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Musical Performance and Textual Performativity in Elfriede Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher*

*Introduction*¹

Music depends on performance. "There is no known ramified art of music that is performer-less," Jonathan Dunsby writes.² When listening to or performing a piece of music, the role of temporality or of bodily presence differs from that which is actualized when perceiving written literature. Having pointed out this difference, however, we become aware of similarities or possible connections such as, for example, the role of performance in oral literature³ or in spoken-word poetry.⁴ Intermedial comparison often works in this way; perceived differences open up for previously overlooked similarities.

In written literary fiction, however, aspects of performance are less prominent. This article deals with the question of how literary narration may be enriched or challenged by referring to musical performance in the plot. It will be argued that narrated performance is a means to highlight aspects of language that are dependent on bodily presence. Referring to the performer in the narrative draws attention to how the narrating text itself performs, stages, and presents.

These questions are highly relevant when discussing Elfriede Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher* (*Die Klavierspielerin*, 1983). The novel's protagonist is a pianist, and performing music is a recurring element of the plot. The following will demonstrate how intermedial references to musical performance in the diegesis interact with the self-referential performativity of Jelinek's prose. In the novel, bodily and performative aspects of music are put center stage, and the way performance is narrated affects the

- 1 This article was written with financial support of the foundation Sven and Dagmar Salén Stiftelsen.
- 2 Jonathan Dunsby, "Performance," *Grove Music Online: Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezp.sub.su.se/subscriber/article/grove/music/43819>.
- 3 See for instance Joseph Harris and Karl Reichl, "Performance and Performers," in *Medieval Oral Literature*, ed. Karl Reichl (Berlin: DeGruyter 2012); Duncan Brown, *Oral Literature and Performance in Southern Africa* (Oxford: James Currey 1999).
- 4 Walter Bernhart, "Rhythmical Ambivalence of Poetry Performance: The Case of Elizabethan Verse," in *Word and Music Studies: Essays on Performativity and on Surveying the Field*, ed. Walter Bernhart (Amsterdam: Rodopi 2011).

way literary language performs. In fact, an intermedial perspective on this early novel in Jelinek's oeuvre uncovers new aspects of music's influence on her writing in general.

As recent research has shown, intermedial interaction, in spite of perceived differences between the media involved, is based on a transmedial modal ground.⁵ Thus, *intermedial* references to music always highlight the *transmedial* traits that both literature and music share, but which, in literature, may require references to specific musical concepts in order to become explicit. The intermedial reference to musical polyphony in a text is thus employed to highlight language's own capacity of simultaneous multi-voicedness.⁶ This applies beyond references which allude to a structural transmediality with music. I would argue that reference to musical performance in the plot works to highlight aspects of embodiment in the text. The study of intermedial references to music in literature has often focused on how references to music might establish alternative narrative structures.⁷ At the same time, other approaches have explored historical and social contexts, as intermedial references to music also exploit the reader's associations and contextual knowledge of music, which may be confirmed or challenged.⁸ In order to understand the role of music in *The Piano Teacher*, these two perspectives on intermedial references to music must be combined, as the novel exposes the idealization and instrumentalization of Western art music by relying upon the structural means of performativity in literary discourse.

In the following analysis of intermedial references to music in *The Piano Teacher*, the focus will be on how narrated music performance connects to different aspects of performativity in language and literature. In Jelinek's novel, the act of performing (music), on the one hand, and the performative ability of language, on the other, inform each other. Different aspects of performativity that will be relevant for the analysis are therefore presented below, followed by a short outline of how the influence of music in Jelinek's writings is usually perceived.

Performativity and Performance

In all of its various aspects, "performativity" is a term that deals with the inseparability of language use and social interaction—the idea that the production of meaning cannot be separated from bodily, material presence.⁹ Performativity of language was first noted when J. L. Austin drew attention to performatives, words that are part of

5 Lars Elleström, "The Modalities of Media: A Model for Understanding Intermedial Relations," in *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality*, ed. Lars Elleström (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 12.

6 Beate Schirmmacher, *Musik in der Prosa von Günter Grass: Intermediale Bezüge—Transmediale Perspektiven* (Stockholm: Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis, 2012), 33–47.

7 Werner Wolf, *The Musicalization of Fiction: A Study in the Theory and History of Intermediality* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), 68.

8 Jørgen Bruhn, "Heteromediality," in *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality*, ed. Lars Elleström (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 232.

9 Uwe Wirth, "Der Performanzbegriff im Spannungsfeld von Illokution, Iteration und Indexikalität," in *Performanz: Zwischen Sprachphilosophie und Kulturwissenschaften*, ed. Uwe Wirth (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2002).

the action they describe.¹⁰ However, language is not only performative in the execution of speech-acts. According to Derrida, language appears as a system of signs that is performatively self-referential. As every sign iteratively quotes a sign used before, both repetition and change are inherent in every use of a sign.¹¹ Following Derrida, Judith Butler foregrounds the influence of iterative performativity in social interaction and the ways in which social identity is established or destroyed through the performative use of language.¹²

The concept of performativity has also been a means of rethinking the role of the performer as such. Although performance is central to music and theater, the performer has long been neglected, as the concepts of music and drama have long been based on written works. The neglect of performance can be attributed to the capacity of the storage media available, as well as to the valuation of the written work as "superior."¹³ The Romantic aesthetic concept of "absolute music" conceived of music as independent of both words and bodily affect—as sublime, spiritual, and transcendent¹⁴—and made even less room for the bodily presence of the performer; the direct physical impact of music was downplayed not only with regard to performing but also with regard to listening to music.¹⁵

Erika Fischer-Lichte's performative aesthetics implies an important shift of perspective, because she places performance center stage and focuses on how the bodily presence of both actor and audience participates in the emergence of meaning.¹⁶ In musicology Nicholas Cook, among others, supports a "performative approach to performance." He conceives of the performance of music as a performative act in the manner of Butler, suggesting the "inseparability of intellectual and bodily knowledge, the way in which the one informs the other."¹⁷ Cook thus stresses on the central importance of the performer, who does not stand in opposition to the work but rather is inseparable from what is usually perceived as the work.

The performativity of literary language is perceived in the world-creating aspect of writing as a self-referential performative act, or with the act of reading which performatively constitutes an imaginary world.¹⁸ As literary discourse always performs what it says, aspects of self-referentiality has been in focus, especially within poststructuralist perspective. As a consequence the connection to social and non-linguistic action is not always perceived as central.¹⁹ The performative ability of literary language to create

10 J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).

11 Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," in *Limited Inc*, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

12 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

13 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 76–82.

14 Carl Dahlhaus, *Die Idee der absoluten Musik* (München: dtv, 1978), 62–80.

15 Nicola Gess, *Gewalt der Musik: Literatur und Musikkritik um 1800* (Freiburg i. Brsg.: Rombach, 2011).

16 Fischer-Lichte, *Transformative Power of Performance*.

17 Nicholas Cook, "Analysing Performance and Performing Analysis," in *Rethinking Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001), 248.

18 Wirth, "Der Performanzbegriff," 25–34.

19 *Ibid.*, 27.

worlds precisely is due to the fact that performative utterances and performative acts stated or carried out *within* a diegetic world lack the ability of directly impacting the social world. Still, what is narrated may in certain cases affect the performativity of literary discourse. Svend Erik Larsen has noted that if performance is narrated in a self-reflexive and performative way, the boundary between what is taking place in the diegetic world and what is part of its presentation by literary discourse is weakened. This leads to a shift in focus in the narrative text: from what it means, or represents, to what it does, or presents.²⁰ Also, Wolfgang Iser has drawn attention to cases when a plot *appears* to be a representation of the social world but is in fact better understood as self-reflexive presentation of literary discourse.²¹ The uncertain boundary between representation and presentation forces the reader to consider the whole text from a performative perspective as linguistic performative acts interact with aspects of theatricality that usually are more characteristic of performing arts. Thus, Larsen concludes, language and literature "can be conceptualized as a performative medium."²² This shift, it will be argued, can be perceived in the *The Piano Teacher*; performance of music narrated in the text interacts with different aspects of performative acts in Butler's sense as well as with iterative performativity in the novel's discourse. The performativity of discourse which is characteristic for all of Jelinek's texts will now be briefly presented before the article explores the way it is used in relation to narrated performance in *The Piano Teacher*.

Music and performativity in Jelinek's writing

Elfriede Jelinek is not only one of Austria's most controversial and prolific writers, but also an accomplished musician. The influence of music on Jelinek's writing is acknowledged both by Jelinek herself and in related scholarship. In spite of the fact that the novel's protagonist is a performer of music, *The Piano Teacher* has long been neglected in discussions of the ways Jelinek's writing is influenced by her musical training.

The novel's protagonist is Erika Kohut, a failed pianist and strict piano teacher, who passes on to her students the same relentless training she herself once had to endure. Her mother tries to restrict and control her social life, and her sexual and emotional existence is restricted to voyeurism, self-harm, and fantasies of bondage and discipline, involving sadism and masochism (BDSM). When her student, Walter Klemmer, tries to make Erika his sexual conquest, he responds to her desire for BDSM by actually raping her. Erika's plans for getting revenge only end in renewed self-harm.

The novel has a coherent plot and psychologically complex characters, and the multi-voiced literary discourse that scholars usually bring to bear with regard to music

20 Svend Erik Larsen, "Speak Again. Speak Like Rain": The Mediality of Performance," in *Exploring Textual Action*, ed. Lars Sætre, Patrizia Lombardo, and Anders M. Gullestad (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2010); Delia da Sousa Correa, "Musical Performativity in the Fiction of Katherine Mansfield," in *Word and Music Studies: Essays on Performativity and on Surveying the Field*, ed. Walter Bernhart (Amsterdam: Rodopi 2011), 71–86.

21 Wolfgang Iser, "Mimesis und Performanz," in *Performanz: Zwischen Sprachphilosophie und Kulturwissenschaften*, ed. Uwe Wirth (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002), 259.

22 Larsen, "Speak Again," 80.

in Jelinek's prose is not as prominent as in other texts. Another aspect in Jelinek's writing that frequently is connected to music is the extreme self-referentiality of discourse in her prose,²³ which gradually pushes plot and characters into the background,²⁴ and instead "presents a body defined by the sound-bite."²⁵ Jelinek's texts are perceived as a "musical flow of voices and counter-voices,"²⁶ and "a speech-act in which every word, every sentence, and every paragraph is double-voiced or even heteroglot, that is, internally dialogical polyphonic, giving voice simultaneously to several intentions or viewpoints."²⁷

As the quote above suggests, in Jelinek's literary discourse ambiguous and polysemic phrases performatively both iterate and destabilize conventional meaning. Polysemy unfolds in an incessant simultaneity of multiple connotations, similar to that of multiple independent voices in musical polyphony. This "cacophonous music," Pye and Donovan argue, draws attention to a materiality of words, which they describe as an "ideological materiality," a materiality not primarily of words, of phonemes and graphemes, but of the ideological material that establishes a certain use of language.²⁸

Although the *The Piano Teacher* appears much more accessible than Jelinek's later texts, even in this novel, meaning is deliberately made ambiguous and unstable. A single sentence may state various things at the same time. In a phrase like "the intricate crocheted patterns of contrapuntal tissue," the metaphoric use of the polysemic "tissue" invokes associations with both textile fabric (which may be crocheted), and "tissue" as part of the organic, living body.²⁹ Both associations inform the concept of counterpoint with a web-like, bodily quality, which undermines general notions of counterpoint as rule-based, strict structure.

Semantic meaning is metonymically destabilized when "Erika shakes the pearl strand of a trill [literally *run*] out of her white blouse cuffs; she is *loaded* with nervous haste" (161; my italics).³⁰ Even here, polysemy renders the passage ambiguous: as the German "Lauf," meaning "run," the rapid movement up or down the musical scale, becomes threatening, as the verb "load" switches the connotation of "Lauf" so as to

23 See for instance Gerhard Fuchs, "Musik ist ja der allergrößte Un-Sinn': Zu Elfriede Jelineks musikalischer Verwandtschaft," in *Sprachmusik: Grenzgänge der Literatur*, ed. Gerhard Melzer and Paul Pechmann (Wien: Sonderzahl 2003), 173.

24 Elfriede Jelinek, "I Want to Be Shallow," in "zum Theater," accessed 06/10, 2015, <http://elfriede-jelinek.com/>

25 Gillian Pye and Siobhán Donovan, "Schreiben und Komponieren': Elfriede Jelinek's *Rosamunde*," *Austrian Studies* 17 (2009): 184.

26 "The Nobel Prize in Literature 2004," *Svenska Akademien*, accessed 15 June, 2015, http://www.svenskaakademien.se/en/the_nobel_prize_in_literature/laureates/elfriede_jelinek_1.

27 Maria-Regina Kecht, "The Polyphony of Remembrance: Reading *Die Kinder der Toten*," in *Elfriede Jelinek: Writing Woman, Nation, and Identity*, ed. Mattias Piccolruaz Konzett and Margarete Lamb-Fafelberger (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010), 207.

28 Pye and Donovan, "Schreiben und Komponieren," 192.

29 "des verschlungenen zu Mustern gehäkelten Kontrapunktgewebes" (63–64). Translation by Heidi Hart as half of the passage is omitted in the English version: Elfriede Jelinek, *The Piano Teacher* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1999), 62. In the following, all quotes in English refer to this edition. The German quote above and in the following refer to Elfriede Jelinek, *Die Klavierspielerin* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1986).

30 "Erika schüttelt die Perlenschnur eines *Laufs* aus ihren weißen Blusenmanschetten und ist mit nervöser Eile *geladen*," (162; my italics).

relate it to the loaded barrel of a gun. Here a musical term is metonymically connected to threats of violence.

In these examples, it has already become clear that every time music is mentioned in Jelinek's text, elements of the discourse performatively comment on the way we perceive music. Connecting Western art music to violence, bondage, and self-harm may on the one hand appear to contradict the way Jelinek normally highlights music as an important point of departure in her writing. On the other hand, violence can be understood as a central means in Jelinek's texts to unmask society's myths and ideologies.³¹ In all of Jelinek's texts, actions of direct, physical violence and violent metaphors are used to unmask the structural violence in, for example, gender and class relations.

Strangely enough, Jelinek's use of violence has not been discussed in connection with the influence of music on her writing. As scholars connect self-referential performativity and polyphony to music in Jelinek's writing, the story about a failed pianist with auto-aggressive sexuality has not fit in. The role of music in *The Piano Teacher* has mainly been understood in terms of unmasking society's myths; it has been assumed that Jelinek uses reference to music in order to criticize society,³² illustrating hoped-for social advancement³³ or Austrian identity in general.³⁴ Several studies of *The Piano Teacher* have focused more on the Erika's gender and sexuality.³⁵ Solibakke mentions in passing how performing gender in the novel relates to performance of music,³⁶ and Powell and Bethman explore more in detail how Erika's profession as a pianist in fact connects with her inhibited sexuality and how the novel actively engages with the instrumentalization of music.³⁷ In the following, however, it will be demonstrated how intermedial references to performance appear to be intimately linked to the way music influences Jelinek's writing.³⁸

When Jelinek reflects on her own musical training and the relationship between music and language, music is repeatedly defined as the passing of time made audible,³⁹ and is thus rooted in the moment of performance. The idea of the abso-

31 Marlies Janz, *Elfriede Jelinek* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1995).

32 Janz, *Elfriede Jelinek*, 73.

33 Pia Janke, "Elfriede Jelinek und die Musik: Versuch einer ersten Bestandsaufnahme," in *Sprachmusik: Grenzgänge der Literatur*, ed. Gerhard Melzer and Paul Pechmann (Wien: Sonderzahl, 2003), 194.

34 Karl Ivan Solibakke, "Discourse on Classical Music in Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher*," in *Elfriede Jelinek: Writing Woman, Nation, and Identity*, ed. Matthias Piccolruaz Konzett and Margarete Lamb-Faffelberger (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), 250. On the other hand, to Karl Ivan Solibakke, Erika's sexuality appears only as a "superficial layer" covering a "configuration and flow of musical discourse" turned into "a remarkably subversive analysis of Austrian identity."

35 Janz, *Elfriede Jelinek*, 71–86; Larson Powell and Brenda Bethman, "One must have tradition in oneself, to hate it properly': Elfriede Jelinek's Musicality," *Journal of Modern Literature* 32 (2008).

36 Solibakke, "Discourse on Classical Music," 259.

37 Powell and Bethman, "Tradition in Oneself," 173.

38 Jelinek appears not to be the only writer and musician to stress this aspect of music. Also in the texts of Kathrine Mansfield, writer and musician, the quality of music as performing art is stressed and affects to a certain degree the performativity of literary discourse. da Sousa Correa, "Musical Performativity," 76.

39 "Time passes, and in music, one listens to its passing." ("Die Zeit vergeht, und in der Musik hört man ihr zu, wie sie vergeht.") Elfriede Jelinek, "Die Komponistin," *Emma* 6 (1987): 12.

lute self-referentiality of music is, when discussed, at the same time undermined as Jelinek refers to music as “the most absolute Non-Sense” or “pure tautology.”⁴⁰ In formulations such as these she reiterates the keywords of Romantic musical aesthetics—as “absolute” and “pure”—although this is not related to transcendence, logic, higher meaning, or a language beyond words.⁴¹ Instead, in Jelinek’s understanding, musical self-reference is a means of conveying “Non-Sense,” a means of productively refusing to make sense and convey meaning. However, as a concept that is both self-referent and dependent on bodily performance, music appears in several of her essays as a threat to the musician.⁴² The idea of self-referential performativity in music and bodily presence in performance come into conflict, and this is a topos which can also be found in *The Piano Player*. I will now discuss (1) how the novel’s focus on the body of the performer leads to the perception of music as discipline and coercive; (2) how the novel’s focus on the female body connects performance of music to gender performance; and (3) how by means of performative elements in the novel’s literary discourse the connection of music performance and performative acts leads to a blurring of the borders between narrative plot and performative discourse.

The performer’s body in focus

When music lessons, practice sessions, recitals, and concert rehearsals are narrated in *The Piano Teacher*, very little focus is given to the aural quality of music; instead, Jelinek explores the effort required to produce it. Whenever a musical performance is described in *The Piano Teacher*, the performer’s body is in focus, and the strain of producing music is highlighted. Acoustical foregrounding, imitation of musical rhythm or other structural patterns, visual-musical associations, techniques familiar in ekphrases of music are absent:⁴³ When piano student Walter Klemmer watches his teacher play a Bach concerto, his focus is on the moving body and not on the sound of music:

40 “Musik ist ja der allergrößte Un-Sinn, die einzige Kunst, die ihre Antwort immer nur mit sich selbst geben kann, die reine Tautologie.” Elfriede Jelinek, “Auf den Raum mit der Zeit einschlagen (Notizen zu Olga Neuwirth),” in *Gesänge von der Notwendigkeit des Überlebens*, ed. Jürg Stenzl (Salzburg: Festival Press Ritter, 1995).

41 Dahlhaus, *Idee der absoluten Musik*, 105–18.

42 Elfriede Jelinek, “About Franz Schubert,” in “zur Musik,” <http://elfriedejelinek.com/>, accessed 03/05, 2016. “Als wäre die Musik (bei mir dann später, sozusagen als Endstation: die Sprache) die Erde, auf der man geht, aber vor diesem Grund, auf dem man sich bewegt, möchte man immer wieder davonlaufen, was naturgemäß nicht möglich ist, weil man ja sonst ins Bodenlose stürzen würde.” Elfriede Jelinek, “Die Zeit flieht: Für meinen Orgellehrer Leopold Marksteiner,” <http://elfriedejelinek.com/>, accessed 26 March, 2015.

43 Following Claus Clüver, I refer to ekphrasis as the representation “of any fictitious or factual text composed in another sign system in literature.” “Ekphrasis Reconsidered: On Verbal Representations of Non-Verbal Texts,” in *Interart Poetics: Essays on the Interrelations of the Arts and Media*, ed. Ulla-Brita Lagerroth, Hans Lund, and Erik Hedling (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), 24; Johannes Odendahl, *Literarisches Musizieren: Wege des Transfers von Musik in die Literatur bei Thomas Mann* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2008), 14–18; Wolf, *Musicalization of Fiction*, 15–17.

He unselfishly admires Erika's technique, he admires the way her back moves to the beat, the way her head sways, judiciously weighing the nuances she produces. He sees the play of muscles in her upper arm, he is excited by the collision of flesh and motion. (63)⁴⁴

As Walter Klemmer has his own sexual interest in mind, this is also an obvious objectification of the female body. Nevertheless, even the music practice of an adolescent Erika is described with a focus on her bodily movements: "She gathers all her energy, spreads her wings and then plunges forward, towards the keys which zoom up to her like the earth toward a crashing plane" (37); "The final note dies out, fades away. HER tendons relax" (41); "Two hands zoom out and play the Brahms again, this time better" (58).⁴⁵ The focus on the body leads to that performing music is perceived as forced and painful:

Reluctantly, the violin finally moves under her chin, heaved up by an unwilling arm [...] Her fingers press the painful steel strings down the fingerboard. Mozart's tormented spirit, moaning and choking, is forced out of the resonator. (35)⁴⁶

Although sounds are described in this passage, they are primarily perceived as pure noise or screams, and appear to be a question of moving the body correctly as demanded. This is a way of highlighting the performer's perspective on music, as opposed to the listener's focus on auditory experience. And from the point of view of the performer's body, the tradition of Western art music demands discipline and subjection.

The human body appears as beastly; beginners are said to "grunt and root about in Czernys elementary études" (28),⁴⁷ and they are to be trained like a circus animal like "a weary dolphin" (58) or a "bear on a bike" (109).⁴⁸ While the musical instruments are repeatedly described as organic and living, the professional performer is inhuman, mechanized, an automaton: "like clockwork the fingers tick the seconds into the keys" (40), or "The gears click, the pistons bang, the fingers move in and out. Sounds are emitted" (114).⁴⁹ The demands of technique and perfection, all-consuming from the

44 "Er bewundert uneigennützig die Technik Erikas, und wie sich ihr Rücken rhythmisch mitbewegt. Er betrachtet, wie sich ihr Kopf wiegt, etliche Nuancen, die sie spielt, gegeneinander abwägend. Er sieht das Muskelspiel ihrer Oberarme, was ihn aufgrund des Zusammenpralls von Fleisch und Bewegung aufgeregt macht" (65).

45 "Sie sammelt kurz alle Energie, spannt ihre Flügel an und wirft sich dann jäh vorwärts, den Tasten entgegen, die ihr zurasen wie die Erde bei einem Flugzeugabsturz" (38); "Der letzte Klavierton verstummt, verhallt, IHRE Sehnen lockern sich" (42); "Schon schnellen zwei Hände vor und wiederholen den Brahms, diesmal besser" (60).

46 "Widerwillig ruckt endlich die Geige ans Kinn, von einem widerstrebenden Arm hochgehievt [...] Die linken Finger drücken die schmerzenden Stahlsaiten auf das Griffbrett hinab. Der gefolterte Geist Mozarts entringt sich ächzend und unter Würgen dem Instrumentenkörper" (36).

47 "grunzend in den Czerny-Anfängeretüden herumwühlen" (29).

48 "ein müder Delphin" (60); "der Bär auf dem Fahrrad" (111).

49 "wie ein Uhrwerk ticken ihre Finger die Sekunden in die Tasten" (41); "Die Zahnräder klicken, die Kolben boxen, die Finger werden an- und wieder abgestellt. Etwas erklingt" (113).

perspective of the performer, are described with metaphors relating to technology and engineering, and the performer appears to merge with her instrument:

Mother makes sure the piano is kept properly *tuned*; and she also keeps *twisting* her daughter's *vertebrae*, unconcerned about the child's *mood*, worrying solely about her own influence on this stubborn, easily deformable, living *instrument*. (36; my italics)⁵⁰

Once again, Jelinek exploits the polysemic ambiguity of homonyms such as "Stimmung" (in German both "mood" and "tuning") and "Wirbel" (both "vertebrae" and "tuning peg"). The demanding piano teacher Erika applies the instrumental perspective on her students: "she has to take the idling student engine and step on the gas, slam down hard in order to rev it up" (28).⁵¹ When a student fails to meet her standards, the playing of a piece of Bach is described in the manner of a dirty car: "The main theme was messed up [...] and the whole piece was anything but transparent: An oil-smear'd car window" (100).⁵²

The harsh description and the focus on strain and coercion connected to performance of music highlights the role of music as cultural violence, as culture which supports structural violence.⁵³ Due to the performer's long invisibility in the history of Western art music, the foregrounding of performance and of the performer's bodily presence often is connected with violence.⁵⁴ Even contemporary art music forcing musicians to encounter physical boundaries during performances may be a means of "evoking the body by rendering its limitations distinctly audible."⁵⁵

Performing music and performing female gender

Performing music is not only straining and coercive. The playing of instruments is presented as a rather inglorious, trivial occupation, often described via metaphors based on imagery relating to needlework or cooking. As a piano teacher, Erika Kohut "corrects the Bach, mends and patches it" (105),⁵⁶ and a Bach concerto may consist of "intricate crocheted patterns of contrapuntal tissue" (62). The needlework metaphors even affect Erika's lectures on Beethoven, which she renders in "regular knit two/purl two" or "loosely crocheted air stitches" (151) with regard to

50 "[Die Mutter achtet] auf die gute Stimmung des Instruments, und auch an den Wirbeln der Tochter dreht sie unaufhörlich herum, nicht besorgt um die Stimmung des Kindes, sondern allein um ihren mütterlichen Einfluss auf dieses störrische, leicht verbildbare, lebendige Instrument" (37).

51 "den trägen Schülermotor durch heftigeres Gasgeben auf höhere Touren schrauben" (30).

52 "Das Hauptthema ist verschmiert worden [...] das Ganze fern jeder Durchsichtigkeit. Eine ölverschmierte Autoscheibe" (102).

53 Johan Galtung, "Violence: Direct, Structural, Cultural," in *Johan Galtung: Pioneer of Peace Research*, ed. Johan Galtung and Dietrich Fischer (Berlin: Springer 2013, 36).

54 Around 1800, suspicion of the emotional and bodily impact of music, gave rise to the topos of *die Gewalt der Musik*, not only perceived of as "power," but also as "violence" (the German word *Gewalt* ambiguously expresses both). Gess, *Die Gewalt der Musik*.

55 Axel Englund, *Still Songs: Music in and Around the Poetry of Paul Celan* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 131.

56 "Erika K. bessert den Bach aus, sie flickt an ihm herum" (107).

Liszt.⁵⁷ Performing music is thus gendered; it is expressed as a part of female-connoted housework. The novel's literary discourse performance of music is intrinsically linked to the performance of (female) gender.⁵⁸ This is already expressed in the novel's German title, which posits music as a female-gendered performative act: *Die Klavierspielerin*—literally “the female piano player”—is a term invented by Jelinek in order to designate a womanly occupation that is not even a profession along the lines of “pianist” or “piano teacher.” The title already presents performance of music as a performative act in Butler's sense. This implication is expressed in the very term that designates Erika's occupation. The household metaphors in the text bring out a gendering that in Western art music has been remarkably strong.⁵⁹ The metaphorical idealization of music during the nineteenth century entailed acts of exclusion and discipline regarding both the performer and the audience. As instrumental art music was increasingly related to the sublime, considered to be spiritual and transcendental,⁶⁰ musical genius became increasingly gendered as male; conversely, women—who in the Western dichotomy are defined by and confined to their bodies—were excluded. Thus, women were denied direct contact with music in composition, but encouraged to access music by using their bodies in the act of performing.⁶¹ Disciplining the (female) body appears to be the obverse of the idealization of music as spiritual and transcendental, and musical education came to be seen as appropriate self-discipline for women, a means “to assign woman a place in the symbolic order.”⁶²

As a female piano student and female piano teacher, Erika reproduces and confirms this traditional female gender role. In her attempts to become a successful pianist, she appears to be more ambivalently gendered and tries to redefine her role as a musical performer in a way that is, after all, creative, as the performer “always spices the soup of his playing with something of his own” (14).⁶³ Once again, this very formulation performatively questions the success of her attempts. Even if the male pronoun is used, the comparison of playing music and cooking maintains the connection to the domestic sphere. Additionally, as a result of her sexual behavior, such as visiting peep shows, Erika moves in domains that are gendered as male. Her voyeurism, auto-aggression, and desire for BDSM experiences appear as an attempt to “gain the

57 “verschlungen zu Mustern gehäkelten Kontrapunktgewebe” (65); “in regelmässigen Zweiglatt/Zweiverkehr”, “in locker gehäkelten Luftmaschen” (151).

58 Solibakke, “Discourse on Classical Music,” 259.

59 Richard Leppert, *The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation, and the History of the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 119–87.

60 Dahlhaus, *Idee der absoluten Musik*, 91–105.

61 See also Inge Suchy, “Buffosopran und Koloraturtenor: Von der verkehrten Musikwelt in *Körperliche Veränderungen*,” in *Die Frau hat keinen Ort: Elfriede Jelineks feministische Bezüge*, ed. Stefanie Kaplan (Wien: Praesens, 2012), 75–88. The notion that exclusory patterns are still at work is confirmed in the ways in which female composers are received and perceived. When Jelinek compares composer Patricia Jünger's work with “traces of the Yeti,” she thus highlights a female composer who appears to be a mythical, which is to say non-existent, creature, like the famous snowman. Jelinek, “Die Komponistin,” 36.

62 Powell and Bethman, “Tradition in Oneself,” 176.

63 “Er würzt die Suppe seines Spiels stets mit etwas Eigenem” (16).

[Lacanian] law that she fails to reach as a pianist," as Powell and Bethman claim.⁶⁴ However, in this line of interpretation, Erika's disturbing sexual behavior remains the subject of psychological interpretation. *The Piano Teacher* is to them essentially a story about her "development as a (perverse) sexual subject."⁶⁵ This line of interpretation connects Erika's profession as a piano teacher, the description of musical discipline, to her failure in sexual emancipation and draws attention to the instrumentalization of classical music. Still, in this line of interpretation, the depiction of the performer of music remains unconnected to the specific influence of music on Jelinek's writing, which Bethman and Powell discuss using examples from other texts by the author.⁶⁶

However, the novel is not only about how music has been used; at the same time, it reveals further aspects of Jelinek's use of music in her writing. As noted above, music-making is connected with gender performance by means of a performative literary discourse. Following Svend Erik Larsen, this blurs the border between narrated performance and textual performativity.⁶⁷ As a result, acts carried out in the diegetic world gain characteristics of performance; not the way they are described in literary discourse but the fact that they are "actually" carried out (in the diegetic world) gains importance and starts to signify in a certain way. This aspect becomes more apparent when exploring a third aspect of the intermedial references to music performance, its frequent use of violent metaphors and their connection to violence actions in the diegesis.

Performing music and the assault of the body

Violent metaphors are used to describe coercion and the amount of discipline applied. Performance of music appears as an assault on both the performer and the audience. The contrapuntal structure of a Bach concerto performed at a recital is connected to violence:

The light is vehemently dimmed when a cushion is propped against the piano lamp. The cushion trembles at the whiplashes of the intricate crocheted patterns of contrapuntal tissue. (62)⁶⁸

Violence is partly connected to musical pleasure, as Erika notes while observing the audience at the recital: "One has to tyrannize them, one has to suppress and oppress them, just to get through to them! ... They want thrashings and a pile of passions" (68).⁶⁹ Also, the force and coercion exerted on the student's body result in aggression. The musician resembles not only a technical instrument but also a weapon: Playing a

64 Ibid., 176.

65 Ibid., 172.

66 Ibid., 166–72.

67 Larsen, "Speak again," 80.

68 "Das Licht wird gewaltsam abgedämpft, indem man ein Kissen gegen die Klavierlampe lehnt, das unter den Peitschenschlägen des verschlungenen zu Mustern gehäkelten Kontrapunktgewebes erzittert" (63–54).

69 "Man muss sie schon tyrannisieren, man muß sie knebeln und knechten, damit sie überhaupt durch Wirkung berührt werden [...] Sie wollen Prügel und einen Haufen Leidenschaften" (69).

Bach concerto, Erika is said to be “loaded with nervous haste” (161), and thus resembles a loaded rifle.⁷⁰ Returning from her music lessons, the adolescent Erika appears to be as dangerous as a bomb: “Emulating a kamikaze pilot, she uses herself as weapon ... Bristling with instruments she arduously staggers into the mob of homebound workers, detonating among them like a fragmentation bomb” (15–16).⁷¹ Finally, the demands for strictness and discipline in classical music education also unfold in metaphors of bondage: “This grid system has hamstrung [Erika] in an untearable net of directions [...] like a rosy ham on a butcher’s hook” (190).⁷²

The violent metaphors used to visualize structural violence connect to Erika’s deviant sexual behavior. In BDSM sex as well as in the classical music tradition, Inge Arteel notes, pleasure is connected to restriction and discipline.⁷³ Both when visiting peep shows and sitting next to her piano students, Erika is

geared to watching people who work hard, because they want results. In this respect, the normally large difference between music and sexual pleasure is quite tiny. (106)⁷⁴

However, what is acceptable in musical performance is regarded as perverted in sexual relations; what is acceptable for the male genius remains eccentric and perverse when gendered as female.⁷⁵ As disciplining the body is transferred from the musical to the sexual sphere, its physically aggressive nature is made visible. Thus, even if Erika’s deviant sexuality can be seen as an attempt to escape her gender role, as is argued by Powell and Bethman, it should be noted that the end result of Erika’s behavior is the sexual equivalent of a performer’s discipline, which we have seen is a means of disciplining the female body. Seen from this perspective, performance and performativity connect in Erika’s deviant sexuality. Erika performs in her sexual life the demands of discipline and contempt of the female body that are professionally expected from her.

Playing music, performative acts, performative discourse

The metaphors of violence described above unmask education in classical music as a means to control the female body. At the same time, these metaphors connect to Erika’s social and sexual behavior in the plot. While the household metaphors are only found on the level of literary discourse (there are no descriptions of Erika cooking or

70 “sie ist mit nervöser Eile geladen” (162); see above FN 29.

71 “In Kamikazemanier nimmt sie sich selbst als Waffe zur Hand ... Sie torkelt müde und instrumentenübersät in die Arbeitsheimkehrer hinein und detoniert mitten unter ihnen wie eine Splitterbombe” (17).

72 “Dieses Rastersystem hat sie in ein unzerreißbares Netz von Vorschriften ... geschnürt, wie einen rosigen Rollschinken am Haken des Fleischhauers” (191).

73 Inge Arteel, *‘Ich schlage sozusagen mit der Axt drein’: Stilistische, wirkungsästhetische und thematische Betrachtungen zu Elfriede Jelineks Roman Die Klavierspielerin* (Gent: Studia germanica Gandensia, 1991), 113.

74 “Erika ist darauf geeicht, Menschen zuzusehen, die sich hart bemühen, weil sie ein Ergebnis wünschen. In dieser Hinsicht ist der sonst so große Unterschied zwischen Musik und Lust eher geringfügig” (108).

75 Powell and Bethman, “Tradition in Oneself,” 175.

doing needlework), the violent tropes, both metaphors and metonymies, reappear in the novel's diegetic universe, in Erika's deviant sexuality, in her voyeurism, in her self-harm, and in her inclination to BDSM sex. When the musical staves are described as a grid system that has "hamstrung [Erika] like a rosy ham on a butcher's hook," the reader is still free to focus on the similarity of restriction between the net of a smoked ham and the musical staves, and can interpret the metaphor as a criticism of restrictive norms. However, something happens when the reader is confronted with Erika's sexual practices. When she asks her would-be lover Walter "that he ties her up with the ropes I've collected and also the leather straps and even the chains! Hogtie her; bind her up as thoroughly as he can—solidly, intensely, artfully, cruelly, tormentingly, cunningly" (215),⁷⁶ it appears as if the implications of the bondage metaphor are acted out. And there are more connections between violent literary metaphors referring to music and Erika's sexual desires. Erika not only speaks contemptuously of her musical audience and their alleged desire to be gagged and thrashed; she also wishes, quite literally, to be beaten and gagged: "and you'll keep me in all sorts of different positions, hitting or kicking me or even whipping me! [...] and gag me so cunningly that I can't emit the slightest peep (217–18)."⁷⁷ The adolescent Erika is not only compared to a bomb; her fellow tram passengers are brutally attacked by Erika's musical instrument cases:

[She beats] with the narrow end of the instrument (sometimes the violin, sometimes the heavier viola). (15)

SHE furiously kicks a hard bone, which belongs to a man. (17)

Almost casually, SHE viciously pinches the female calf to her left or her right. (18)⁷⁸

In these descriptions, the violence is not only suggested in discourse, but it happens—at least in the diegesis. The latent violence in metaphors used to speak about music (re)appear in Erika's social and sexual life: Thus, the *Gewalt der Musik*, the "power of music," connects to actual abuse and violence (the German word *Gewalt* ambiguously expresses both), the strict form of contrapuntal composition connects to bondage and discipline, the demands of technique become mechanical in nature. The violent metaphors of literary discourse thus relate to Erika's most disturbing actions, such as her self-directed aggression when cutting her hands (44) and her vulva's labia with a razor (86), and the maiming of her too-talented student's hands with glass shards (170), actions that evoke rejection, uneasiness and qualms when reading them. The idealiza-

76 "daß er sie mit Genuß so derart stramm, gründlich, ausgiebig, kunstgerecht, grausam, qualvoll, raffiniert mit den Stricken [...] und auch den Lederriemen und sogar Ketten! [...] fesselt, ver- und zusammenschnürt und zusammenschnallt, wie er es nur kann" (216–17).

77 "daß du mich dabei in allen möglichen Stellungen sogar schlägst oder trittst oder gar auspeitschst! [...] [K]nebel mich so raffiniert, daß ich nicht den geringsten Laut von mir geben kann" (272).

78 "[S]ie [prügelt] mit dem schmalen Ende des Instruments, einmal ist es die Geige, dann wieder die schwere Bratsche" (17); "SIE tritt wütend gegen einen harten Knochen, der einem Mann gehört" (18); "SIE zwickt wie nebenbei die eine oder anderen Frau [...] in die Wade" (20).

tion of classical music is performatively questioned by literalizing the metaphoric language used to discuss music.

This shortcut leads to a blurring of the borders between actions carried out in the diegesis and their mediation by means of a performative literary discourse. In a way, Erika's most questionable actions start to resemble art performances that incorporate self-abuse and deliberate maltreatment of the performer's body, actions that are felt to symbolize something but at the same time are not to be taken symbolically or metaphorically but are actually carried out. Fischer-Lichte stresses the fact that the materiality of art performances with self-abuse prevents us from directly interpreting them on a solely symbolic level.⁷⁹ The performance employs bodily reactions, "the holding of one's breath, the feeling of nausea,"⁸⁰ in order to set the process of reflection in motion. Erika's aggression toward her body is not only illustrated by violent metaphors, but it actually takes place—at least in the diegetic world of the novel:

She gingerly tests the edge, it is razor sharp. Then she presses the blade into the back of her hand several times [...] The metal slices her hand like butter. For an instant a slit gapes in the previously intact tissue; then the arduously tamed blood rushes out from behind the barrier. (44)

This thin elegant foil of bluish steel, pliable, elastic. SHE sits down in front of the magnifying mirror; spreading her legs she makes a cut, magnifying the aperture that is the doorway into her body. (86)⁸¹

In contrast to the metaphor which compares Erika to a piece of meat at a butcher's hook, these actions are to be imagined to actually take place in the diegesis. The revulsion one likely feels in reading these passages is provoked in order to performatively engage the process of reflection.

Erika Kohut's disturbed sexuality thus reveals something more than a perverted individual. In the text, her actions in the diegesis reveal a performative connection to what is discussed in literary discourse. Thus, the novel not only points out its criticism on how music has been instrumentalized, but the narrative plot also gains the performative ability to actually *do* what usually is *said* about music. Thus, not only literary discourse is a means to performative acts in literature, not only literary discourse exploits the "ideological materiality" of language, the ideological presumptions sedimented in language. In Jelinek's prose, actions carried out in the diegetic world, are turned into a performance site in which the violence in literary discourse is "actually" carried out and this violence hurts even while reading it.

79 Fischer-Lichte, *Transformative Power of Performance*, 16–17.

80 Ibid., 18.

81 "SIE prüft vorsichtig die Schneide, sie ist rasierklingenscharf. Dann drückt sie die Klinge mehrere Male tief in den Handrücken hinein [...] Das Metall fräst sich hinein wie in Butter. Einen Augenblick klafft ein Sparkassen-Schlitz im vorher geschlossenen Gewebe, dann rast das mühsam gebändigte Blut hinter der Sperre hervor" (45); "Dieses dünne, elegante Plättchen aus bläulichem Stahl, biegsam und elastisch. Sie setzt sich mit gespreizten Beinen vor die Vergrößerungsseite des Rasierspiegels und vollzieht einen Schnitt, der die Öffnung vergrößern soll, die als Tür in ihr Leben hineinführt" (88).

Conclusion

This article began with the question of how intermedial reference to musical performance may challenge literary narration. It also raised the question of whether this early novel about musical performer connects to Jelinek's understanding of music in her writing at large. Based on the assumption that intermedial references to another medium always exploit the transmedial common ground of the media involved, my analysis focused on elements in the text that literary language shares with the performance of music, but that would require musical references in order to be noticed in literature. The focus on performance and the body in the plot has highlighted several aspects: The way performance is described performatively undermines ideas of musical transcendence and spirituality by focusing on the bodily strain and discipline of the performer, which has been instrumentalized in controlling the female body. Musical performance, which is narrated in a self-reflexive way, blurs the borders between representation and presentation. Thus Erika's sexual most disturbing actions, instead of being causally explained, gain performative meaning of doing/acting out metaphors in literary discourse.

Elfriede Jelinek's prose is thus not simply characterized by highly self-referential literary discourse. Performances of music and gender are described in a way that do not merely highlight the role of performance in music or criticize the instrumentalization of music. Just as intermedial reference highlights and brings forth the transmedial common ground of the media involved, the novel highlights the ability of narrative to perform, as a performance site that confronts the reader with the bodily consequences of language use. In *The Piano Teacher*, then, not only the performer of music is placed center stage, but the performing ability of language is also rendered visible.