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James H. Rubin and Olivia Mattis, eds., *Rival Sisters, Art and Music at the Birth of Modernism, 1815-1915*. Farnham, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014. xiv + 389 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$129.95 U.S. (hb) ISBN 978-1-4094-2070-5.

Review by Peter L. Schmunk, Wofford College.

Since the 1990s an increasing number of scholarly studies have explored the interrelations of music and the visual arts during the nineteenth century, especially the latter half of that period. Among the best of recent books on this topic is this collection of essays edited by James H. Rubin and Olivia Mattis. Originating as a double session of papers presented at the 2011 annual meeting of the College Art Association, followed that same year by an international conference at Stony Brook Manhattan on inter-art dialogues during the periods of Romanticism and Modernism, this project has yielded a substantial body of original and compelling research. The book includes a lengthy introduction by the editors followed by fourteen essays on discrete topics focused in most cases on individual artworks or artists, from Friedrich and Delacroix at the beginning of the century to Rodin, Debussy, and Matisse at the end. The authors represented include a number of the most active and influential scholars currently working in this burgeoning field of research.

While the book's title suggests a balance between art and music, as broad areas of investigation or as influences on one another, and though the editors include an art historian (Rubin) and a musicologist (Mattis), they acknowledge an "emphasis on visuality" (p. 1) at the conferences that preceded the book and the dominance of art history in the published essays. Such stress is appropriate given the far greater reliance on music as a model for painting than the reverse. Enormous prestige was accorded to music during the nineteenth century due to its unprecedented accessibility with the establishment of public concerts and concert halls, the accomplishments of major creative personalities such as Mozart, Beethoven, and Wagner, and the revelatory example that music offered of a nonrepresentational art that might yet have prodigious emotional impact. It was exalted by various commentators as the "most romantic of all the arts" (E.T.A. Hoffmann) and "the art of the century" (the English minister and essayist H.R. Haweis).<sup>[1]</sup> The editors observe that "far more art historians than musicologists are engaged in this line of research" (p. 25), and *Rival Sisters* conforms to this pattern. All but three of the fourteen contributors are art historians. Nine of the collected essays concern artistic developments in France, while one or two each focus on Germany, England, and the United States. In number and variety the essays underscore the primacy of Paris as a locus of inter-arts critical and creative activity, but it was German music, especially that of Beethoven and Wagner, that French artists found hugely compelling in conceptualizing music-based models for their own art.

In their opening essay, Rubin and Mattis introduce the concepts of rival sisters, analogy, and convergence as ways of understanding the art-music relationship during the nineteenth century. The idea of the different arts as sisters, a metaphor embodied in the Greek muses, has its origins in the ancient world. With Leonardo's *paragone* arguments and the emphasis on precise definitions and the delineation of differences in Enlightenment theory, the relationship between the arts "grew into rivalry, with music and

painting offering competing paradigms for the creative process” (p. 1). But by the 1820s, Delacroix expressed appreciation for music’s autonomy, its freedom from subject matter, and aspired to the formal ideal of “musical painting,” even while ranking music inferior to painting as an art because of its imprecision of meaning and its taxing demands on the listener to gather and interpret sensory experience over long periods of time. Over the course of the nineteenth century, “competition grew into collaboration” (p. 3). In 1888, Van Gogh predicted: “Painting as it is now promises to become more subtle—more like music and less like sculpture—and above all it promises *color*. If only it keeps this promise.”<sup>[2]</sup> Odilon Redon conceded that music was a more powerful art than the one he practiced as a painter.<sup>[3]</sup> Indeed, most of the book’s essays explore the various ways that painters sought to emulate, borrow from, or model themselves and their art after music, and thus a more appropriate title might have been “amiable” or “intimate” sisters.

The editors ground the concepts of analogy and convergence in the mid-century writings of Louis Viardot (*ut pictura musica*) and Walter Pater (“all art consistently aspires to the condition of music”), both well-known and often cited as seminal statements of the paradigmatic value of music for the other arts.<sup>[4]</sup> Rubin and Mattis employ these terms for the purpose of linking the book’s varied essays, but acknowledge some ambiguity in their application: “these ostensibly opposed models in many cases combine in varied proportions” (p. 4). In “Music as Magic Architecture: Immersive Environments in Baudelaire and Whistler,” for example, Suzanne Singletary identifies analogies to music in a number of Whistler’s image-making strategies: his use of musical titles to elicit “a visceral, non-intellectual response” (p. 96) to his insistently non-narrative paintings; the reductive formalism of his images, especially the *Nocturnes*; his so-called *Six Projects*, which were intended to unfold in a theme-and-variations pattern around the walls of a room; and his creation of all-encompassing environments such as the Peacock Room wherein “aural, visual, and tactile elements...consecutively and continuously reverberate throughout the room” (p. 102). This last example would seem to exemplify a kind of *gesamtkunstwerk*, an ideal that the editors associate, along with synesthesia, with the concept of convergence. Julie Ramos, in her especially informative essay on “Caspar David Friedrich and Music: A ‘Divine Kingdom of Hearing’?,” demonstrates with admirable clarity that “music appears in both forms in Friedrich’s work: on the one hand in his project of a *union* [or convergence] between painting and music, and on the other hand through the notion of an *analogy* between the two forms of expression” (p. 54). Her topic is Friedrich’s effort, eventually abandoned, to combine painted transparencies with the actual performance of music. The three images that survive have musical subjects but also embody the artist’s characteristic endeavor to reveal an underlying quasi-mathematical order in the visible world, the “music of the landscape,” and to stir feelings of transcendence as were associated with both abstract instrumental music and the choral music of the Protestant church. Generally useful as over-arching conceptual labels, the concepts of analogy and convergence are only occasionally cited by the various contributing scholars. As the editors acknowledge, they sometimes overlap or co-exist in specific artworks and may be problematic to employ.

Following the editors’ introductory essay, Simon Shaw-Miller asserts, in “*Opsis Melos Lexis*: Before and Around the Total Work of Art,” that “the interdependence [of image, music, and text], not their independence, is among their most salient characteristics.” (p. 37) This insightful discussion locates many of the foundational terms of subsequent debates in the *Poetics* of Aristotle and then traces the shifts of emphasis and argument in the writings of such seminal figures as Lessing, Nietzsche, Wagner, Greenberg, Frye, Cage, and Barthes. Shaw-Miller reminds us that Aristotelian poetics was the “historic touchstone” for the critical projects of Wagner and Nietzsche in the mid-nineteenth century, but for them music merited a more exalted place in relation to the other arts. Wagner ascribed to instrumental music “a faculty of speech” with “the power of uttering the verbally inexpressible.” For Nietzsche music embodied “the essential idea of the world, and the dramatic work of art was merely “a reflection of this idea, a detached adumbration of it.”<sup>[5]</sup> Shaw-Miller emphasizes that we can only fully separate between sense perceptions in analysis, not in experience, and that signs do not exist in a pure state but inescapably “take on symbolic dimensions.” (p. 47) The word “desert,” for example, will inevitably call to mind images of such a place particular to the experience of the individual subject, as well as associated sounds such as

wind or silence. Thus, he argues “a rigorous, emphatic, and essential partition between the arts is often a doomed endeavor, for it ignores the fluid nature of the true relationships between *opsis*, *melos*, and *lexis*.” (p. 38)

Limited space precludes commenting on every essay in *Rival Sisters*, though a few warrant mention for their originality, their methods, or the insightful perspectives they offer on individual artist or artworks not usually regarded in this light. In “The Musical Imagination of Fantin-Latour,” Anne Leonard addresses the apparent stylistic gulf between that artist’s highly realistic portraits and still-lives and his imaginative portrayals of subjects derived from the musical works of Wagner, Berlioz, and other composers. Citing Fantin’s admission that he thought about music constantly while painting, she argues that, across the spectrum of subjects and styles in which he worked, the artist sought to elicit “sustained attention” (p. 217), a mode of response demanded of listeners by lengthy concert pieces and most especially the new works of Wagner to which Fantin was especially devoted. For the nineteenth-century novelist and critic Émile Zola, such a pre-occupation with music was “a distinct threat to the development of modern painting, to the primacy of literature as the model art form, and to the representational capacities of language itself” (p. 149). Michelle Foa, in her essay “‘One Art Eating the Other’ in Émile Zola’s *L’Œuvre*,” sees these concerns expressed within the novel in the conflicted intentions of the main character Claude Lantier, but especially in the secondary character of the artist and melomane Gagnière, a name that may be a Gallicized version of Wagner. Passionate about music to the point of distraction and absorbed in novel color theories, Gagnière is disinterested in observation and analysis of the contemporary world, which was the aim of Zola’s naturalistic project, and he eventually gives up painting. Thus, Foa concludes, “Zola renders painting that is any way connected to music as a failed endeavor in *L’Œuvre*, thereby implicitly refuting the notion that music can serve as a model for the other arts” (p. 157).

One of the most perplexing responses to music in nineteenth-century painting must be Moritz von Schwind’s *A Symphony*, from 1852. In a linguistically opaque but ultimately illuminating essay entitled “Schwind’s ‘Symphony’: Beethoven, Biedermeier, and the Cruelty of Romance,” Cordula Grewe elucidates the layers of symphonic structure, Biedermeier’s romantic narrative, and generalizing arabesque that comprise this alternative modernism. Inspired by the symphonies of Beethoven and that composer’s creative autonomy, Schwind elaborated a four-part visual sequence within an altarpiece-like frame. He then represented the characteristic moods and tempi of a symphonic composition not with something closer to absolute painting or “pictorial arabesque,” as Romantic writers termed it, but with what he called a “musical novella,” a sentimental narrative of love found and eventually consummated. In other words, Schwind appended to a symphony-like formal structure the very conventional, clichéd story-telling from which instrumental music had been liberated and, thus, had come to be celebrated. Grewe reveals the overlapping meanings—esthetic, social, political, and personal—encoded in this complex project. Essays by James Rubin (“Gustave Courbet and Music: Soundscapes and the Total Work of Art”), Therese Dolan (“Strums the Word: Manet’s *Spanish Singer*”), and Olivia Mattis (“Rodin’s Beethoven”) explore the personal identification of major artistic figures with music, with specific kinds of music, and with particular composers. Dolan argues that Manet’s choice of a flamenco guitarist as the subject for an important Salon submission was not simply dictated by the contemporary vogue for Spanish subjects, but an act of “self-portrayal,” because such a figure embodied the outsider status, the improvisatory execution, and the engaging, but strident tone he sought in his own art. Rodin’s identification with Beethoven was profound. Mattis employs a biographical method in tracing Rodin’s many and various connections with that great musician, including the co-founding of La Société Beethoven, a group that met regularly to hear performances of the composer’s chamber music. Perhaps no other figure was so important for Rodin as an inspiration and artistic model.

Only two of the essays in *Rival Sisters* treat music or musicians as a primary topic, rather than as an influence or model for works of visual art. One of these is Charlotte de Mille’s, “Grafting a Dream: Henri Bergson, Claude Debussy, and Henri Matisse.” She does not offer a comparative analysis of works by

composer and painter, but instead employs the ideas of their contemporary, the philosopher Henri Bergson, “to enlighten and refract common interests” (p. 297) linking the two creative figures. De Mille shows how Debussy and Matisse used formal devices proper to their particular art to convey “ambiguity, irresolution, and the defeat of the everyday,” states of mind akin to Bergson’s affirmation of the dream-like condition that allows for “a free play of memory” and the revelatory “synthesizing [of] associations across time, place, and reason” (p. 299).

These essays and others in *Rival Sisters* merit multiple readings, chock full as they are of informative discussion and insightful connections and conclusions. While some essays would be accessible to undergraduate-level students, many would not. The complex arguments and use of specialized vocabulary specific to several disciplines render this book generally useful, in my estimation, only to a more advanced audience. Given the book’s exploration of many different artists, styles, and issues related to its topic, it would provide an excellent text for a graduate-level course focused on exchanges between the arts during the nineteenth century. Aside from its many excellent essays, the book’s extensive bibliography is, in itself, of inestimable value to anyone interested in further reading or research on “Art/Music, Music/Art,” as it is titled. Compiled by Olivia Mattis, the bibliography is over fifty pages in length, “comprehensive [in its coverage] for the nineteenth century and selective for earlier and later periods” (p. 313).

Perhaps it was the publisher who chose to illustrate the idea of “rival sisters” on the book’s dustjacket with Renoir’s insipid image of *The Daughters of Catulle Mendès*, a girls-at-the-piano-themed painting from 1888. An unfortunate choice, the painting portrays three, not two, sisters whose bland faces seem incapable of rivalry, much less creative activity or intelligent thought. The painting, which merely uses one art to portray another, gives a poor idea of the intellectual richness of the book. A better choice might have been Whistler’s *Symphony in White No. 3*, a portrayal of two young women and based on a musical model signified by its title, or perhaps an image by Maurice Denis or Odilon Redon representative of the increasing abstraction and decorative impulse seen in late nineteenth-century art under the influence of music. When one reflects on the many other nineteenth-century artists not considered in this book who were engaged in inter-art dialogues and reliant on the example of music in some measure in their own artistic production (Corot, Degas, Seurat, Signac, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Kandinsky, Kupka, to list a few), the importance of this topic to a full understanding of nineteenth-century culture is all the more apparent. What remains wanting is a major museum exhibition that would bring together a generous collection of artworks about, influenced by, or modeled on music to give broad attention to the importance of music for painting in this period, recognition that *Rival Sisters* and other recent scholarly studies have established the topic deserves.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

James H. Rubin and Olivia Mattis, “Musical Paintings and Colorful Sounds: The Imagery and Rhetoric of Musicality in the Romantic Age”

Simon Shaw-Miller, “*Opsis Melos Lexis*: Before and Around the Total Work of Art”

Julie Ramos, “Caspar David Friedrich and Music: A ‘Divine Kingdom of Hearing’?”

Peter Bloom, “Berlioz, Delacroix, and *La Mort d’Ophélie*”

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James H. Rubin, “Gustave Courbet and Music: Soundscapes and the Total Work of Art”

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Cordula Grewe, “Schwind’s ‘Symphony’: Beethoven, Biedermeier, and the Cruelty of Romance”

Tim Barringer, “Burne-Jones’s *Le Chant d’amour* and the Condition of Music”

Olivia Mattis, “Rodin’s Beethoven”

Charlotte de Mille, “Grafting a Dream: Henri Bergson, Claude Debussy, and Henri Matisse”

#### NOTES

[1] R. Murray Schafer, *E.T.A. Hoffmann and Music* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1975), 83, and Rev. H. R. Haweis, *Music and Morals* (London: W. H. Allen, 1871), 38.

[2] *The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1959), III, 21.

[3] Ari Redon, ed., *Lettres à Odilon Redon* (Paris: Corti, 1960), 25.

[4] Louis Viardot, “*Ut Pictura Musica*,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* I/1 (January 1859), 19-29; and Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1873), 135.

[5] Richard Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, trans. William Ashton Ellis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 300; Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Clifton Fadiman (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1927), 80.

Peter L. Schmunk  
Wofford College  
[schmunkpl@wofford.edu](mailto:schmunkpl@wofford.edu)

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