

Sound waves and semiotic ripples:

Visualizing the invisible in European periodicals and early American Comics

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Ekphrasis, deriving from Greek ἔκ-φρασις (= description), is a verbal strategy of making readers *see* before their inner eye what they are reading about. „Even though artists with colour and design, and writers with words and phrases, represent the same subjects, they differ in the material and the manner of their imitation; and yet the underlying end and aim of both is one and the same; *the most effective historian is he who, by a vivid representation of emotions and characters, makes his narration like a painting*“, writes Plutarch (ca. 45–ca. 125) in *On the Fame of the Athenians* (my emphasis). Rhetors and writers have, thus, found techniques of description that try to evoke images in their listeners and readers. Conversely, visual artists have sought—and found—techniques of painting and drawing that which cannot be seen, especially sound and music.

In the second third of the 19th century, Europe saw two coinciding developments: the groundbreaking rise of the illustrated magazine, and the advent of spectacular public performances by virtuoso musicians such as Franz Liszt. While not immediately linked, both addressed and originated in the growing bourgeoisie. When Liszt became an early object of admiration by (mostly female) fanatics in France, Switzerland, Germany, Italy, and Austria, periodicals frequently reported on his feats. Illustrators working for these periodicals, struggled to produce a never-ending stream of pictures that tried to evoke the experience of *seeing* and *hearing* Liszt and other virtuosos in concert. Illustrated satirical periodicals such as *Fliegende Blätter* (Munich), *Kladderadatsch* (Berlin), *Kikeriki* (Vienna), and *Borsszem Jankó* (Budapest), especially, excelled in imaginative ways of depicting sound and music. The techniques and strategies invented and developed in the European illustrated press carried over to American (satirical) periodicals like *Puck*, *Judge*, and *Truth*, from whence newspaper moguls Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst hired artist to draw funny picture stories that later became known as Comics, also heralded (among other cultural products) as a “true American Art Form”. Consequently, this talk spans approx. 100 years of the development of popular depictions of music and musicians in visual art from the 1830s to the 1930s. Bridging the Atlantic, transnational exchange between European and American illustrators and comics artists is highlighted, both on the levels of themes as well as visual semiotics, asking how it is possible to show and evoke the invisible waves of music and sound, and what ripples this caused in the semiotics of a fledgling medium.