Music As Translation. Musical Motifs in Liebert’s Poetry

Abstract

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This article is devoted to analyses of musical motifs in poetry by a Polish author Jerzy Liebert (1901–1934). Two main kinds of metaphorically understood music can be distinguished in his work: the earthly, referring to human finiteness, and the transcendental, which is the divine music of God. In the investigation of this problem, Boethian typology of music (musica mundana, musica instrumentalis, musica humana) is engaged. The results of these analyses contribute to the understanding of how the human condition confronts the perfect nature of the Creator in Liebert’s poetry. The article argues that musical motifs seem to be yet another expression of this problem, ubiquitous in the poet’s work; thus, they are essential to its correct interpretation.

Keywords: Liebert, music, poetry, translation, transcendence

Introduction

Is music a language? Can we use it as a means of expression for particular intellectual content? Many thinkers have approached this philosophical problem, among them Nicolas Harnoncourt, Martha Nussbaum, and Theodor Adorno, yet the answers vary. Without a doubt, however, there is less reservation on the part of literary authors. They frequently draw inspiration from the musical universum, to add to the message they are able to contain in words. One such author is the Polish poet Jerzy Liebert (1904–1931), in whose work we can find symptoms of multifaceted exploration of musical themes.

The interpretation filter engaged in the analysis of Liebert’s work in this article may be considered a broad metaphor. However, we will try to prove that this filter is appropriate, and, above all else, cognitively useful. Understanding how Liebert uses musical themes and motifs to enhance his poetic art sheds light not only on its formal structure but also on its deepest layers of the intellectual message. We may boldly state that in many cases Liebert’s poetry as such speaks through music. By not making efforts to hear it, we lose an essential part of its expressive nature. According to this view, music in Liebert’s work should not be seen as something external and ornamental, but rather substantial.

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For this reason, we have to approach this problem from a philosophical perspective, and not only that of formal literary analysis, which focuses mainly on the means of artistic expressions. Reaching beyond them, we will discover yet another manifestation of transcendence in Liebert’s poetry, often omitted in typical interpretations: music as an emanation of universal truths.

Therefore, we aim to consider how these musical motifs are functionalized, that is, what is the purpose of their use. We will do this in a way that tends to treat music as a quasi-language present in Liebert’s work, although inherent to his poems as such. We will try to hear through what kind of music Liebert decides to convey his intellectual message, and will distinguish between earthly and divine music. In doing this, we will focus on the problem of spirituality in Liebert’s work. We will argue that it bears a strong connection to music and that a certain spiritual content is expressed through particular musical, or musical-like, imaging. In this process, we will come closer to understanding why the musicality of Liebert’s poems may be treated as a specific form of translation.

**Vanitas. Earthly Music**

In general, two different types of music should be distinguished in Liebert’s work. The first one is humble and human; the latter, divine and transcendental. Both of them require a separate approach. And when they are correctly understood, they reveal a tension between the finite and the eternal, between the superficial and the most intimate, between the imperfect and the holy. This tension, which is, not surprisingly, a broadly discussed current of Liebert’s poetry, will then be presented here in musical frames.

Michael Edwards, in his philosophical thought about the existential meaning of the act of translation, distinguishes two types of linguistic experience inherent to that act. The first one is *misére*: the hopelessness of language in its attempts to convey the deepest mystery of being\(^2\). The latter, in contrast, is *grandeur*, which should be understood as the great creative power of language, which surpasses human finiteness and, so to speak, works how it will, independent of our own efforts. We should keep this opposition in mind, as it accurately explains the problems crucial to Liebert’s work.

The first kind of music, which for the needs of this article will be called “earthly”, manifests itself mainly in forms corresponding to folk songs. There are some poems in which Liebert declares the use of musical matrix, as in *Fir Lullaby*\(^3\). And there are others, in which he does so without mentioning it explicitly; however, this fact is still quite easily arguable due to metrics, the type of imaging and the message they convey, as in *Colas Breugnon*\(^4\). Taking a closer look at particular cases of such folk-inspired poems, or even, so to speak, “folk songs”, will let us understand Liebert’s vision of the human condition here, on earth. Respectively, confrontation with his depiction of what

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\(^3\) Jerzy Liebert. ‘*Kołysanka jodłowa*’, in: *Poezje zebrane* (Warszawa: PIW, 2018), 111.

we call “transcendental music”, serves to more adequately grasp Liebert’s urge to surrender to God’s will. Taken together, those two kinds of music show the poet’s spiritual struggle in its entirety.

Take *Fir Lullaby* (*Kołysanka jodłowa*). This poem, from which the whole poetic volume takes its name, seems to be based entirely on contrasts: the rustic simplicity of the form, characterized even by a certain naivety of the rhymes, clashes with the heaviness of existential pain which it conveys. A lullaby, a song sung to children to put them to sleep, is here addressed to a man afflicted with tuberculosis, who is preparing himself to sleep eternally, facing the last extremity of death. What this contrast shows, in agreement with our hypothesis concerning the folk dimension of music in Liebert’s poetry, is the complete fragility of human life, in this case reduced almost to, so to speak, a zero point. If a lullaby is something sung to a person at the beginnings of their life, and Liebert uses it as a funeral song, then it provokes a feeling as if nothing has ever really happened. In an existential circle, we come back to the stage of *tabula rasa*. A man is but a cosmic insect that lives one day, consisting of atoms that stay together for a little while, only to disperse.

However, we should also note that this lullaby is not one that brings tranquility. In fact, in particular passages, it may remind us more of a folk dance. The patient’s relatives are concerned with his passing, perhaps busy with mournful errands because of what will inevitably come. The thermometer’s quicksilver jumps and quivers, the faint amount of life still left makes desperate efforts to jolt, the fir trees spread their fragrance as they always did. We feel that all of this is happening in a strangely external, whirling movement, not able to penetrate the soul, let alone to help it. It is doubtful that these superficial events relate anyhow to the dying patient’s most intimate state of being.

Another musical motif in *Fir Lullaby* seems to be disguised in its ending; however, so as to avoid overinterpretation we should state this with certain reservations. The final picture of ultimate divorce of body and soul resembles the incipit of a popular Polish folk song about parting with a loved one, *You Will Go Through the Mountain, and I Through the Valley* (*Ty pójdziesz górą, a ja doliną*)\(^5\). The soul in Liebert’s poem will go to the green hills, while the body will be laid in the earth of July. We, therefore, see a similar theme of enormous separation, the two divided by vast space, an impossible distance between them. It is the same cruelty of fate that tears apart the young love of a woman and a man, and the temporary union of body and soul. It is, perhaps, also a picture of the insurmountable difference between the sinful human being and infinite God.

In a way, we may argue that the form of a folk song matches very well indeed with *vanitas* themes, as it seems human, natural, not refined and sometimes even primitively imperfect. It is something that emerges from the futile perspective of earthly concerns: a perspective of bodies that do not keep, minds that err and souls that are corrupted

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by sin. As far as Liebert’s poetry is concerned, we may feel that even the simple human joys he describes are underlain by a certain existential anxiety.

The hidden current of this anxiety, even if the poet himself does not yet recognize it fully, seems to run through one of his most anacreontic poems, *Colas Breugnon*. This text which, at first glance, is likely perceived as a tribute to the beauty of life, may be read as a kind of naive confession before God, in the face of pagan engagement in earthly delights. The world depicted in the poem seems to be harmonious and by all means happy, thanks to the people’s instinct of joy, which turns every misfortune into a blessing. The stream of bitterness turns into wine; the black bread tastes not worse than ambrosia. Moreover, it is not as if we underestimated divinity, bold and vain. Quite the opposite, we even raise our hands to God in an act of gratitude, convinced that we live in spiritual balance. We sing our song in a cheerful and peaceful community of believers, who have found a way to tame the suffering brought by life.

Despite all this, we know one more thing: for a reason, God does not answer us, ignoring our call. He remains concealed behind the silvery clouds, not showing His face, while we are here in the lowlands, taking care of comforting ourselves. Then, an unsettling thought appears. Our song may not be the one He actually wishes to hear, so it is possible that the whole existential order we have built is idle. We will be stuck in this position until we understand that the face we want to see is not the face He can show us. For, against our expectations, He is not Dionysus. Our song is fundamentally flawed because it is devoted to the kind of deity who is just not the Lord. It only causes His image to become blurred, impeding our chances of communication, and holding us captive in a circle of sin. In a way, just as our eyes are filled with the sight of clouds and lush branches of the post-Eden garden, our ability to hear Him is deafened by the very song we sing to Him as a prayer.

Because the truth is that the suffering He gives us is here to be embraced, not to be eradicated; it is to be accepted as such, without the anaesthetic power of bliss. Only this kind of attitude, the poet seems to suggest, can take the veil off His face, or, to use a more appropriate metaphor, to make this veil somewhat more transparent. The futility of human advances in lessening the existential horror is easily visible in another poem by Liebert, *The Engagement*, in which he describes how the confrontation with God’s grandeur dissolves the feeble construction of earthly life into pieces. However, this is a thread of our analyses which we will expand in the second part of the article.

To close our discussion on the themes of folk music in Liebert’s work, let us recall yet one more poem, perhaps the most representative of the sort, that is *Playing the Pipe (Na fujarce)*. This text, which, when read for the first time, seems utterly ornamental and superficial, bears an unexpectedly serious message. All of the formal aspects, namely the accumulation of nouns in their diminutive forms, simple rhymes, repetitions,
and idyllic imaging, should not mislead us. For the whole enterprise of playing the pipe is questioned as empty and vain not precisely as such but in the perspective of existential matters.

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, in his famous book on instrumentation, Principles of Orchestration, describes the sound of the flute as rather superficially sad, and Liebert seems to make good use of that supposed property, creating a general impression. But the bright, pastoral tone of the poem is abruptly invaded by an alien substance: the word “despair.” We suddenly come to understand that the seemingly carefree and light-hearted pipe-player is going through enormous suffering, feeling the tragic urge to create something which, as he in fact believes, has no meaning whatsoever (perhaps just as the poet himself tended to think about his work). The world does not want to listen to what the pipe-player has to offer. A man plays his small finite songs, but the heart of reality is indifferent, although people do not have much more to give than that. They will vanish, both the player and his earthly music, without making an impact, so that, from the eternal point of view, it is as if nothing has happened. Once again, the human sings, while God remains silent.

Grandeur. Divine Music

Liebert uses hymns, odes, and rhapsodes, which, to a certain extent, could be analyzed as musical forms. But music contained in such literary structures, however noble, is still human. It comes from people’s spirituality, their understanding of divine things, and so it has to be flawed. The music which we want to seek in this part of the article is, in contrast, transcendental, coming from the outside. More precisely, it is the perfect music of God, tremendous and eternal. Speaking about this, we immediately shift the perspective of a human being from the careless creator to the repenting listener.

However, referring to this kind of music is already qualified by an important fact. The divine music, however oddly it may sound, is not something to be heard with our ears, just as we hear a pipe-player performing his songs. At the same time, it does not mean that there are no ways in which it can be perceived. To understand this, we should reach for an ancient scheme from the philosophy of music, which remained technically unchanged for centuries, and still finds its use in analyses concerning the art of sound.

It was as early as the sixth century when the Roman philosopher, Boethius, wrote his treatise entitled De institutione musica. Here, he distinguished and described three kinds of music: musica mundana, the celestial music of the spheres, musica instrumentalis, the discipline of composing and of instrumental art, and musica humana, explained as the harmony of all the elements, bodily and spiritual, which form a human being. The task of the musician is to grasp musica mundana and represent it in a musical piece so that a person who listens to it could join the universal cosmic harmony.

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Musica mundana, however, is not something you hear; it is something you know. It is too great to be heard with human ears. It is a tremendous force that may be approached through mathematics, geometry, or mystical revelation. It is divine: and it is precisely this kind of divinity that we observe in Liebert’s poetry.

Having said that, where can we find musica mundana, or, more adequately, musica divina in Liebert’s poems, if we cannot hear it? We have to look for a description of how the supernatural, divine force works. It often manifests itself as a primordial, elemental power of fire or wind, an energy that we cannot control. It is something elusive yet extremely violent, able to bring destruction to the frail human being.

But once a human understands the truth about God’s ways, his life changes, just as the life of Jerzy Liebert changed with his spiritual conversion. He slowly comes to acknowledge that contact with transcendence puts him in jeopardy, but there is no other morally acceptable attitude than accepting this existential risk. In Liebert’s poems, we may observe a growing consciousness of that challenge. The book devoted to Liebert by Anna Szczepan-Wojnarska, Z ogniem będziesz się żenił (You Will Get Married to a Fire), contains a thorough study of this process\textsuperscript{11}. The fact of discovering different music, coming from outside of what is available to the senses, is the beginning of a young man’s tragedy, although one that leads to heroic spiritual growth.

To justify this statement, we should name at least a few examples of poems illustrating this struggle. However, this is not a difficult task, as they are many. One of them, already mentioned, is The Engagement (Zaślubiny); the others include The Rider\textsuperscript{12}, in which the divine force is personalized as a heavenly soldier who tramples the speaker; The Perfect Love\textsuperscript{13}, in which the power of heavenly loving goes through the body in the form of celestial light; The Invisible Wing\textsuperscript{14}, where the poet speaks about waves of mysterious wind that moves the soul, and so on. Searching for something that all of these poems have in common, we see a rather disturbing picture. For it seems that the divine force, which is supposed to redeem the human being, often does it through almost physical destruction. In this context, tuberculosis, from which Liebert suffered, seems yet another manifestation of this unexplainable logic of divinity.

We may find an analogous vision of God’s will in one of Martha Nussbaum’s texts, The Mourner’s Hope\textsuperscript{15}. She says that the voice of God “literally enters the body”, forcing a person to confront the perspective of change. It is there whether we want it or not. One may deny it, or surrender to it. But once we surrender, the deliverance it brings does not evoke a comfortable, pleasing kind of joy. Perhaps we would like to hear a sweet song of victory, pleasant to the senses; but all we hear is a proclamation of the uncompromised law of the Decalogue, discovered by cold reason. The joy of eternal justice

\textsuperscript{11} See Anna Marta Szczepan-Wojnarska, “Z ogniem będziesz się żenił”. Doświadczenie transcendencji w życiu i twórczości Jerzego Lieberta, (Kraków: Universitas, 2003).
\textsuperscript{12} Jerzy Liebert, “Jęździec”, in: Poezje zebrane (Warszawa: PIW, 2018), 77.
is then a joy that breaks us because it requires self-resignation. Knowing this, Liebert used his poetry as a testimony of fear, which one can overcome thanks to God’s grace. And a fear overcome, to quote Aquinas, is bravery.

Referring to this problem, Zygmunt Lichniak maintains that most of Liebert’s spiritual difficulties stemmed from a sort of spiritual solipsism, which the author names as “Newman’s mistake”. Lichniak argues that Liebert rarely speaks on the part of the whole community of believers, considering his relationship with God as a one-to-one kind of exchange. This, allegedly, locks him within the walls of existential loneliness. However, we should notice that the poems in which the musical motifs appear tend to break this rule. More closely inspected, they reveal a union of voices before God’s majesty, and these are not rare cases. Even the “folk songs”, which we have previously described as superficial, are themselves characteristic of art that belongs to the whole community. Folk art is not always individual but frequently represents a collective voice.

Therefore, in Liebert’s poetry, we can find a process somewhat similar to that described by Andres Comte-Sponville in his Small Treatise on the Great Virtues. In this philosophical catalogue, the French author starts by mentioning solidarity, which itself is not yet a virtue as such. For, as we have seen in Colas Breugnon, it may refer to morally imperfect enterprises. The treatise ends with a description of love, which, contrary to solidarity, is already something more than a virtue. It reaches beyond human limitations, time and space, and prepares a human being to lay down their life. And even for Comte-Sponville, an atheist, the fact of love is a source of a great existential mystery. Liebert’s poetic pilgrimage, therefore, seems to be a way to individualize the voice which becomes more and more self-conscious in the light of divine love.

**Conclusion. Poetry As a Musical Medium**

To conclude, let us return to the classification of music proposed by Boethius. We have mentioned that there are three kinds: the cosmic (musica mundana) or similar to this, the divine (musica divina); the instrumental (musica instrumentalis); and the human (musica humana). We have shown traces of the divine in Liebert’s poems, after approaching the parts which sometimes seem, so to speak, purely instrumental. What is the result of this clash? And what about human music in Liebert’s work?

If the role of a musician is to compose music in accordance with the knowledge of divine music, then his work has to change along with discovering new spiritual truths. The purpose of this process is to change people’s souls, bringing them closer to the harmony of the universe. Liebert understood that once he heard the divine music, he could not remain on the level of superficial form in his poetry. From that moment, his work, as adequately written or performed musica instrumentalis, had to mirror spiritual reality.

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16 Zygmunt Lichniak, Poeta konsekwencji (Warszawa: PAX, 1952), 36.
Because only by doing so, could the artist tell the truth about God, the world, and the human being. Only that kind of art may be called genuine.

Therefore, we now see that in Liebert’s poetry, music is indeed a form of translation. The musical motifs he uses fluctuate along with his spiritual conversion. The form reacts. In his poetry then, music is a medium between the divine and the human, thus becoming problematic itself. For, in the poet’s view, the divine is violent and mysterious, while the human is extremely fragile. What kind of poetic word might stand the burden of such a responsibility? It seems only a thin layer of paper covered with ink between the soul and God. A wind produced by the vocal words, *flatus vocis*, as the medieval philosopher, Roscelin de Compiegne might say. But, despite all this, if the task of an artist is to link human beings to the divine by playing the right music, even if concealed in poetic verse, today we may undoubtedly state that Liebert did win his struggle.

**Bibliography**