

The Intersection Between Art, Music, and Society

Musical Iconography's Social Dynamics Impact¹

Edson Leite

Abstract

This research focuses on musical iconography as a valuable source of information that refers to understanding themes and concepts supported by knowledge of history, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, traditions, popular wisdom, etc., to perform an interpretation of the intrinsic meaning of civilization's documents historically. It is related to the works and from the whole context involving different temporal conditions to enable testimony and imagination in a vivid way that characterizes a fundamental means of expression and communication within the universe of art, referring to symbolic devices that conform to the social memory of a recent past. The images hold information linked to the history of art and the time they were produced and constitute tools for understanding the world. Music carries traits characteristic of the society that makes it and processes information decoded by musical iconography. Integrating the senses and the presence of rhythm as a form in all the arts allows the appreciation of musical iconography in a broad sense, as something that reaches the various manifestations of art and human communication, intertwining artistic proposals. From modernity on, Baudelaire, Kandinsky, and, later, Messiaen reported the correspondences between the senses and sensory experiences with constant references to music and musical metaphor. Such experiences enabled a new meaning and application to the term musical iconography, which we understand to be extended to non-figurative works. The artistic practices involving the universe of music will be analyzed. They will include artworks from the Museum of Contemporary Art of the University of São Paulo (MAC USP), one of the most significant art collections of contemporary art in Brazil and Latin America. The reflection on the music represented in modern and contemporary images will reveal aspects of the social context and current artistic production, enabling the historical review and interpretation, thinking the dimension of musical iconography.

Introduction

The artistic experience goes through memory, symbolic expression, and perception. It allows the perspective of a dialogue to reach new meanings. According to Heidegger, the work of art publicly makes something else known, reveals something else to us, and is also an allegory. In the artwork, something other is joined to the manufactured thing—the artwork becomes a symbol (Heidegger 2012). Images always present multiple aspects and different perspectives, constituting a terrain of uncertainties. In this sense, Victor Hugo called the wall boxes of French Gothic cathedrals' vast symphonies of stone' or 'bibles of stone' (Hugo 2003).

Iconography (from the Greek *eikon*, image, *graphe*, description, writing) is the study of artistic images, representations in painting, sculpture, and other branches of the visual arts related to their sources and meanings. It studies the images' configuration, identification, description, and their respective symbolic and allegorical relationships. The French historian Émile Mâle coined, at the end of the 19th century, the term 'iconography' as a descriptive method of visual representations (Mâle 1908). Therefore, the evolutionary variants of the iconography term are related to 'iconography/allegory' by Cesare Ripa (1593), 'iconography' by Émile Mâle (1908), and 'iconography' and 'iconology' by Erwin Panofsky (1939).

There is a complex intellectual exercise in image analysis. Musical iconography approaches disciplines such as musicology, organology, history, art history but now incorporates anthropology, ethnomusicology, sociology, semiotics, and music psychology. Musical iconography relates to music and image; it is the narrative between the two elements. Images contain codified information that is linked to the history of art and the history of its time. Works of art are human construction and can help us understand the world around us. They are history's reflections and contain the symbols of their time. Music carries traits characteristic of each society, and iconography is an information processor. Observation of musical instruments in action is not possible in music archaeology studies. However, iconography provides an indirect statement of playing techniques and the treatment of musical instruments when they were not being played, providing information about past cultures' sound and ceremonial production. Studying the past of musical culture is much more than learning musical practices and their agents. It is thinking about music and past societies through music (Cerqueira 2016) to think about humanity's past. The iconographic repertoire creates an imaginative and pictorial universe related to events and signs, a historical memory of a particular past (Castro 2015).

The entire cultural complex of musical iconography constitutes a valuable source of information and points to the importance and complexity of working with a broad and multiple set of data, a complex and dynamic system, with multi, trans, and interdisciplinary perspectives. Visual representations of music nourish organology, archaeology, and musical iconography. The repeated presence of certain instrumental combinations in the images of a given period indicates such ensembles in that culture. The main problem of iconographic analysis is determining the functional, aesthetic, or ideological transformations that link the representations with their supposed originals, demonstrating the epistemological and interdisciplinary complexity and integrating this theme to heritage, mainly traditional communities (Cerqueira 2016).

In *Musical Poetics* (*Poétique musicale*, 1942), Stravinsky explains that music refers to a creative force that aspires to sound materialization in the strict sense of art. Thus, the musical sound and the artistic image are embedded with symbols and traditions. Many of them are ancestral. Art is a significant expression of collectivity and influences and impacts changes in society, but it also suffers the influence of time and where it is inserted. Poses, adornments, or the artist's mere freedom of creation can hardly be understood outside their time due to the codifications of the period they were created. The musical sound and the artistic image are expressions of human culture. Since antiquity, artists have used codes to explore symbolic aspects and to understand them. The theological, rhetorical, pedagogical, historical, and aesthetic knowledge is necessary to that understanding. Without which it becomes almost impossible to encompass all its signal meaning: one should bear in mind that many poets and theoreticians—and artists—of the seventeenth century were polymaths—with a multifaceted knowledge—and after all, there was not yet the idea of specialization (Brandão 2009). Bennet (2005) understands that the museum and the exhibitions are a privileged territory to analyze the devices that instrumentalize the possibilities of vision in each historical moment. The Museum of Contemporary Art of the University of São Paulo (MAC USP), since its creation in 1963, has been consolidating itself as a pioneer and protagonist space regarding avant-garde artistic languages and their use in the creative and musicological sphere. Also, the MAC USP has been preserving, studying, and exhibiting a collection that contains many artworks linked to the music representation. Artworks that this study intends to analyze and understand the musical sensibilities, symbolic conceptions, and transformations in its historical dimension. In this way, mapping the artistic context and understanding this intermediary place between creation, research, and teaching can use this privileged documentary source for the constitution of another account in modern and contemporary art history.

The Tradition of Images

Iconography plays a facilitating role in human communication with the gods, referring to mythological and supernatural origins. For example, a cave painting in the Caves of El Cogul in Spain shows a group of women dancing around a naked man who appreciates the dance and, consequently, the music. Greek mythology indicates Euterpe, one of the nine Muses, as the one responsible for creating music. The word music means "Art of the Muses." Thus, it was up to the Greeks to systematize musical theory, influencing human beings and the state.

Engravings found in the Egyptian pyramids show the importance of music to the Assyrian and Egyptian peoples, with musicians playing flute, lute, and harp. Ancient peoples believed that music had a divine origin. In ancient times, the Hebrew people were the only ones to consider music a human creation, attributed to Jubal, a descendant of Cain. In ancient times, music imposed itself as a fundamental force of the ritual act. The art of the Greeks and Romans, in the painting on vases, sculptures, coins, frescoes, and sarcophagi, demonstrates the role of instruments in mythological themes and plays and bacchanals, showing how musical practice is inseparable from life events, worship, education, and military art (Bosseur 1999). Orpheus and the Muses transformed the harp into a symbol of poetic inspiration that, by prolonging natural sounds, imitates the sound of the waters and the winds. With the mermaids, represented in funerary monuments, as angels of death, the harp accompanies the songs of seduction and induces illusion. Orfeo's lyre was represented with thirteen strings, corresponding to the ancient alphabet of thirteen consonants (Bosseur 1999). The percussion instruments were generally linked to the feeling of joy and vivacity and used in the bacchanals. The tambourines rhythmized the bacchanals with effects that referred to frenzy and hypnosis.

Musical instruments, inseparable from their visual incarnation, manifest secret faculties of the human soul and contribute to the induction and interpretation of mood swings since the beginning of human history. Music contains harmonic principles established by a higher order, the model for all human creation, and therefore asserted itself in the Middle Ages in contemplation and glorification of divine messages. Instruments were seen as an extension of the human body organs, and, in this sense, they amplified the bestial or celestial aspects of individuals. They could be "Satan's sacristans" or "angelic" (Bosseur 1999). The materials used in the construction of the instruments influenced the symbolism attached to each of them.

Based on elementary numerical proportions, both visual and sound phenomena should produce an impression of order and balance in the spirit, capable of provoking a feeling of fullness and agreement with the laws of the universe. Until the 16th century, iconography was used only for the study of religious symbols and images. In a society where most of the population could not read, the painting was fundamental in the symbolic construction of the social imaginary. Although linked primarily to allegorically transmitting divine truths to the faithful, medieval art did not lose creativity and aesthetic value. Music was an effective medium for propagating social ideas, behavior, and conduct in the Middle Ages, including those relating to love and marital fidelity. In the *Symposium* (c. 385–370 BC), Plato explains that music is the science of love between rhythm and harmony, celestial and ordered love, which unites opposites and is efficient for education and moderation (fig. 1). According to the Platonic concept, music is the reflection of mathematics and celestial order. In the Platonic conception, conjugal love is understood as the perfect way to achieve supreme beauty. Love should always be expressed in verse and song since it is eminently communicative. It was understood that music could be learned through the experience of passion and love controlled and governed by harmony. Thus, music acted as a fundamental guideline for education and human relations and already began its association with images and texts, exercising a didactic and propaganda function.

The relationship between art and its context of production should fall on the meaning of artistic forms and the content of images, constituting historical sources to investigate the culture of a period. The study of images and symbols indicates numerous changes in art historiography and the traditions of the past. According to Panofsky, iconographic analysis refers to understanding how, under different historical conditions, themes or concepts were expressed by objects and events (Panofsky 2009). For Argan, Erwin Panofsky's great merit consists of having understood that, despite its confusing appearance, the world of images is ordered. Therefore, it is possible to make art history the history of images (Argan 1992). In the artworks where episodes of sacred history are represented, it is common to observe open fragments of heaven. Considering the musician angels as Neoplatonic images, through which the harmony of paradise is alluded to, or understanding heavenly music as an unmistakable sign of the divine presence, an indication of the supernatural. The union of the human soul with God is analogously expressed as the intimate delight produced by music. The intangible harmony takes visible forms through musical instruments, especially in the representation of stringed instruments. From a material point of view, the sonority

of the instruments depends on the details of their construction. Their symbolic meaning is inspired by their timbre qualities or their ability to produce one or more sounds at a time. Information can be supported from sources relatively close to the pictorial works in temporality. Since the 16th century, music was understood as an art capable of directly communicating heaven and earth. The paintings figured musical instruments played by angels, functioning as a visual metaphor for spiritual music, contributing to the artwork's didactic purpose and suggesting to the faithful a way to understand mystical union through sound evocation. By its polyphonic nature, the harp became a symbol of harmony, of the interaction between consonance and dissonance, which should serve as an example of the internal moderation of the human being (Borja 1680). A very similar meaning to the harp was attributed to the lute, considered adequate to express the appeasement of the human soul as if it were a musical instrument, capable of producing music inside the body. The human voice was also considered a musical instrument, the instrument of praise to the most significant degree.

Sometimes evoked by musical instruments, the number seven is linked to the number of the planets (not all of them are planets in the astronomical sense of the term) to the seven angels that rule them or the seven scale notes. Cotte, relying on Mersenne, reports that the symbolism of the four elements (fire, air, water, and earth) pervades works of art and corresponds to the four temperaments, the four seasons, the four cardinal points, the four human voices, and even the four Gospels. The Reformation expressed great suspicion, sometimes hostility, to instruments that visibly showed signs of their pagan origin and were consequently revealed to favor debauchery and imbalance of the senses. According to the terms of the Council of Trent, the Counter-Reformation disapproved and prohibited instruments associated with worldly music, except the organ. From the 16th century on, angels were preferentially singers, under the rigor and censorship of the period. Exports to musical art became more individualized as the Baroque era was affirmed, which shows music in its close relationship with the general laws of the cosmos, shown obedient to monarchical and religious power (Bosseur 1999).

The sound phenomenon, ephemeral by essence, refers to the flow of time and implies the illusion of pleasures of the senses. It translates the growing variety of approaches to music in society, in gallant gatherings and popular festivals, particularly numerous in the 17th and 18th centuries, in official ceremonies, military parades, theater, and amateur practices (Bosseur 1999). From the moment the will to treat color as energy is more clearly affirmed, giving relative autonomy to what is represented, composers explore the harmonic language and timbre games, artistic intentions are modified and incorporate sensitively different

implications. Music contributes to relief the inner and outer space, and whether in the fine arts, literature, or music, symbolism constitutes the basis and essence of the artist's language (Cotte 1995). The symbolism of musical instruments is linked to their timbre, social use, external appearance, or legendary traditions.

From modernity on, firstly, the poet Charles Baudelaire, then the painter Wassily Kandinsky and, later, the composer Olivier Messiaen, reported the correspondences between the sensory experiences and the body in the city. Further, the constant references to music and musical metaphor occurred, making possible a new meaning and application to the term musical iconography, which we understand to be extended to non-figurative works. Therefore, as an example, many of the artworks of the MAC USP collection present relation with musical iconography, among them (figs. 1-3), the paintings by Di Cavalcanti (*Cena de café concerto*, 1934 and *Homens tocando violão*, 1949), Massimo Campigli (*Mulheres ao piano*, 1946), Fulvio Pennacchi (*Figuras carnavalescas*, 1973), Alex Flemming (*Santa Cecília tocando harpa num pátio pós-moderno*, 1985), Regina Vater (*Flauta tibia III*, 1988), Robert Rauschenberg (*Music – John Cage*, 1994), and also, sound sculptures and tridimensional artworks such as those by Nelson Leirner, Paulo Nenflidio, and Carlos Bevilacqua, among many other artists. Many sculptures, installations, objects, instruments and drawings, electronics, movement, construction, invention, randomness, physics, interaction, and other creations linking music and visual arts are highlighted. In the art of these artists, visual representation of auditory sensations is common, even using, in some cases, musical structures transformed into visual images. Kandinsky, for example, expounds his theories on the use of color, establishing a strict link between music and spiritual dimensions. Paulo Nenflidio builds sound structures that produce unusual sounds and that, in many cases, refer to instruments known to the public.



Figure 1. Emiliano Di Cavalcanti, *Roda de Samba*, 1928.

Photo by Jonas de Carvalho, April 9, 2013.

Licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.



Figure 2. Massimo Campigli. *Mulheres ao violão*, 1946
Photo by Jean Louis Mazieres, September 17, 2014.
Licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

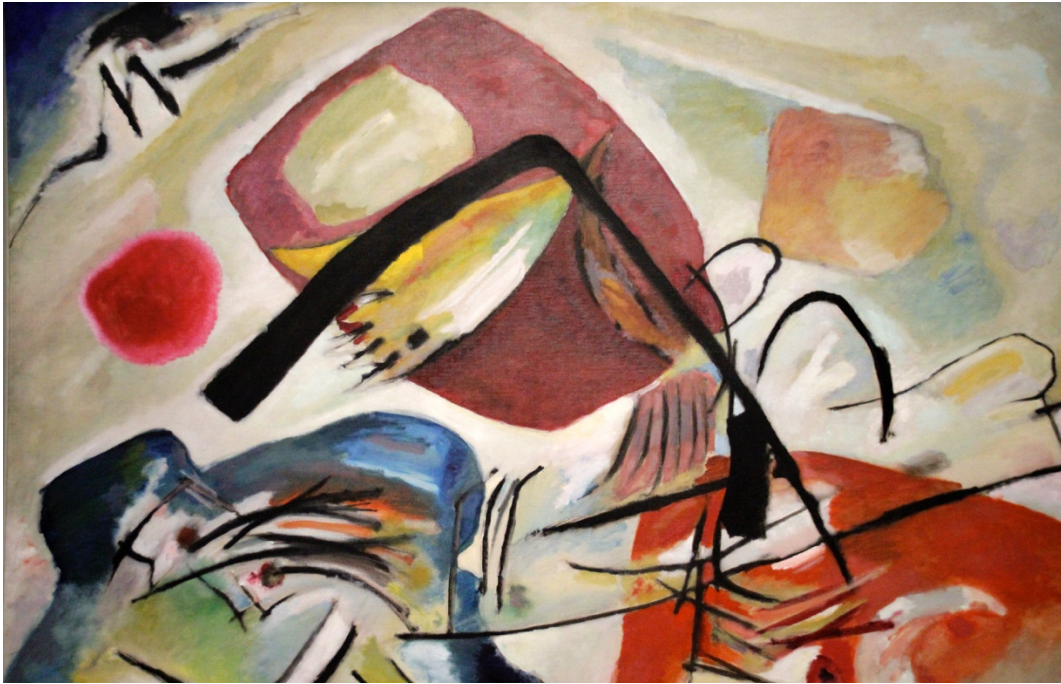


Figure 3. Wassily Kandinsky, *Mit dem schwarzen Boden*, 1912.
Centre national d'Art et de Culture Georges-Pompidou, Paris.
Photo by Renaud Camus, December 6, 2013. Licensed under CC BY 2.0.

Final Considerations

The iconographic musical documentary heritage constitutes a powerful tool that allows establishing a new relationship between musicology, information, and the various aspects in the relations between globalization, regionalization, and local culture. Musical information emanates from the phenomenological dimension of music (materialized in sound and audiovisual records) and its linguistic and semiotic dimension (materialized in iconographic and graphical music records). Art is a source of reflections, impacts collectivities, and produces changes in the societies' mentality in which it operates. The art-society relationship is present in musical iconography through the desire to deepen the analysis of a concrete episode in the history of music and art that allows us to resolve several unknowns that arise due to the influence of the visual arts in the unchaining of social situations. Music generates substantial social impact through iconographic reference, which has highly significant transformative power. Iconography translates a broad panorama of music-making and how society interprets its presence. Music presents strong cultural traditions of our society, and on it have been produced images and icons that have transformed society, or part of it, in powerful ways. The intersection between art, music, and sociology is the source of musical iconography's social dynamics impact. According to a long tradition, musical iconography can allow the subject beyond established determinations towards its conditions and possibilities, revealing itself as an identity vector through which the art universe is expressed, constituting an ideal, a possible form of self-understanding.

In an anthropological sense, culture is objectified in socially transmitted discourses, practices, rites, products, and institutions, and their products summon us into dialogue with the past and otherness. Discourses about music are symbolic forms, conceptions of ideas and values, concepts explicitly stated, and others only inferred. The integrated theoretical reflection on music in modern and contemporary images should reveal social context and artistic production aspects. As Adorno stated (1984), to tear the mute eternity out of musical images is the true intention of progress in music. Modern and contemporary artworks, especially the non-figurative ones—as the artworks at MAC USP—have a relationship with music. Also, these artworks seek a symbolic reconstruction allowing a transcendental listening and understanding to think about and interpret the historicity and the dimension of musical iconography. The integration of the senses and the presence of rhythm as an existing form in all the arts allow us to think, nowadays, of musical iconography, which reaches various art and human communication manifestations, intertwining artistic proposals.

Author Biography

Edson Leite is a full professor at the Museum of Contemporary Art at the University of São Paulo (MAC USP). He is former Vice-Director of the School of Arts, Sciences and Humanities at the University of São Paulo (2010-2013), Director of the USP Symphony Orchestra (2010-2016). He was also the coordinator of the Inter-Graduate Program in Aesthetics and Art History of the University of São Paulo (2017-2020). Since 2021, Professor Leite has been the President of the Research Commission of MAC USP and develops his arts, music, cultural heritage, and communication research, working mainly on Brasilien and Latin American cultures. E-mail: edsonleite@usp.br

¹ Translated by Marjorie Lambert.

Bibliography

- Adorno, Theodor W. *Reaccion y progreso*. Barcelona: Tusquets, 1984.
- Argan, Giulio Carlo. *A história da arte como história da cidade*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 1992.
- Bennett, Tony. *The birth of the museum: history, theory, politics*. London: Routledge, 2005.
- Borja, Juan de. *Empresas Morales*. Bruselas: Francisco Foppens, 1680.
- Bosseur, Jean-Yves. *Musique et Beaux-Arts. De l'Antiquité au XIXe Siècle*. Paris: Minerve, 1999.
- Brandão, Antônio Jackson de S. "O gênero emblemático." *Revista Travessia*, Cascavel, Paraná: Unioeste, v. 3, n. 3, 2009, 124-138.
- Castro, Beatriz Magalhães. "Três séculos de iconografia da música no Brasil de Mercedes Reis Pequeno: visualidade e construção de identidades na prática musical brasileira." In Blanco, Pablo Sotuyo, eds. *Estudos luso-brasileiros em iconografia musical*. Salvador: EDUFBA, 2015, 11-32.
- Cerqueira, Fábio Vergara. "Um campo emergente: arqueologia da música e suas interfaces com o patrimônio." In *Revista Arqueologia Pública*. Campinas, São Paulo, v. 10, n. 2, (June 2016) 101-114.
- Cotte, Roger J. V. *Música e simbolismo: ressonâncias cósmicas dos instrumentos e das obras*. São Paulo: Cultrix, 1995.
- Heidegger, Martin. *A origem da obra de arte*. Lisboa: Edições 70, 2012.
- Hugo, Victor. *O corcunda de Notre Dame*. Rio de Janeiro: Ediouro, 2003.
- Mâle, Émile. *L'art religieux de la fin du Moyen Age en France: étude sur l'iconographie du Moyen Age et sur ses sources d'inspiration*. Paris: Armand Colin, 1908.
- Panofsky, Erwin. *Significado nas artes visuais*. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2009.
- Plato. *Banquete, Fédon, Sofista e Político [Symposium]*. Coleção Os Pensadores. São Paulo: Nova Cultural, 1991.
- Ripa, Cesare. *Iconologia*. Madri: Akal, vol. 1 e 2, 1987.
- Stravinsky, Igor. *Poética musical*. Barcelona: Acantilado, 2006.