

THE MUSICAL ANALOGY IN BEARDSLEY CRITICISM 1898-1914¹

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The use of musical imagery in Aubrey Beardsley's work, the way he used non-musical imagery to suggest musical structure and rhythm, the primacy of form over content in many of his designs, and his working at a time when Whistler challenged Ruskinian art-historical assumptions, all contributed to a tendency among uncensorious (but not uncritical) Beardsley critics to see a musical aesthetic in his artistic process. In their metaphorical discussions of Beardsley's art as visual music, his admiring reviewers focused attention on the 'formal,' and hence unrepresentational, qualities of Beardsley's work. They reacted against those who insisted on being outraged by Beardsley's unorthodox treatment of orthodox subjects. Beardsley was sympathetic to the aesthetes' attempt to free visual art from the confines of its own attributes, and his incorporation of musical imagery and themes into his art and his symbolist attempts to imitate the conventions of Wagner's music-dramas were an endeavour to create a synaesthetic analogy between music and art. His admiration of Whistler's work would have confirmed his interest in the correspondence between art and music.

Unlike Whistler, however, Beardsley was not a theorist. The repeated references to music in his work were primarily an attempt to enrich the decorative and narrative aspects of his visual and literary efforts. Musical instruments and musicians are recurrent images in his drawings, but function aesthetically as well as symbolically. Beardsley liked to experiment with different styles and ideas, including the synaesthetic interrelations between the visual and literary arts and music, but in no way were his experiments part of the goal of *ut pictora musica*. However, the fact he did not verbalize a Whistlerian aesthetic against art being programmatic does not undermine the critics' observation of a lyricism in his work (which is most poignant in his illustration of musical works). The emphasis he placed on style above subject matter, and his assimilation of musical effect (as in the Chopin *Ballade* and *Nocturne*) and motif (as in the illustrations to Wagner's operas) were a result of his passionate interest in classical music and a frustrated ambition to be a musician himself. The abstract quality, his innate feeling for rhythm and line in his designs, was recognized and expressed after his death by