachmaninov’s music has brought us to experience not just this despair, but also the sweet earthly memory in the ‘life’ section, probably his ideal life on earth. If we adopt the literary technique of description, this second section indeed serves as a flashback—the dead soul is looking back to his or her life on earth, inducing all the blissful memories and remembrance. This is a place where an author would freeze the action, insert an emotional description, and release the tension of the story.

It is generally understood that music is a temporal medium, in contrast to the spatial quality of painting. Painting is in essence a descriptive medium, whilst music is more a narrative one. However, this is only true when we compare the two media at the material level (materiality). Every medium has the potential to extend beyond its limitation of materiality. As a medium of time, music has the potential to portray space in musical works in the way I have attempted to demonstrate in *The Isle of the Dead*. Lars Elleström called it *virtual space*—“the spatial character of depth in the perception and interpretation…by means of resemblance of certain visual qualities in the perceived world they give the illusion of a third, depth, which creates a virtual space in the mind of the beholder.”40 The acoustic illustration of the environment of *The Isle of the Dead* through various musical signs—including high and low pitches, loud and soft dynamics, echo effects—creates an illusion of depth and distance, which then help to depict the spatial aspect of the image of the painting, thereby transferring the visual signs (of the painting) to musical signs.

The creation of this *virtual space* is very important in description, especially when considering that description in art should aim to produce a visual mind-image to make one believe. In novel writing, Pamuk called it *landscape*, and by describing this landscape in words, the novelist aims at “evoking a very clear and distinct image in the mind of the reader through the use of words.”41 Pamuk explained the idea of landscape painting in a novel:

41 Pamuk, 93.
Whatever the writer’s intention maybe, the feature that I am calling the “landscape” of the novel—the objects, words, dialogues, and everything which is visible—should be seen as integral to, and an extension of, the hero’s emotions. This is made possible by the novel’s secret center, which I have mentioned before.\textsuperscript{42}

Pamuk pointed out that a novelist is not simply anyone who wants to become a painter to ‘paint’ a landscape; rather, he or she “seeks the ability to paint with words and descriptions.”\textsuperscript{43} More importantly, it is through the description of these visible aspects that the ‘hero’s emotion’ is reflected. When we consider music as the medium of art, the \textit{scenic setting}, or the virtual space creation, is as important as the landscape painting, as Pamuk has noted. This has also been shown in the case of Respighi’s \textit{Trittico Botticelliano}, as well as in Rachmaninov’s \textit{The Isle of the Dead}.

The evaluation of the descriptive aspect of \textit{The Isle of the Dead} is the key issue of this paper. Regarding its descriptivity, the central question is the \textit{referentiality}, i.e., whether the musical signs have pointed towards the object-centered features, as well as the subject-centered reality. As I have shown, \textit{The Isle of the Dead} has very few musical signs of iconic (or mimetic) nature that directly imitate the sounds of natural objects. (The sound of unearthly creatures and the depiction of waves via the 5/8 figures could marginally be considered iconic signs.) However, it employs many metaphorical as well as symbolic connotations, such as the 5/8 motif to illustrate the water scene, the \textit{Dies irae} motif to connote the topic of death, the low register and dark sonorities to depict the mysterious and

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 105.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 115.
sorrowful atmosphere, and a ‘romantic’ key and dance-like triple meter to illustrate the sweet memories of earthly life. All these allow the listeners to have an extraordinary experience, as well as assisting in developing a mental image of this place of afterlife.

Here, we come to the problems of referentiality again—the question of whether music can represent something extra-musical in a concrete manner. The limitation in hetero-referentiality prevents music from conveying concrete settings, time, characters and actions, because, to a certain degree, music resists referentiality, whether in a narrative or descriptive work. As a result, intermedial references are essential in delivering a definite programme or topic that the composer intends in his mind, or the source of inspiration that produced the work. In a letter, Rachmaninov once wrote that “there must be something definite before my mind. When composing, I find it of great help to have in mind a book just recently read, or a beautiful picture, or a poem. Sometimes a definite story is kept in mind, which I try to convert into tones without disclosing the source of my inspiration.”44 In the case of The Isle of the Dead, the picture in the composer’s mind is undoubtedly the pictorial work of Böcklin. He was deeply touched by the atmospheric impression given by the painting, that he noted, “I was not much moved by the color of the painting. If I had seen the original first, I might not have composed my Isle of the Dead. I like the picture best in black and white.”45 The black and white version of the painting is even more sentimental and atmospheric than the colored one. We can see that Rachmaninov was deeply moved by the melancholy of the painting, and that is why his

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44 Sergei Bertensson and Jay Leyder, Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Life Time in Music (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 156.
45 Ibid.
symphonic poem is even more mythological and spiritual. As a result, we can understand that Rachmaninov was more concerned with depicting the subjective reactions, as he himself revealed in his letter to von Struve, where he explained how he was moved by the black and white version of such an atmospheric painting, rather than the colored original one that would have otherwise been too explicit. It would have allowed Rachmaninov to read too much into it.\textsuperscript{46} This argument shows again that the emotional description in music is more crucial than the description of the physical objects.

Earlier in chapter six, I identified problems concerning the imprecise definitions of narrative and descriptive music, by which almost all music with extra-musical content would be generally regarded as narrative music. As I have also discussed, that in literary narration authors follow a teleological flow; while in description, the focus in on a referential drive of exhausting an object. This musical case exhibits, on one hand, the presence of some core narratemes to provide a frame of reference to a narrative interpretation of the meaning of the musical work (through intermedial reference). On the other hand, it also fulfills the descriptive requirement of referentiality and reinforces the mind’s image. As stated earlier, narrativity is a \textit{gradable} concept, depending on the nature and number of narratemes contained in a narrative work.\textsuperscript{47} The extent of narrativity of \textit{The Isle of the Dead} is, in my view, at the lower end of the spectrum, owing to its weak causal relationships and sparse actions or events revealed in the work. Taking a narrative approach, while sequences of events are present, these events are not developed towards a goal-oriented ending. There is a plot—where the

\textsuperscript{46} Harrison, 149.  
\textsuperscript{47} Wolf, “Cross the Border,” 86.
boat transporting the dead soul lands at the island and then returns—but the actions are minimal and not truly developed. This musical work is not as vividly eventful as one would expect in a literary narrative. If our criteria for narrative remain tied to the literary models, then *The Isle of the Dead* would certainly fail to meet most of the requirements. The several scenes of events, or the scenic pictures as depicted musically by Rachmaninov, are just logically arranged. His work simply conveys several shifting moments after death.

While plot is present in this work, the musical events may just essentially respond to the exigencies of musical form and process. The temporal nature of music would nevertheless automatically arrange musical events in some logical way, guiding us to narratize the musical events in the same logical sequence. I have pointed out previously that there is usually no patterned order for arranging the descriptive elements within an artwork. The temporality of music thus provides a track field for organizing the musical descriptive elements and generates meaning in consequence. The same order would nevertheless emerge in many other so-called ‘narrative’ or ‘narrative-like’ musical works. This would help us to rationalize and justify the musical signs as it provides a logical framework or connection for various musical signs within the work. As Jeffrey Kittay has stated, “...it is upon narrative that description is to depend, it is narrative which is called upon to hold and control it. It is the representation of action which is there to keep description in its place.”[^48] The spatial aspect of experience (descriptive) is therefore converted into a temporal sequence; and it is only in music, a temporal art medium that the aesthetic illusion of the descriptive scenes and the

emotions can develop and unfold in an organized way. Therefore, it is more of a quasi-narrative in nature. I would rather call a musical work such as this an extended description, as it is mainly describing various scenes that are suitably arranged in some sense of logical relationship.

Rachmaninov himself might not have been interested in telling a story through his symphonic poem. Rather, the abundance of atmospheric description and lyricism of mood are the keys to his music. What Rachmaninov has described is of great specificity of affect; we listen to the piece, we are drawn to the emotional state, rather than simply being told about events. In doing so, we actually experience the emotions—melancholy, sorrow, anxiety, relief, and the pleasure of consolation. Like many other Rachmaninov’s works, the music discussed here reflects his melancholy soul, which was occupied by the darker side of life. As Lawrence Kramer has pointed out, “music is the supplement of narrative. Emotionally suggestive and technically arcane, music adds itself to the closed circle—apparently all self-sufficiency and self-evidence—of an acknowledged story.”

Music serves as an accompaniment to such a story, expanding it, and often extending beyond its limits. It leads listeners to experience the sentiments by bypassing the verbal medium as we are used to. Similarly, the musical description might also function as a supplement to the visual art, in which various musical signs not only transform the visual signs to musical ones, but also elaborate on emotional expressivity, so that we could develop a more vivid picture fused with the intended affection. Description is therefore not an end in itself. Through descriptions, composers extend what Pamuk identified as the

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49 Kramer, Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge, 111-112.
hero’s emotion. This ‘hero’ could be the fictional character—in this case, the dead soul—or he could be the painter, Böcklin, or even the composer himself.
Chapter 8  Conclusion: Music As a Medium of Description

At the beginning of this paper, I identified the lack of a precise definition of description in the study of music in particular, as a problem that has made this study about musical descriptive a particular challenging one. The limitation of musical hetero-referentiality, and the undefined musical signification process, further put musicologists in an unfavorable position for evaluating the potential of musical descriptive. It is not my aim to sort out all of these fundamental problems, particularly those related to the nature and signification systems of music. It would also be unrealistic for a dissertation as such to resolve all the controversial issues regarding representation in music. Through examining some of the existing studies and concepts of description and narrative from language studies, I have wanted to arrive at a more concrete definition of musical description, and evaluate how and to what extent musical descriptive is possible, through various in-depth case studies of musical works inspired by a pictorial source.

Semiotic Nature of Music

Music is an art of inward affection. Its subjective and intimate natures make it stand apart from other arts. Unlike verbal signs that are solely symbolic and mostly univocal in nature, music contains signs of iconic, indexical, and symbolic
nature. In musical signification, these signs generate numerous interpretants, and these interpretants themselves become other signs that are involved in multiple chains of signification processes at the same time. Together with the mixing of natures of various musical signs in terms of iconic, indexical, and symbolic functions, these make the web of musical signification a very complicated and less-easy-to-define one. To put it another way, musical signs are indeterminate because the relationships between the signs, their objects, and interpretants are too complicated, and at the same time the same musical sign can generate an infinite number of signifieds and interpretants. However, the identification of the iconic, indexical, and symbolic nature of musical signs, as well as the understanding of intrinsic and extrinsic semiotics, reveals to us the nature of the signification relationship between musical signs and the extra-musical world. Riding on these natures of musical signs, musical description functions through devices including aural iconicity, metaphorical illustration, and symbolic connotation. Music achieves its representation of the external world through direct imitation via sounds (i.e. aural iconicity), borrowing or transferal of meaning via the use of metaphors (i.e. metaphorical illustration), as well as riding on convention and culture to generate semantic content (i.e. symbolic connotation). In addition, music can achieve the hetero-referentiality through triggering states of emotion that are similar to the same experience of the physical objects or phenomena. Music has only sounds; it can act only by acoustic musical signs in a direct way. However, by provoking a subjective state that objects or phenomena inspire in us, music represents different facets of reality through various acoustic signifiers and signifieds.
Definition of Description – From a Medial Point of View

As a semiotic mode of organization, the core feature of description lies in the aspect of referentiality. Description functions as a means of *identification and reference* through vivid representation of an object or phenomenon in the world. Wolf reminds us that the object-centered referentiality is the key to description, because it is only through referring to the physical attributes or external features of an object or phenomenon that description can achieve its function of identification and referentiality. As I have discussed, this view of description, emphasizing its functionality and physical appeal, is quite a pragmatic view. Description in art domains, however, serves more than just identification or reference. As a result, the study of its original form—*ekphrasis*—has informed us of the ultimate purpose of description, that is, to create a vivid image in which someone may believe. This involves *not* just the plain laying down of a list of physical attributes, or the sensory qualities of the descriptive object or phenomenon, but also personal and subjective emotional responses with regard to the experience of the subject. Art should take up a role to reflect this subjectivity, either on its own, or from one form to another, and only this vivid, imaginative evocation serves the ultimate purpose of aesthetic forms of description.

In poetic usage, as Bernhart has pointed out, the purpose of description is only ‘verisimilitude.’ Poetic description consists of imaginative evocation (*phantasia*) of previous experience and the emotional involvement (*pathē*) that altogether account for description’s affective effectiveness (*enargeia*). It sheds further

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1 Bernhart, 149.
light on our idea that the immediacy of the effect of subjective emotion is frequently of higher importance than a straightforward description of an external reality. This is particularly true in music. As I have demonstrated in the discussion of *Tonmalerei* and *Kunstkritik*, emotional representation and its unique functioning in expressivity are what a musical work is all about. I have also discussed the aesthetic concepts of Berlioz and Liszt, where the subjective aspect of musical work is often the essential and indispensable part of the music. For musical work of descriptive nature, the description of physical elements should therefore be subordinate to the emotional aspect of the music. Or we could say, the emotional expressivity of music should always be given the prime concern in music, rather than anything else. The descriptive content of the work is necessary in the sense that it signifies the extra-musical world and provides denotative meaning for the musical content. The description of physical world is not, in any event, the ultimate goal for a musical work.

As I have stressed, description in art involves the construction of an illusionary world which offers a unique virtual experience to audience. This is very common and used extensively in literary description. To quote Pamuk again, novels are essentially “visual literary fictions [as opposed to verbal fictions].” He pointed out that a novel exerts its influence on readers mostly by “addressing our visual intelligence – our ability to see things in our mind’s eye and to turn words into mental pictures.”² He considered that even life-like descriptions in literature often contain constructive elements; they are rarely true ‘re-presentations.’ This

² Pamuk, 92.
creation of mental pictures would nevertheless involve description of subjective aspects. In literary writing, writers often intentionally avoid a direct description of physical objects, but rather, there are some indirect ways that “process the description through the character’s consciousness”:

All three of these techniques—showing a character’s inner life through thoughts, dreams and fantasies, describing the world that passes before a character’s eyes, and rendering a character’s interior rhythm—are indirect methods of description. That is, the writer does not directly describe a person, scene or event, but rather processes the description through the character’s consciousness.³

Hence, I reject the weighted emphasis on object-centered referentiality and recommend a reconsideration of the definition of description. I propose that both object-centered and subject-centered referentiality be taken up in equal importance when we consider description, particularly the aesthetic forms of description. Achieving referentiality through a plurality of qualities and features should therefore not be confined to external and/or physical attributes. What is important in description is, the audience should be emotionally engaged in aesthetic description. Hence, qualities or features of the subjective or emotional aspect should also account for a descriptive form of art.

The case study of Liszt’s *Sposalizio* shows that music relies heavily on metaphorical and symbolic significations to generate meaning and associations with the extra-musical world. Musical signs often exercise a kind of metaphor-

³ McClanahan, 134-5.
like effect, which, as noted by Treitler, “inhabits a realm where imagination, not logic, rules.” Liszt’s work demonstrated that it is the power of emotional expressivity in music that brings us to the same states of emotion that external object or event can. The ability of music to ‘describe’ things, therefore, is found to a great extent in its emotional expressivity (or, in its capacity to express emotions). Liszt saw in the painting a kind of symbolism that reflected the expressive potential of music. In a verbal medium, it is difficult to describe without involving the description of sensory and concrete images. It is even more complicated for verbal medium to describe abstract concepts, such as emotions and atmosphere. Yet, music can bypass these verbal constraints: in music, the vivid representation of an object or phenomenon is often achieved by directly retracing the feeling or emotion that the object or phenomenon induces. The listeners will therefore be closer to the portrayed feelings, as “she will not have to go through the portrayal of the behavior in order to ascertain what feelings are portrayed.” Music as a medium fits more the description of inner life, rather than the physical object. This gives music a unique position as a medium of representation.

Potential of Musical Description – Music as a Medium for Descriptive

However, music cannot rely solely on the description of the subjective state or the emotional reality in order to be a medium of description. It should also have the possibility of referring to an extra-musical object or phenomenon through

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4 Treitler, 20.
5 Walton, 72.
both object-centered and subject-centered referentialities. The study of Respighi’s Trittico Botticelliano demonstrated how the composer tactically borrowed musical elements from pre-existing works (which I call the musical paraphrase) to simulate the effect of an iconic sign. The opening trills in Primavera and La Nascita di Venere imitate the gentle wind or sea breeze as an iconic sign to depict the visual element in the paintings. At the same time, these musical signs are also understood as a symbol for spring and its vitality, especially with reference to Vivaldi’s La Primavera. Respighi also quoted other pre-existing musical materials, such as the troubadour song A l’entarde del tens clar, the plainchant Veni Veni Emmanuel, and the Italian Christmas carol, Tu scendi dalle stelle, to generate ‘mental pictures’ associated with the visual and atmospheric natures of La Primavera and L’Adorazione dei Magi. This kind of inter-musical reference generates referential meaning that helps to represent both the objective and subjective aspects of the painting in a more vivid and concrete manner, as opposed to other kinds of musical description using metaphorical or symbolic signs. The borrowing of musical reference not only helps to draw an association with the musical topic, it also imports all the related stylistic and emotional attributes that are attached to the original works, achieving a more concrete description of both the physical and emotional reality of the paintings.
Musical Narrative – Providing a Framework for the Understanding of Musical Description

Like description, narrative is another semiotic mode of representation that invites even more discussion and study, both in linguistic and music fields of academic studies. Musicologists are particularly interested to look into musical narratives (rather than musical descriptive), probably owing to the temporal nature of music that naturally makes it a perfect medium for narrativity. Music scholars have largely used the term ‘narrative’ to describe all musical works that relate to extra-musical topics, regardless of whether narrative or descriptive is actually involved. This reflects the conceptual confusion between descriptive and narrative in music studies. The discussion of musical narrative therefore has served two purposes in this paper. First, a musical work of narrative nature inevitably has to refer to and offer extra-musical meaning. The discussion of its narrative aspect is therefore intended to reveal its deepest referential potential, and that in returns facilitates our understanding of music as a medium of description. Second, with a more concrete definition and in-depth understanding of the nature of description, I have reviewed the musical case of Rachmaninov’s The Isle of the Dead to see the extent to which it is a work of narrative (or descriptive), and through which I have attempted to set up an example for future studies on the differentiation of narrative and descriptive music.

We are often tempted to speak of musical narrative, and not just because of the inherent temporal nature of music that facilitates the teleological arrangement of musical events. As Nattiez has observed, human beings are symbolic animals;
we seek to interpret musical signs and to assign meaning to them.\textsuperscript{6} The natural human narrative impulse, as discussed both by Agawu and Nattiez, is triggered when we are exposed to musical works, owing to both its temporal nature and our meaning-seeking instinct. It directs us to find causal relationships between various musical events in order to come up with meanings. Bernhart even proposed there might be ‘a descriptive impulse’ (as opposed to Nattiez’s “narrative impulse”). As audiences are exposed to descriptive work, it would trigger their descriptive impulses, and “invites them to recall in their imagination emotionally colored experiences of objects and events as they find them in the painting.”\textsuperscript{7} Knowing more about descriptivity in music would certainly guide us on the exploration of this descriptive impulse, whatever aesthetic medium we are referring to.

As I have discussed, both narrative and descriptive help people to organize experience, and to make sense of the things happening in our world. Their contradictions on one hand and complementarities on the other hand, make the study of this topic complicated, and yet challenging. Description and narration seems to be discrete concepts, but in many cases they are actually inseparable. They are often positioned at opposing sides because descriptive concerns \textit{space} while narrative concerns \textit{time}. Descriptive deals with \textit{referentiality} while narrative deals with \textit{action}. However, the two seemingly contradictory concepts actually often work together. In narrative writing, description serves to modulate the pace of the story, by creating tension, suspension, elaboration and relaxation. It is also used to suggest emotions, as well as reinforce aesthetic illusion. When

\textsuperscript{6} Nattiez, \textit{Music and Discourse}, 128.
\textsuperscript{7} Bernhart, 149.
description is integrated as part of the story, it functions in elaborating and rationalizing the events of a story, as well as supplying vivid images for the story, therefore enhancing the sense of reality of the narrative work. In returns, the narrative framework of music provides a meaning-generating framework for description—a logical framework for the connection of various musical signs within the work to generate meanings. The unfolding of this narrative-situated description is particularly illuminating for our understanding of musical description, because the temporal nature of music automatically offers a narrative framework for description, and as a result, the musical descriptions often functions like a narrative-situated one in narrative writing.

In this way, the temporal nature of music facilitates a narrative approach to make sense of the various musical signs in The Isle of the Dead, which then allows us to rationalize the content that is both visibly and not-visibly displayed in the original painting. Taking the narrative approach, we can posit that Rachmaninov’s work has extended the content of the original static medium, that is, Böcklin’s painting, Die Toteninsel, to a realm of a deeper nature. His music brings us to experience not just of the despair and somber mood that is displayed in Böcklin’s painting, but also the cherished earthly memory of the ‘life’ section—a depiction of Rachmaninov’s ideal paradise. However, the potential of extending beyond the original source does not limit its content level. Every medium does have its limitation on material levels, and yet they also have the capability of extending beyond their limitation of materiality at the same time. Painting as a spatial art does have the possibility to overcome its narrative deficiency by incorporating narrative elements of other sources or attaching its
content to mythology or other known stories. Music, on the other hand, can also portray visionary space or landscape. In *The Isle of the Dead*, Rachmaninov has transposed the visual signs of a more static and image-based nature to musical signs to produce even more affectionate and evocative images. As in the previous two musical cases (Liszt’s *Sposalizio* and Respighi’s *Trittico Botticelliano*), Rachmaninov’s work shows us how a musical work inspired by painting translates the visual sensations to musical ones, and by further enhancing the emotional appeal, how the new artwork delivers the atmospheric image of the original works by further uplifting the aesthetic value and spirit of the original. As I have demonstrated, music can transcend its temporal medial nature and portrays a *virtual space*, through which it achieves descriptivity. The acoustic illustration of the environment of *The Isle of the Dead* through various musical signs, including high and low pitches, loud and soft dynamics, echo effects, and variety of timbres and textures, create an illusion of depth and distance (or, what has also been called ‘acousmatic space’), which then helps to depict the spatial aspects of the image of the painting. Symbolically, the incorporation of *Dies irae* motif informs listener about the occasion relating to death, that further enhances the mournful and lamenting atmosphere. This *scenic depiction*, just as Respighi created in the three movements of *Trittico Botticelliano*, not only describes the physical aspects of the paintings, it also transports all the stylistic and emotional aspects of the painting, which function like a landscape depiction in literary works.

I often doubt whether music is inherently a narrative medium, and that is why I posit a query on whether all the so-called narrative musical works are really
narrative ones. On one hand, the evaluation on both the narrative and descriptive aspects of *The Isle of the Dead* exhibits some core narratemes that have provided a frame of reference on which various musical signs generate their signification. On the other hand it also fulfills the descriptive requirement of referentiality and mind-imagery reinforcing. As I have pointed out, a general plot is evidenced in this musical work. However, the several scenes of event, or the scenic pictures, as depicted musically by Rachmaninov, are just logically arranged. They simply convey several shifting moments after death. Music is not aimed at ‘telling a story.’ Most composers, if not all, do not intend to tell a story in the same way as literature does. The musical events are probably responding to the exigencies of musical form and its temporal process. As I have discussed in the case of *The Isle of the Dead*, there is only a general plot, but the actions are minimal and not truly developed. This musical work is not as vividly eventful as one would find in a literary narrative. It is more of an atmospheric description of several scenic pictures as inspired by the painting (and emotional reactions towards the topic of death). It is, therefore, more of a quasi-narrative in nature, or what I would call an *extended description*. I believe there are numerous other musical works that seems ‘narrative,’ but which in fact fall into the same category of *The Isle of the Dead*, perhaps better to be defined as an extended description rather than a truly narrative work. More case studies on musical works of programmatic content are therefore required for establishing a more precise and detailed definition of this ‘genre,’ which I should leave to future researchers.

Returning to my ultimate question: to what extent can music describe? I am not in agreement with the notion that music has only very limited capacities in
description. As I have shown, as a medium for instinctive feeling its potential in descriptivity is largely accomplished through its power of expressivity, despite the fact that its potential for the delivery of physical description is still possible through various imitative and connotative devices, as well as through intermedial references or musical paraphrases. The view of a limited descriptive potential in music is partly owed to our narrow view of description, are that focuses mostly on physical reality, and more particularly it owes to our naïve understanding of the nature of music as a medium of representation. There are certainly fundamental differences between various arts and media, particularly when we talk about their natures with regard to time and space. As I have reiterated, each medium has an individual potential to extend beyond its limitation of time and space, and various media may also join together to deliver intermedial art of various kinds. The medial boundaries (or media borders, as they are called by linguistics scholars) seem no longer to be defined as before. Intermedial studies are therefore becoming even more important. Studies on intermediality concern intermedial relationships, and are “about studying all kinds of media with a high level of awareness of the modalities of media and the crucial modal differences and similarities of media.”

These inter-art researches, including this one, allow us to reveal the best potential of each medium, so that artists can create and perform, as well as understand their individual arts better. An intermedial study on musical works inspired by the paintings reveals medial aspects not limited to just music and painting, and aspects of the nature of verbal media have also been unveiled. As Elleström

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stated, “what makes intermedial studies important is that they offer insights into the medial nature of all media, not only a selection of peripheral media.”

Although a direct transferal of concepts or theories from one medium to the study of another medium may encounter problems, an intermedial approach to description is still beneficial. It facilitates collaborations between various media, not just in research but also in developing new forms of art particularly in the twenty-first century. Our concepts of media have expanded towards many other different types, such as film, photography, and the internet; this is also a time when we advocate the crossing of borders between media for interaction and integration. The collaboration of different media might also inspire new formats of performance, and to provide multiplicity of experiences to modern audiences. Although there is no space to explain this in detail, I hope my study might encourage performance of the three studied works which ‘cross the border’ of medial appreciation. With the technology available today, immersing the audience in the image as well as the music could be done easily, and in different formats. I believe it is essential for the academic field to broaden our views on medially and all kinds of modes of representation, as well as to emancipate media studies from traditional art forms to include other and newer arts.

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9 Ibid.
10 As in my case, the direct borrowing of concepts relating to descriptive from literary studies on examining musical descriptive is not always feasible. We always need to revisit the concepts and reconsider the nature of the medium under discussion.
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