

Musical Realism: From Verismo to Phonorealism

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Abstract

The notion of realism, accurate imitation or representation of reality, has been associated with visual arts since Ancient Greek; such notion had also been considered the aesthetical standard for millennia. Despite its apparent influence on visual arts, the notion appears to bear rather little connection with the realm of western classical music. This article aims to study the concept of Musical Realism, the relationship between the notion of realism and music, beginning from various definitions of the term realism. It investigates further into a nineteenth-century literary and artistic movement that focuses on the representation of ordinary lives and the social reality of the time. The influence of the nineteenth-century movement, also known as Verismo, is evident in operas by Verdi, Bizet, Mascagni, Massenet, and Puccini. With this study, the notion of realism is also found in instrumental compositions in the styles of Naturalism and Pictorialism which aim to use musical sounds to imitate sounds in nature or represent words or movements. The last section of this article explores the style of Phonorealism invented by Peter Ablinger who uses musical instruments to imitate sound spectra of sounds or recordings. This twentieth-century musical movement not only maintains the core concepts of realism but also pushes the search for Musical Realism further.

Keywords: Musical Realism, Verismo, Peter Ablinger, Phonorealism

Introduction

“Phonorealism” is a compositional technique invented by Peter Ablinger, an Austrian composer who works with electroacoustic compositions and sound installations. The technique adopts the notion of “realism” from a visual art movement “Photorealism”. By using musical instruments, Ablinger imitates recordings in the same way a photorealist artist imitates photographs (Ablinger, 2005). An introduction to Ablinger’s invention during my postgraduate study inspired me to investigate the connections between the concept of realism and music as the term realism has been commonly associated with visual arts but is rarely explored in the realm of classical music. Therefore, the application of the notion in musical works is a very

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interesting area on which to do further research. This article will cover the following aspects of musical realism: definitions of realism; the application of realism in nineteenth-century art and literature, and its influences on operatic compositions; realism in instrumental music; and modern artistic and musical movements such as Photorealism and Ablinger's Phonorealism.

Definitions of Realism

Realism is a theory of art that aims to directly imitate a real object, person, or landscape by various art forms. Defined by the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2020), realism is “the quality of being very like real life”. The theory of realism has been closely related to visual arts since the time of Ancient Greece in the term “mimesis” which means “imitation”. Ancient philosophers believed that the creation of art is the imitation of nature and to exactly represent the original was the ideal purpose of art (Dahlhaus, 1985: 16-18). This particularly idea of realism can be found in Greek sculptures that imitate human bodies and the portraiture in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. David Coupar Thomson (1880: 282), a Scottish art critic, gives a simple definition of realism in painting that it is to paint “nature exactly as it is, without the smallest change.” Furthermore, Gustave Courbet, a nineteenth-century French artist, indicates the importance of realism in painting as follows:

Painting is an essentially *concrete* art and can only consist of the presentation of *real and existing things*. (...); an object which is *abstract*, not visible, non-existent, is not within the realm of painting. (Nochlin, 1990: 23)

It is possible to conclude that realism is an artistic style that aims for an exact representation of an actual object which has been considered an important component, or even the aesthetic standard, of visual arts for almost two millennia

Realism: a nineteenth-century movement

In the nineteenth century, the term “Realism” (with a capital R) could also refer to the artistic and literary movement that partially resembled the notion of realism discussed above. The movement emerged after the second French revolution in 1848. After middle-class and working-class revolutionaries brought down the French monarchy, the attention of the French society was drawn to those classes instead. Art and literature in this period, which had adopted the concept of realism, aimed to represent the reality of the society in contrast to

Romanticism or Idealism; realist paintings portrayed ordinary people instead of angels or other imaginary figures, realist novels presented the everyday-life of a lower-class person instead of the luxurious life of an aristocrat (Finocchio, 2004). According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2020), another definition of the term realism is "a style in art or literature that shows things and people as they are in real life." A French art critic, Jules Champfleury also described the nineteenth-century realist movement in his book *Le réalisme* as follows:

Realism is (1) an - as far as possible - objective representation of (2) social reality, set in either (3) the present time or (4) a concrete past, a reality which (5) also extends to areas which were previously excluded from art as "unsuitable", and the depiction of which (6) frequently breaks the traditional rules of stylization. (Dahlhaus, 1985: 60)

In summary, the nineteenth-century movement of Realism is an anti-Romantic movement in art and literature that still maintains the definition of the notion of realism through true physical representations of people and objects in artworks. However, it also aims to present the social reality of that period by focusing on the lower classes, the lives of ordinary people, and unpleasant perspectives on the society.

Verismo and realism in operas

Realist literature in the nineteenth century elaborated the concept of Realism by representing social reality and refusing the standard of Romanticism. One of the leading French realist authors, Honoré de Balzac, wrote a collection of novels titled *La Comédie humaine* or *The Human Comedy*, which concerns ordinary French lives: the society after the Revolution, the poor, and provincial lives (Balzac, 1893). In 1856, Gustave Flaubert, published *Madame Bovary*, a story of a married woman who has two adulterous affairs and finally commits suicide (Flaubert, 2016). Plots in both novels were opposite to the convention of the Romantic period and unusual to readers at the time. Literary Realism spread to several countries including Italy. Around 1870, Luigi Capuana and Giovanni Verga established the realist movement in literature, "Verismo", a term derives from an Italian word "verità" which means "truth" (Giger, 2007: 279). Both French Realism and Italian Verismo had a significant influence on opera in the late nineteenth century.

Although, in music history, Realism has never been considered to be as substantial a movement as Romanticism or Impressionism, the notion of literary Realism significantly influenced opera in the second half of the nineteenth century and became the model of serious opera until the beginning of the twentieth century. Although the New Grove Dictionary of Music (Sadie, 2001: 477-478) states that the beginning of operatic Realism, also named Verismo after the Italian literary movement, was Pietro Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana* in 1888, Dieter Schnebel, a German composer, claims that realistic elements in opera might have appeared decades earlier in Giuseppe Verdi's *La traviata* premiered in 1853 as follow:

With a setting in the immediate present – a revolutionary innovation in the history of *opera seria* librettos – and with the individual fates of the principal characters influenced by a social mechanism which is not merely an implicit background but it is actually depicted in action on the stage, *La traviata* undoubtedly draws very close to a realism. (Dahlhaus, 1985: 64-65)

The opera showed the influence of the realist movement by having a lower-class protagonist, which was uncommon in its contemporaries.

Another opera that presented evidence of Verismo's influence in opera before the premiere of *Cavalleria rusticana* was Georges Bizet's *Carmen*, an opera about a gypsy woman premiered in 1875. Donald Jay Grout (2003: 484-485), an American musicologist, also considers *Carmen* to be a transition to the era of realist operas that counter-balance Wagner's influences. Dahlhaus (1985: 88) also emphasizes the difference between *Carmen* and previous mythological music dramas in the Romantic period as follows:

Bizet's rejection of a sentimental or mythological plot was significant of a narrow but important anti-Romantic movement toward realism in late nineteenth-century opera.

After Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*, many more realist operas were produced, for instance, Massenet's *La Navarraise* (1894), Puccini's *La Bohème* (1896), *Tosca* (1900), and *Madame Butterfly* (1904).

Nevertheless, neither *La traviata* nor *Cavalleria rusticana* was the first opera with a story about lower-class characters. Hermann Abert, a German music historian, argues that there were “realistic elements in the *opera buffa* of Mozart’s time” (Dahlhaus, 1985: 52). On the other hand, Erich Auerbach, a German literary critic and philologist, gives the following definition of operatic Realism in his book *Mimesis*:

Realism developed by process of deliberately breaking the classical rule of stylistic differentiation between social classes (...). According to that rule as it was applied to drama, including opera, tragedy and an elevated style were reserved for personages of noble blood and high rank, while bourgeois and the peasant could be represented in the theatre in comedy and therefore in a “low” style. (Dahlhaus, 1985: 80)

In conclusion, nineteenth-century Realism applied the concept of realism by representing social reality through the working-class characters in artworks and literature. Similarly, numerous operas in the second half of the century were under the influence of the realist movement. Tragedies of lower-class protagonists were embodied in serious operas, which were different from the Romantic melodramas of the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Naturalism and Pictorialism: instrumental musical realism

Some musicologists believe that a realist opera, which adapts its libretti from realist literature, or has its attention on working-class characters, does not truly represent the idea of realism in music. Carl Dahlhaus (1985: 13), a German musicologist, asserts that “the presence of realist features in the texts of *La traviata*, *Carmen* or *Cavalleria rusticana* has little or no bearing on the music.” Despite the fact that the texts of a realist opera depict the social reality of the nineteenth century, the music itself does not represent anything. Norman Cazden (1951: 141), an American composer and musicologist, states that realism in music is “an aesthetic content that is achieved essentially on a completely musical level.” According to Dahlhaus’ and Cazden’s observations, a piece of music can truly present the notion of musical realism only when it uses sounds to imitate or to represent something.

Dahlhaus (1985: 18) discusses several types of musical imitation in his book; one of them is the “imitation of (non-musical) sounds”. This type of imitation refers to the use of musical instruments to imitate existing sounds, for example, the sounds of engines or animals. Imitating sounds in nature or other existing sounds is closely related to the term “naturalism”, which means, according to Cazden’s article (1951: 135), “direct imitation or representation in musical compositions of sounds that are easily recognized as occurring in nature.” Naturalism has been associated with instrumental music since the Baroque period. In a BBC Radio 3’s podcast, a British composer Julian Anderson mentioned that imitating the sounds of nature was a French tradition in the time of Jean-Philippe Rameau or even before (Anderson, 2012). Using music to imitate actual sounds should immediately remind listeners of the original sounds, for example, sounds of a train in Arthur Honegger’s “Pacific 231”, birdsongs in Olivier Messiaen’s “Catalogue d’oiseaux” (Scruton, 1997: 124-127) and calls of a cuckoo in Gustav Mahler’s First Symphony.

Another type of musical imitation given by Dahlhaus (1985: 18) is “a representation of spatial movement”, which is also referred to by Cazden (1951: 138) as “pictorialism”. Pictorialism, which is closely related to the term word-painting according to Grove Music Online (Carter, n.d.), is a compositional technique that uses musical materials to represent movements or words, for instance, using ascending and descending gestures to represent the rising and falling of objects, using a gradual ascent within high registers to represent heaven. Cazden (1951: 138) claims that in Johann Sebastian Bach’s chorale prelude “Durch Adams Fall ist ganz verderbt”, the composer uses descending scales to illustrate “the fall of Adam”. Cazden further asserts that pictorialism does not aim to imitate the original sounds, but to represent them:

The “falling” of the bass line does not directly sound the way a falling soul would sound, assuming there were such a recognizable sound. The image of the fall is therefore metaphorical, pictorial in musical terms. (Cazden: 138-139)

In my opinion, if “realism in art” can be achieved by the act of imitating a person or an object with a painting or a sculpture, “realism in music” should, therefore, only be achieved by imitating any sound with music or using a piece of music to represent something. The sounds in a realist opera may not represent any existing sounds in reality. The entire opera, however,

depicts the reality of the nineteenth century. In summary, realism in music can be categorized into two groups. The first group comprises nineteenth-century serious operas that apply the idea of literary Realism, or Verismo, and portray social reality through the stories of lower-class characters. The second group consists of instrumental compositions that adapt the original idea of realism by using music to imitate sounds, as in Naturalism, or to represent something, as in Pictorialism.

Photorealism

In the second half of the twentieth century, after the birth of Abstract Art and Expressionism, an artistic movement that revived the idea of realism has emerged: Photorealism. Artists of this movement created artworks by imitating photographs. On the Guggenheim Museum's website, a description of Photorealism is given as follows:

Photorealism involved the production of images that deployed near-microscopic detail to achieve the highest degree of representational verisimilitude possible. Using the photograph as the primary visual reference artists (...) painted with the goal of photographic actuation. (Guggenheim Museum, n.d.)

The first photorealist, according to Louis K. Meisel, was an American painter, Robert Bechtle (Hillings and Lubin, 2009). In 1963, Bechtle painted his own portrait on a canvas by using a photograph of himself as a model. A photorealist painting usually looks identical to the original photograph. Artists recreate every detail of the photograph on canvas including colors, shadows, or even reflections on a metal surface. This artistic movement clearly demonstrates the idea of realism through its exact imitation of a real object, in this instance, a photograph.

Peter Ablinger's Phonorealism

Peter Ablinger is an Austrian composer and sound artist whose works have been featured in various internationally renowned music festivals in Europe, America, and Asia. His interests lie in the use of noise as his primary musical material and the manipulation of “the nature of sound, time, and space” (Ablinger, 2017). At the end of the twentieth century, Ablinger applied the theory of Photorealism directly to his music and coined the term “Phonorealism”. He describes Phonorealism as “the reproduction of ‘phonographs’ by instruments” (Ablinger, 2006). In this case, an “acoustic photograph” is a spectral analysis of sounds or recordings.

Afterward, acoustic instruments are used to recreate the exact same sound spectra to imitate the analyzed sounds. This compositional process clearly resembles how photorealist artists imitate photographs. His first phonorealist composition belongs to the series “Voices and Piano”, a currently ongoing set of compositions initially composed in 1997. In this series, recorded speeches of famous people were spectrally analyzed, with the assistance of Thomas Musil a programmer of the Institute of Electronic Music (IEM) in Graz, and transformed into musical notations for piano (Ablinger, 2018). In a performance, the original recordings and a piano are played together in order to compare the original recorded sounds with the sounds played by a piano. His intention is to focus on the imitation of the speeches by a musical instrument.

In 1998 and 2000, Ablinger premiered another two pieces that use the photorealist technique, “Quadraturen IV: Self-portrait with Berlin” and “Quadraturen V: Music” respectively. The former is a composition for an ensemble with six recordings of ambient sounds of Berlin. Spectral analyses of all recordings were rewritten for the ensemble to play with the recorded sounds. On the other hand, “Quadraturen V” is a composition for an orchestra. Its music follows the spectral analysis of the hymn “Auferstanden aus Ruinen”, the anthem of the former German Democratic Republic (West Germany). “Voices and Piano”, “Quadraturen IV” and “Quadraturen V” strictly follow the idea of realism by using musical instruments to imitate the spectral analyses of recordings. The last stage of the Quadraturen series is “Quadraturen III: Reality.” This set consists of nine small pieces; most of the pieces are composed for piano with recordings similar to “Voices and Piano”, except the fact that they require a computer-controlled piano invented by Winfried Ritsch, an Austrian composer and engineer, instead of a piano. The piece “Quadraturen IIIe: display-window piece” is unlike the others because it does not use any recordings or spectral analyses in the piece. Ablinger uses microphones to pick up sounds from the outside of the performance venue, analyzes the sounds by the computer program, and plays them out by the computer-controlled piano. This piece has brought the concept of realism in music to another level by using a musical instrument to imitate the actual sounds occurring in real-time.

Conclusion

The essence of realism, an imitation or representation of reality, can be found throughout history not only in visual art or literature but also in music. Although the notion of realism has never been considered a major influence in any periods of western classical music, it always guides music towards unexplored territories: the invention of the nineteenth-century realist operas; the use of musical instruments to represent natural sounds, words, or movements; and the use of musical instruments and technology to recreate recordings by imitating their sound spectra. With this study, I have shed some light on the definitions of the term realism, its importance since the time of Ancient Greece, and how the notion of realism facilitated the invention of Realism or Verismo in the nineteenth century. This article has also covered Naturalism, Pictorialism, and views of musicologists such as Dahlhaus and Cazden on musical realism. Peter Ablinger and his phonorealist techniques have also been investigated which is a more recent piece of evidence of the close connection between the notion of realism and music. Adaptations of realism in different periods resulted in different outcomes; what remains throughout centuries of development is the core idea of imitation and representation which undoubtedly proves the existence of Musical Realism.

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