

String Quartets in Prose

Studies on the relationship between music and literature have traditionally been plagued by a methodological problem which is expressed by Wellek and Warren in the seemingly simple question: 'What are the common and comparable elements of the arts?'¹ Too often critics have indulged in impressionistic descriptions of vague analogies in the techniques used or effects created by the two media, the verbal and non-verbal, thereby equating them and neglecting the specific material conditions of each art.² Similarly, direct formal and thematic influences have readily been postulated without any logical necessity, an approach which ranges from an improper usage of musical terms in a literary analysis³ to attempts to provide absolute music with an underlying, but of course well concealed, literary programme.⁴ The intriguing problem of *ekphrasis* — in this context the verbal description of a purely instrumental work of art — will, however, not be in the centre of our observations on string quartets in three twentieth century prose writings. After all, the string quartet represents a form of music which is remote from the literary medium, unlike opera, oratorio or song. Not only is there hardly any creative interplay between language and the music (disregarding the very few works with a non-musical motto or an explicitly stated programmatic idea),⁵ but chamber music in general does not lend itself readily to

1 R. Wellek and A. Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt 1962) 130

2 To quote but one such example from R. Benz, *Die Welt der Dichter und die Musik* (Düsseldorf: Diederich 1949) 243:

Und wie dem Musiker [i.e. Haydn] leihen auch dem Dichter [i.e. Jean Paul] die Zauberfarben geschauter Natur die Farben für das Seelen-Jenseits-Bild, das in Traum und Vision geheimnisvoll sich webt; gleich dem Haydn der Quartette wird Jean Paul zuzeiten in ein anderes Reich entrückt, da Phantasie, nun nicht mehr erdgebunden, freischöpferisch waltet.

3 See the examples given by U. Weisstein, *Einführung in die Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1968) 195.

4 E.g. the unprovable theory that Beethoven's late quartets reflect scenes and lines from Goethe's *Faust*; see Arnold Schering, *Beethoven und die Dichtung* (1936; rpt. Hildesheim: Olms 1973), Teil 4 (337-41 on *Heiliger Dankgesang* from op. 132).

5 To mention only Smetana's quartet entitled 'From my Life,' Janáček's first quartet inspired by Tolstoy's novelette *The Kreutzer Sonata* or Schoenberg's early sextet 'Transfigured Night' on a poem by R. Dehmel.

verbal interpretations and does not generate conceptual associations in its listeners to the same extent as orchestral music with its variety in instrumentation and dynamics. String quartets are among the least accessible musical forms when approached with words as our guide, notwithstanding the copious programme notes at most chamber music concerts. Interestingly enough, however, several prose writers in our century became intrigued with this kind of music to the point of trying to incorporate it in their literary creations, attempting to find some meaning in it which could enhance their own text. Here, string quartet playing seems to have become a motif in its own right with recurrent features. The music itself, the later quartets of Beethoven in particular, has reached an exemplary status representing a 'metaphysical' type of music. In short, a literary image has emerged which could be compared to that of the musical salon with its Chopin *Nocturnes* in novels and poems of the late nineteenth century⁶ or to the role of the courtly minstrel and his *lais* in medieval epics. The following choice of works by Aldous Huxley, Thomas Mann and Reinhard Baumgart no doubt could be extended to include other authors from various national literatures (e.g. Proust); this would enrich the image without changing it drastically.

There is certainly also a historical reason why string quartets more than any other form of instrumental music are encountered in literary texts. From the time when Haydn, Boccherini and Mozart wrote a stream of quartets, this type of collective but mainly private music-making became very popular throughout the following century, particularly in countries within the German-Austrian sphere of cultural and political domination (which, of course, notably included what is now Czechoslovakia). While quartet compositions increased greatly in intellectual complexity and technical difficulty which could be mastered only by professional ensembles, string quartet playing as such remained a cherished musical pastime of many amateurs well into the twentieth century.

The view that the string quartet represents the pinnacle of instrumental chamber music can be traced as far back as the early nineteenth century and has bestowed an elitist image on this form of art which eventually contributed to its present demise.⁷ Whereas quartet playing had traditionally been likened to 'a conversation of four reasonable persons from

6 See Carol Wootton, 'The lure of the Basilisk,' *Arcadia* 9 (1974) 22-38.

7 See on this topic the talk by Ludwig Finscher, 'Zur Geschichte des Streichquartetts als musikalischer Gattungsgeschichte' and the following discussion held at the International Congress 'Violinspiel und Violinmusik in Geschichte und Gegenwart' in Graz, Austria, 1972, published in *Beiträge zur Aufführungspraxis*, ed. V. Schwarz, III (Vienna: Universal Edition 1975) 80-9 and 97-100.

whose discourses one can gain,' as Goethe put it in a letter to his musician friend Zelter in 1829,⁸ modern writers and film-makers have all but reversed this view. What seems to be more fascinating is the comic as well as dramatic potential of this activity, the contrast between the musical ideal of the composition and its inadequate realization, or else between the harmonic cosmos conjured up by a musical performance and the underlying private disharmony among the players. To mention but three examples in this respect, we may include the Czech movie *Intimate Lighting*, which won its director Ivan Passer the New York Critics' prize in 1970,⁹ the radio feature 'The Friends of Chamber Music' by the German author Erich Westphal,¹⁰ and the British movie *Ladykillers*. In the radio play, the listener eavesdrops on four professional players rehearsing a Mozart quartet whose mellow, well-blended sounds are frequently interrupted by vicious arguments and displays of petty jealousy and greed. In the Czech movie, on the other hand, a motley quartet of well-meaning would-be or have-been musicians run through Mozart's *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* with great dedication but rather sad musical results. No doubt, the contrast between ideal and reality in this respect is carried to its most hilarious extreme in *Ladykillers*, where hardened criminals disguised as distinguished string quartet players plan the great train robbery while the gramophone provides an acoustical alibi by playing Boccherini's famous Minuet over and over.

Naturally these two media, radio and film, are not plagued by the writer's problem of *ekphrasis*. They do not have to create 'verbal music' but can use the musical sounds themselves, thereby provoking a direct reaction from their audiences. Apart from this specific difference, similar recurrent motifs, characters and situations connected with string quartet playing can be noticed here as well as in several twentieth century prose works. Let us start with a passage from Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus*, which depicts the quartet evenings to which the young Adrian Leverkühn, the future 'Dr. Faustus,' is exposed in the house of his uncle, a dealer and maker of instruments. Once a week, a group of local music lovers meet here and read through quartets by Mozart and Haydn.

8 'Man hört vier vernünftige Leute sich untereinander unterhalten, glaubt ihren Diskursen etwas abzugewinnen und die Eigentümlichkeiten der Instrumente kennen zu lernen.' See Friedrich Blume, *Goethe und die Musik* (Kassel: Bärenreiter 1948) 21

9 See Josef Škvorecký, *All the Bright Young Men and Women: A Personal History of the Czech Cinema*, trans. Michael Schonberg. Take One Film Book Series 1 (Toronto: Peter P. Martin 1971) 94-6

10 'The Friends of Chamber Music,' trans. Otto Lowy, produced by the Vancouver Studio of the CBC under Robert Chesterman in 1977.

These were masculine evenings, with the beer-glass on the floor beside the chair, a cigar in the mouth, and frequent bursts of talk, strange, dry interruptions in the middle of the language of music; tapping of the bow and counting back of the bars when the players got out, which was almost always the fault of the singing-master.¹¹

Thomas Mann draws the image of quartet-playing as a bourgeois retreat into the idyll, into the harmonic universe of Viennese classical music far removed from the intellectual unrest, industrialization and nationalistic fever of the turn of this century. This goes hand in hand with the critical judgment of Theodor Adorno, Mann's mentor in musical questions throughout the years he worked on his *Faustus* novel in his Californian exile. Adorno attributes to chamber music-playing of this kind 'an element of privacy in a negative sense, of petit bourgeois domestic bliss, of a self-limitation which is more than merely in danger of turning into a resigned quietism.'¹² Understandably, such musical activity which smacks of bourgeois ideology does not appeal to the young protagonist of the novel in his search for new musical forms and values. Yet, later in his life story his penultimate, 'most esoteric work' will be a string quartet, which indicates a radically different understanding of the artistic potential of this type of music. Leverkühn's quartet can, however, only be realized on the concert stage.

Adorno, in his essay on chamber music, describes its essential characteristic as 'die bürgerliche Wohnung.' Indeed, the German term *Hausmusik*, which is commonly used for such 'domestic' music-making, conjures up an image of a bourgeois withdrawal within one's own four walls which is completely missing in its more aristocratic and hence more

11 Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkühn, as Told by a Friend*, trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter (New York: A. Knopf 1948) 44.

Es waren das Herrenunterhaltungen, bei denen man sein Bierglas neben sich am Boden stehen, wohl auch die Zigarre im Mund hatte, und die durch öfteres Zwischenreden, wie es sich in die Sprache der Töne hinein so sonderbar trocken und fremd ausnimmt, Aufklopfen des Bogens und Rückwärtszählen der Takte unterbrochen wurden, wenn man, fast immer durch die Schuld des Singemeisters, auseinandergekommen war.

Thomas Mann, *Doktor Faustus: Das Leben des deutschen Tonsetzers Adrian Leverkühn, erzählt von einem Freunde* in *Gesammelte Werke*, VI (Frankfurt: S. Fischer Verlag 1960) 62. All future quotations from the English version.

12 Theodor W. Adorno, *Einleitung in die Musiksoziologie*, ed. E. Grassi, Rowohlt Deutsche Enzyklopädie (Reinbek: Rowohlt 1968) 106: '... ein Moment von Privatem im negativen Sinn, von kleinbürgerlichem Glück im Winkel, von einer Selbstbescheidung, die mehr als bloß gefährdet ist von resignierender Idyllik.' [translation mine]

public counterpart *Kammermusik*. The seemingly idyllic bourgeois apartment (something like the *locus amoenus* topos of string quartet playing) figures prominently in the central chapter of the novel *Hausmusik* by the contemporary German novelist and literary critic Reinhard Baumgart.¹³ Baumgart (who, interestingly enough, wrote a doctoral dissertation on Thomas Mann's epic work) portrays in his novel typical attitudes and modes of behaviour prevalent in the German middle class during the Nazi era. The chapter 'Hausmusik,' which gives the entire book its name, can be discussed in isolation as a self-contained short story. It tells — in a nutshell — of the increased difficulty of playing *Hausmusik* in a small German town in 1938 when a 'typical' string quartet (consisting of such notables as a veterinarian, a school teacher and a merchant,) loses a member due to an accident and co-opts a seclusive newcomer to their town who is suspected of being of Jewish descent. Against the background of the first major anti-Semitic pogrom in Nazi Germany, the infamous *Kristallnacht*, the quartet tries to carry on as usual and to block out the political events by which, however, they are rapidly engulfed. A raiding Nazi gang breaks up their playing and the Jewish member disappears mysteriously, never to be seen again.

The story begins in the innocuous atmosphere of what Adorno called 'kleinbürgerliches Glück im Winkel,' describing the modest, domestic bliss of musical conversations between four seemingly reasonable persons. In numerous details of his setting, the author Reinhard Baumgart no doubt follows a work on string quartet playing which has become a classic in its field: *Das stillvergnügte Streichquartett* by B. Aulich and E. Heimeran.¹⁴ This unabashed, good-humoured praise of dilettantism abounds with practical hints on organizing and carrying out quartet sessions right down to sometimes trivial particulars, e.g. whether the carpet should be rolled up, what room temperature is preferable, should tea or beer be served, what should be done if the second violin does not show up, etc. In Baumgart's story these fussy concerns are deliberately taken up to create a deceptively idyllic mood of impenetrable musical privacy which at the end is unmasked as a tragically self-induced illusion. Furthermore, the highly successful musical conversation which almost magically occurs between the four players does not lead to any similar harmony on the human level. All attempts to communicate other than musically are

13 R. Baumgart, *Hausmusik. Ein deutsches Familienalbum*. (Frankfurt: Fischer Bücherei 1966). The German original text is quoted from this edition; all English citations are taken from my translation of the *Hausmusik* chapter due to appear in *Dimension* 14 (1981).

14 B. Aulich and E. Heimeran, *Das stillvergnügte Streichquartett*, 14th ed. (München 1958)

thwarted because of different political loyalties, pro- and anti-fascist, among the players. "There is no place for such talk here in our circle," said Herr Heilmann, if we talk at all, then only about music." "Then let's not talk at all," suggested Mandler!¹⁵ A scared silence seems to be the dominant feature of the newcomer to the group, the second violin Herr Jonas, so that eventually the musical sessions take place 'under a dome of silence.' When on that fatal night of November 8th, Jonas appears very late and in obvious panic, with a suitcase and a violin, a victim stalked by his pursuers whose time is running out and who is in desperate need of help, he is unable to break through the wall of silence, to elicit a human response from his fellow players.

"I beg you," said J. Jonas finally without moving. "I beg you, just one word so that I won't be misunderstood ... You can also ask my opinion quite openly. On that murder in Paris, you know. As a matter of fact, I abhor it," he said without being asked. "My father lived in Cologne as an authenticated pure Aryan businessman." Mandler could not quite suppress a cough, and Herr Heilmann said with deliberate, refined emphasis: "On such matters, no one is accountable to anyone, that does not belong in our circle." And he tapped his bow on the open page at the top left.¹⁶

Instead of offering active support or at least verbal assurances of solidarity, the others grant nothing but musical partnership to the outcast from society; he has to play his part in the quartet. The victim consents, allows himself to be led off into the world of music and thereby foregoes any chance of real escape. 'Ihm boten die Töne Asyl' (To him the sounds offered asylum'). The author's view is unmistakable. Continuing to play *Hausmusik* in such inhuman times is a perhaps understandable but inexcusable form of escapism. In a society which openly assesses the value of

15 R. Baumgart, *Hausmusik*, 57: "Das gehört nicht in diesen Kreis," sagte Herr Heilmann, "wir sprechen, wenn überhaupt, dann über Musik." "Sprechen wir lieber überhaupt nicht," schlug Mandler vor.

16 R. Baumgart, *Hausmusik*, 63:

"Ich bitte," sagte J. Jonas endlich und rührte sich nicht, "ich bitte: nur ein Wort, um nicht mißverstanden zu werden ... Sie können auch mich, ganz offen, nach meiner Meinung fragen, über besagten Mord in Paris. Ich verabscheue ihn nämlich," sagte er ungefragt. "Mein Vater wohnte in Köln als nachweislich rein arischer Kaufmann."

Mandler hustete unterdrückt und Herr Heilmann sagte in einem feinen, grundsätzlichen Akzent: "Darüber ist niemand niemandem Rechenschaft schuldig, es gehört nicht in diesen Kreis." Und pochte mit dem Bogen in das aufgeschlagene Stimmenblatt, links oben.

such musical activity as follows: 'It is true that "Hausmusik" in its content and its techniques used is different from the music of the marching columns, but their essence and purpose are the same in both cases,'¹⁷ it seems hypocritical to publish a book such as *Das stillvergnügte Streichquartett*, whose first edition appeared in 1936. It may be worth noting that, in the revised post-war edition, the authors Aulich and Heimeran acknowledge their debt in contents and style to an earlier newspaper article of 1924 'which circulated in handwritten copies among music lovers but nobody knew who the author was.' Now his name is revealed: a certain Franz Anton Ledermann, a lawyer and viola player, 'who was murdered together with his family by the SS in Holland as we later found out with a shudder.' Unwittingly the two authors illustrate the point made in Baumgart's masterful story. *Hausmusik* in such inhuman times has nearly become a crime in itself — just like talking about trees in Brecht's famous poem *An die Nachgeborenen* — because it includes silence about so many crimes.¹⁸

The same reproach could of course be levelled at any other kind of withdrawal into private activities — stamp collecting, for instance — but why is it that playing music is singled out? Music, for all its alleged nobility, has acquired highly dubious overtones, not only in Baumgart's story. The author's ironic remark, 'Music — nobody would cast the first stone at it,' reflects a critical viewpoint which can be encountered in several twentieth century texts. Particularly in post-war literature, stones are being thrown at music from many sides and it has become rather common to link music (instrumental, classical music rather than vocal or popular) with the barbarism of the Nazi period. A striking example can be found in Gerald Green's novel and teleplay *Holocaust*, where the SS-henchman Heydrich is introduced as 'an accomplished violinist. In fact, a violin rested on a stand nearby. A Mozart cantata was open';¹⁹ or where, as in the teleplay, a string quartet is made to play in front of the furnaces of Auschwitz. That these scenes are not completely without historical

17 'Die Hausmusik ist nach ihrem Inhalt und der Art der angewandten Mittel wohl etwas anderes als die Musik der marschierenden Kolonnen; aber Wesen und Sinn der Sache ist in beiden Fällen gleich' From Karl Blessinger, 'Auch die Hausmusik im höchsten Sinne eine Angelegenheit der Bewegung,' *Die Musik-Woche*, 16 January 1937, p. 2, as cited in *Musik im Dritten Reich: Eine Dokumentation*, ed. Joseph Wulf (Reinbek: Rowohlt 1966) 284

18 'Was sind das für Zeiten, wo / Ein Gespräch über Bäume fast ein Verbrechen ist / Weil es ein Schweigen über so viele Untaten einschließt' Bertolt Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke* (Frankfurt: Werkausgabe Edition Suhrkamp 1967), vol. 9, 723; 'An die Nachgeborenen,' 722-5

19 G. Greene, *Holocaust* (New York: Bantam Books 1978) 21

foundation goes without saying,²⁰ but why is the emphasis put on this connection? What then do some authors perceive as the essence of this type of music and why do they point their finger at it?

It may be useful here to widen our scope and turn our discussion to an author from a very different cultural and social background, Aldous Huxley. In his various writings, from his musical critiques for the *Weekly Westminster Gazette* in 1922-23 to several of his later novels and essays, Huxley has reflected on the nature of music.²¹ To what extent his philosophy of music may have had an impact on Thomas Mann cannot be investigated here, but it is worth noting that Mann was well familiar with Huxley's writings, as he states in a letter of February 20, 1934 to Karl Kerényi: 'I admire in Huxley's art, in particular in his essays, a most refined flower of West European spirit.'²² In Huxley's novel *Point Counter Point* of 1928 (to which we will limit our remarks) music plays an important role, both in structure and meaning. The book starts with the description of a chamber music concert in a fashionable home before members of London's High Society, and it ends with that of a gramophone performance where a movement from a Beethoven string quartet is played to an invited couple (both musical events clearly far removed from the German *Hausmusik* ideology). Before discussing Huxley's philosophical views on the nature of music, however, we should briefly sketch the importance he attributes to chamber music in the composition of his novel. In fact, the entire structure of *Point Counter Point* is meant to imitate the technique of contrapuntal music, as Huxley suggests through the mouthpiece of one of his major characters, the novelist Philip Quarles. The artistic aim would be 'the musicalization of fiction. Not in the symbolist way, by subordinating sense to sound ... but on a large scale, in the construction.' The musical model, according to Quarles, would be the later Beethoven quartets with their linear, contrapuntal style, their 'changes of moods' and 'abrupt transitions,' which he would like to imitate in his planned novel by devising 'parallel, contrapuntal plots,' by alternating the themes or by considering 'the events of the story in their various aspects — emotional, scientific, economic,

20 See e.g. Fania Fénelon's autobiographical story *Playing for Time* (New York: Berkley Books 1979)

21 See also Basil Hogarth, 'Aldous Huxley as Music Critic,' *Musical Times* 76 (December 1935), 1079-82; Eric Blom, 'The Musician in Aldous Huxley,' *The Chesterian* 18 (September 1935), 37-45; and Jean-Louis Cupers, 'Analyses musicales chez Aldous Huxley et l'idéal de la critique d'art,' *Mélanges de musicologie* 1 (1974) 12-26

22 Thomas Mann — Karl Kerényi, *Gespräch in Briefen*, ed. K. Kerényi (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag 1967), 43-4: 'In Huxleys Kunst, namentlich seiner Essayistik bewunderte ich eine feinste Blüte westeuropäischen Geistes.'

religious, metaphysical, etc.' — and by constantly modulating from the one to the other.²³ Huxley himself experiments with this technique in *Point Counter Point* by stressing the contrasts in opinions of and attitudes toward recurrent themes in juxtaposed short passages where lines of action are discontinued and interspersed with theoretical reflections. In spite of the ingenuity and great effect of Huxley's concept, the musical analogy should not be overrated. The limitation of the diachronic literary medium in this structural aspect is undeniable: the simultaneous complexity of classical polyphonic music where several parts follow their own logical line independently and yet sound together in harmony becomes, in its literary imitation, a succession of scenes and views mainly with the effect of creating satirical 'counterpoints' to a preceding 'point.' This technique, however, whether musical or not, is perhaps best suited to express the fragmentation of values in the twentieth century and the isolation of the individual in modern urban society as diagnosed by the author.

Apart from using contrapuntal instrumental music as a structural model (a technique which neither Thomas Mann nor R. Baumgart have attempted to imitate), Huxley tries to grasp its essence, to describe its magic power over a susceptible listener like himself. He sees it as an almost metaphysical force capable of granting him a glimpse of the absolute, of perfect bliss, evoking in him a state of serenity which, for the duration of the music, comes close to a religious mystical experience. Thus, the Sarabande movement of Bach's B Minor Suite performed at the chamber music *soirée* in the second chapter of *Point Counter Point* represents to him

a slow and lovely meditation on the beauty (in spite of squalor and stupidity), the profound goodness (in spite of all the evil), the oneness (in spite of such bewildering diversity) of the world. It is a beauty, a goodness, a unity that no intellectual research can discover, that analysis dispels, but of whose reality the spirit is from time to time suddenly and overwhelmingly convinced ... Is it illusion or the revelation of profoundest truth? Who knows?²⁴

In the final chapter of the novel, this open question is answered in opposite ways by the two antagonists Spandrell and Rampion. The psychopathic pervert Spandrell, who has spent most of his adult life in the quest of evil, believes he has finally found the proof of God's existence in the sound of the slow movement of Beethoven's String Quartet

23 Aldous Huxley, *Point Counter Point* (New York: Harper 1947) 293-4

24 *Point Counter Point*, 24

op. 132, and he tries feverishly to proselytize Rampion and his wife to his newly-found religion by playing the music (an early recording by the Budapest Quartet) to them. His two listeners, however, are portrayed in the novel as the only ones who have achieved or who are blessed with a harmonious balance of opposites within themselves and who manage to live lives wholesome, creative. They are not impervious to the beauty of the music but, as true agnostics, refuse to accept it as a proof of God's existence. Does Spandrell's mystical experience, on the other hand, lead him to a *metanoia*, a renewal in spirit that would also manifest itself in deeds, or is this 'beatific vision' which he experiences through Beethoven's music to be understood as an extreme form of hedonism? Does the author perhaps side with Rampion's view that such abstract, esoteric music represents 'a spiritual cancer eating up the real, human, natural reality?' Huxley does not clearly commit himself, but, in my view, he ironically hints that the pervert has the illumination — despite his melodramatic staging of his own execution precisely at the end of the music — while the reasonable, harmonious character shows his limitations in his refusal to be touched by the divine element within the music. At the same time, Huxley also indicates that even such sublime music is powerless to banish the demonic nature in humans. From the divine to the demonic is but a small step.

A similarly cautionary note about music can be found at the outset of Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* which was begun in 1943, some fifteen years after Huxley's work appeared. The decidedly average narrator of the novel, the schoolteacher and philologist Zeitblom, praises the study of classics because it instills in the student 'a loving sense of the beauty and dignity of reason in the human being,' and adds the following remarks:

And that other, perhaps more intense, but strangely inarticulate language, that of tones — if one may so designate music — does not seem to me to be included in the pedagogic-humanistic sphere ... Rather, it seems to me, in all its supposedly logical and moral austerity, to belong to a world of the spirit for whose absolute reliability in the things of reason and human dignity I would not just care to put my hand in the fire. That I am even so heartily affected to it is one of those contradictions which, for better or worse, are inseparable from human nature.²⁵

There is no doubt that in this passage the author expresses his own view through the medium of his narrator. Such an ambivalent attitude toward music, a paradoxical mixture of humanistic distrust of its power and, on

the other hand, a great loving fascination for it can be found in various personal statements by Thomas Mann. Take, for instance, his instinctive reaction when looking at a facsimile edition of Beethoven's letters as he describes it in his *Genesis of a Novel*:

I looked at them for a long time, those scrambled and scratched lines hurled onto the paper, that desperate orthography, all that half-wild inarticulateness — and could find no love for it in my heart. Once again I sympathized with Goethe's rejection of "the untamed human soul," and once again gave thought to the relationship between music and intellect, music and good breeding, music and humanity. Has musical genius, then, nothing at all to do with humanity and "better society"? Does it perhaps work directly in opposition to these?²⁶

Whereas Thomas Mann in his earlier works had stressed the dissolving, demonic nature of music which could lure its victim into an untimely decay or death (e.g. in *Buddenbrooks*, the *Tristan* novella or *Der Zauberberg*), in his later exile years — partly due to Theodor Adorno's influence — he discovered and emphasized more strongly its abstract and systematic nature. This double nature of music, the unblended mixture of 'calculated order and chaos-breeding irrationality at once' appeared to him a symptomatic expression of the German spirit, as he argued in an address delivered at the Library of Congress shortly after the fall of the Third Reich.²⁷ In Thomas Mann's view there exists 'a secret union of the German spirit with the Demonic,' which explains why the sixteenth century Faustus figure with his demonic drive (ritualized in the pact with the devil) became a national German myth in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Since both art and politics are offshoots of the same ideological roots, it follows that the Faustus figure as conceived by Mann had to be a musician-composer who was made to represent, on an artistic-intellectual level, the self-destructive, ambitious aspirations of German politics. Although it has been argued convincingly that, by such analogy, Thomas Mann does injustice both to music (dodecaphonic composition in particular) and to historical truth (in ignoring the material and economic roots of fascism),²⁸ this cannot be pursued here.

As indicated already, Thomas Mann turned increasingly to more

26 Th. Mann, *The Genesis of a Novel*, trans. R. and C. Winston (London: Secker & Warburg 1961) 171-2

27 Th. Mann, 'Germany and the Germans,' in *Thomas Mann's Addresses delivered at the Library of Congress 1942-1949* (Washington: Library of Congress 1963)

28 See on these aspects Ján Albrecht, 'Leverkünn oder die Musik als Schicksal,' *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift* 45 (1971), 375-88, and Helmut Jendreich, *Thomas Mann. Der demokratische Roman* (Düsseldorf: Bagel 1977) 476-91

abstract and intimate music, mainly that of Beethoven's later chamber works and his last piano sonatas and string quartets, and away from the lush Romantic music on a grand scale (Wagner's in particular) which had him spellbound as a younger man. While he exposes the hero of his earlier *Der Zauberberg* of 1924 to the magic of operatic music, twenty years later he treats his Faustus figure, the young Leverkühn, to lectures and demonstrations on the art of the later Beethoven. In them Leverkühn's preceptor Kretzschmar demonstrates Beethoven's breaking away from 'the habitable regions of tradition,' which appeared to his contemporaries as 'a process of dissolution or alienation, of a mounting into an air no longer familiar or safe to meddle with.'²⁹ Compared to its overt manifestation in Huxley's *Point Counter Point* and Baumgart's *Hausmusik*, Beethoven's quartet music does not seem to play such an important role in *Doktor Faustus* at first glance; it is, however, highly instrumental in Thomas Mann's altered understanding of the nature of music in general and — whether one agrees or not — of the nature of the German spirit. In his address at the Library of Congress, he characterizes the Germans as 'primarily musicians of the vertical, not of the horizontal,' and as greater masters of harmony (which includes counterpoint) than of melody; 'they are instrumentalists rather than glorifiers of the human voice, far more inclined toward the learned and the spiritual in music than toward the melodically happy-making.'³⁰ Such a statement applies of course perfectly to the later Beethoven quartets, to which the author listened avidly in his exile years. In his autobiographical *The Genesis of a Novel* he recalls a glorious performance in 1943 by the Busch Quartet, who played Beethoven's Quartet in A minor op. 132, 'that supreme work which, by what might be called the kindness of providence, I had the chance to hear at least five times during the years I was working on *Faustus*.'³¹ In the novel itself there is, indeed, a repeated tribute to this work, first in a conversation between the narrator Zeitblom and Leverkühn at the opening of chapter 20 and later in the form of a musical quotation from it which Leverkühn builds into his own Violin Concerto.

Why is it that the works of both Huxley and Mann refer to this quartet and, in particular, to its slow movement? I would suggest two reasons, one esthetic and the other sentimental. The movement is unique in its structure and sound and, at first hearing, it will alienate rather than gain the hearts of an audience. The symmetry existing between various sec-

²⁹ *Doctor Faustus*, 52

³⁰ Th. Mann, 'Germany and the Germans,' 52

³¹ Th. Mann, *The Genesis of a Novel*, 52-3

tions of the movement (the Molto Adagio and the Andante parts in ABABA sequence) and even within each individual subsection is completely balanced and could be expressed in a mathematical equation based on the number of bars. Such a rigorous order appears more medieval than nineteenth century, and the archaic character of the composition is enhanced by the usage of the Lydian church mode which provides the harmony to the slow chorale-like tune of the Molto Adagio sections (usually played without the warm, Romantic vibrato). Beethoven points explicitly to religious faith by inscribing this movement 'Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in der lydischen Tonart' ('Holy Song of Thanksgiving to the Godhead for Recovery from Illness, in the Lydian Mode'). This 'autobiographical' reference to the composer's illness of 1825, which interrupted the completion of Opus 132, adds to the otherwise seemingly abstract work a note of poignancy which singles it out from other later Beethoven works, where similar meditations and experiences are perhaps also expressed, but solely in musical terms.

It goes without saying that the thematic overtones of this quartet ('the strangest piece of music that Beethoven ever wrote'³²) facilitate a meaningful incorporation into a literary work. Thus, Thomas Mann parallels the artistic development of his protagonist, his turning away from the traditional tonal system, and his process of growing isolation to that of Beethoven, with the decisive difference, however, that Leverkühn-Faustus turns away from the Godhead, and that his convalescence from illness (physical and spiritual) will not come about. In the final chapter of *Point Counter Point*, on the other hand, the gramophone recording of *Heiliger Dankgesang*, the ultimate proof of God's existence according to Spandrell, provides the musical setting for his demonic suicide-execution. As the music comes to its climactic end after the brief but gory interruption, a glimmer of hope seems to emanate from the sound and to promise salvation: 'Heaven, in those long-drawn notes, became once more the place of absolute rest, of still and blissful convalescence.'³³

Reinhard Baumgart is the only one of our three cited authors who does not use the overt verbal 'meaning' of the A minor quartet's slow movement for purposes of contrast or analogy within the literary context. In fact, if there is any reference at all to a specific work played on that fatal November night, it is a hidden allusion to Beethoven's Quartet in C Sharp Minor op. 131 (the second violin's entry after four bars into the first fugal movement is mentioned). The images used throughout the nar-

32 Philip Radcliffe, *Beethoven's String Quartets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1978) 115

33 *Point Counter Point*, 431

ration, however, do not just describe the music of this particular quartet *per se*, but could apply to various passages from all late Beethoven quartets. They are thus non-specific. In a letter to me, Reinhard Baumgart confirmed this impression and stated that he listened almost constantly to the later Beethoven quartets and sonatas while writing his book and that this overall listening experience is reflected in his style. Whatever might be called 'musical' in his prose, the author modestly claims, is owed to this music, 'even though it may not be possible to analyze that in detail.'³⁴

This brings us back to our opening remarks on the writer's problem of *ekphrasis*. To be sure, it is his prerogative to interpret works of absolute music in his own words. The reader has to be aware that such passages shaped by the poetic as well as musical knowledge, taste and talent of the writer could lead away from the music rather than toward it. That, again, does not necessarily speak against the poetic quality of the text itself which, after all, should not be confused with programme notes for a concert. The adequacy or even accuracy of a musical description cannot be ascertained once and for all, as it involves a twofold process of individual reception. It is a matter of personal taste and experience in music and literature (and ultimately, in life) whether a reader 'recognizes' in a visual image the sound of the piece described. To take an example from our texts, whether the music of the *Heiliger Dankgesang* is more truthfully evoked by Huxley's imagery of a 'tropical sea' or 'an Alpine lake,' Thomas Mann's 'moon-landscape' or Baumgart's metaphors of 'star-constellations on a celestial atlas' is a question of personal preference. In all three examples, however, the same process has taken place, namely 'the metamorphosis of the quintessentially fugitive art of music into an intrinsically static landscape.'³⁵ Occasionally, symbolic overtones are introduced into this imagery, the unfathomed depth of quiet waters suggesting the human soul, church crypts indicating timelessness, star im-

34 'Im übrigen haben Sie recht: charakterisiert wird *allgemein* die Musik der späten Beethoven Quartette (ich habe sie und die späten Sonaten während der *ganzen* Niederschrift des Buches sozusagen unendlich gehört, und meine, was musikalisch sein könnte an dieser Prosa, verdankt sich dieser Musik, auch wenn das im Einzelnen kaum analysierbar sein dürfte).' From R. Baumgart's letter of January 9, 1980. Another example of Baumgart's affinity for Beethoven's late quartets can be found in his teleplay *Die Wahlverwandtschaften. Ein Traktat mit Personen* produced by the Hessische Rundfunk in 1979. Here, part of these works played by the Busch Quartet provide the visual medium with something like a *leitmotiv* substructure.

35 This statement applies to Marcel Proust's technique in Ann P. Linder, 'Music as Mysticism and Magic: The Presentation of Music in the Works of Marcel Proust and Thomas Mann,' *Comparison* 5 (1977) 41

ages reflecting the cosmic harmony of spheres, etc. And yet, our three authors are constantly aware of the arbitrariness and limitation of the literary medium in this regard, which Leverkühn-Faustus himself expresses after pondering over 'the spirit, the attitude, the behaviour' of the opening theme of the final movement of Opus 132:

Only it is vexatious, if you don't want to call it gratifying, that in music, at least in this music, there are things for which one cannot scare up, out of the whole rich realm of language, do what you like, any properly characterizing epithet or combination of epithets.³⁶

It may seem paradoxical when an author who has employed much artistry to talk about music declares himself ultimately incapable of doing just that, but this would, of course, be a misunderstanding of this statement. It is rather a warning to the reader not to expect a verbal paraphrase of a piece of music but to content himself with the author's poetic meditation on its essence (as he comprehends it) and to appreciate its integration into the prose work. What appeared at first like a literary impasse can at the same time be considered a gateway to a deeper level of beauty and truth, or, as Aldous Huxley concludes his essay 'Music at Night': 'The best we can do is to indicate in the most general terms the nature of the musical beauty-truth under consideration and to refer curious truth-seekers to the original ... If we want to know, we must listen ...'.³⁷

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³⁶ *Doctor Faustus*, 160

³⁷ Aldous Huxley, *Collected Essays* (London: Chatto and Windus 1960) 180