A Glimpse of Music and Literature in French Symbolism Through Three Modern Chinese Writers—Shen Congwen, Xu Zhimo, and Liang Zongdai

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Abstract

The relationship between music and literature is a continuous topic among poets, and a key subject for the Symbolists. From the mid-19th century on, the French Symbolist theories on music, which largely regard music as the superior form of art, have influenced the modern ideology of both the literary and artistic worlds. French Symbolists have even been considered the pioneers of literary Modernism. Undoubtedly, French Symbolism came into China along with other literary trends during the early 20th century and influenced modern Chinese literature. Modern Chinese writers, in turn, developed their own thinking on music and literature, a thinking which reflected its French roots. Therefore, an examination of their ideas can offer a viewpoint for us to understand the diverse routes of the importation of ideas into China. This article will read into the words of three distinctive modern Chinese writers, to have a glimpse of how they viewed the relationship between music and literature, as well as the inter-relationship between their ideas and the connection with French Symbolism.

Keywords: music, French Symbolism, Shen Congwen, Xu Zhimo, Liang Zongdai

The close tie between music and literature has always been a focal point in examining literature around the world and throughout time. In the history of Western literature, the dynamics between the two arts became a much-discussed topic among the artists in the nineteenth century. Such discussion lasted through generations of modern artists, especially among the French Symbolists. According to Daniel Albright, “at the dawn of the twentieth century, music became the vanguard medium of the Modernist aesthetics”
The May Fourth Movement marked the beginning of modern Chinese literature; it was a political movement initiated by university students in Beijing on May 4th, 1919, which in a broader sense belonged to the New Cultural Movement led by Chinese intellectuals from the mid 1910s to the 1920s. After The May Fourth, many Western literary ideas were introduced to China, and the clash between different literary ideas generated debate among Chinese writers. The question of whether music was the best medium among all arts also initiated heated debates among writers, mostly poets. This put forward the debate on whether basic musicality, which refers to the sense of rhythm and rhyme of poetry, is necessary for modern poetry. It also, and in fact most importantly, put forward a broader question of what the best way is to pursue the abstract concept of beauty in arts, which is also one of the main issues that French Symbolism is concerned with. When “music” is discussed in this article, unless otherwise noted, it refers to the concept of music or music in the abstract, rather than audible music (for example, a particular piece of musical work), or the traditional musicality of literature—rhythm and rhyme.

Symbolism, dating from as early as the mid-19th century and concentrated in 1890s Paris, “marks the turn from Romanticism to Modernism” (Bullock & Stallybrass, 1977). It was largely led by a generation of French poets such as Charles Baudelaire (1821 – 1867), Stéphane Mallarmé (1842 – 1898), and Paul Valéry (1871 – 1945). Symbolism, or rather the concept of symbols, has long existed in literature, referring to a form of expression that tries to reach an unseen reality (Symons, 1919). However, the Symbolist movement we define today have theories beyond the traditional uses of symbols; it is a literary movement that is “conscious of itself, in a sense in which it was unconscious” (Ibid., p. 3). While the Romanticists take individual experience as reality, the Symbolists use symbols to approach the idea that “everything in humanity may have begun before the world”; they are concerned with “the soul of things” (Ibid., pp. 8-9). In the process of this pursuit, the Symbolists regard “the indefiniteness of music” as one of “the principal aims”, which is produced by swaying between the imaginary and the real, as well as “a confusion between the perceptions of the different senses” (Wilson, 1931, p. 13).

In the West, the relationship between music and literature is being studied systematically. For example, the Forum of the International Association for Word and Music Studies, established in 2009, offers a platform for scholars to discuss various issues relating to music and literature, and to develop new theories in the related fields. Western literary criticism also has a long history of discussing musical aesthetics and its connection with literature, going back to Eduard Hanslick’s *The Beautiful in Music* (1891), which almost provides Modern writers with a fundamental theory of musical aesthetics. In terms of music in modern literature, and Symbolism, there are also several systematic works, such as Albright’s *Modernism and Music* (2004) and Acquisto’s *French Symbolist Poetry and the Idea of Music* (2006). Peter Dayan, the first professor in Word and Music Studies, has also discussed the idea of soundless music. He brings forward the idea of “interart” in *Art as Music, Music as Poetry, Poetry as Art, from Whistler to Stravinsky*.
and Beyond, which sublimates the dialogue between different arts (Dayan, 2011). Without a doubt, music, as an international art, has been explored by Chinese writers, and after the May Fourth Movement, the tendencies of Symbolism and Modernism appeared in modern Chinese literature. There exist studies on individual writers on music, but a systematic study on this topic is completely missing.

Among the three writers this article will focus on, most critical works recognise Xu Zhimo (1879 – 1931) as a Romantic writer, thus overlooking his possible connection with Symbolism in terms of music. There are a number of works on Liang Zongdai (1903 – 1983), and French Symbolism as the influence is obvious, but there lacks a major work that studies Liang’s Symbolist ideas from the perspective of music, let alone abstract music. As for Shen Congwen (1902 – 1988), scholars are gradually noticing his Symbolist tendency. Among them, Liu Hongtao explores it the most in Shen Congwen’s Fiction and Modernism (《沈从文小说与现代主义》) (2009), but he also fails to explore deeper the primary subject of Symbolism—music. Furthermore, while scholars are aware of Xu’s mentorship with Shen, seldom do people realise that Liang might have a crucial influence on Shen’s aesthetics. The following pages will take a look at the ideas of music and literature of the three writers and their interrelations with each other and French Symbolism.

Xu Zhimo and Liang Zongdai both had a Western educational background, where Xu’s literary background was usually considered “Anglo-American” and Romantic, while Liang’s bore a strong French Symbolist influence. However, Shen Congwen never studied abroad or learned any foreign language. Hence, it is easy to assume that Shen received little Western influence and that, consequently, his works show little resemblance to Western literature. Nevertheless, such assumption is implausible. Firstly, Chinese literature after May Fourth largely involved imitation of foreign, especially Western, literature. Liu Hongtao suggests that modern Chinese literature was synchronous with Western Modernism, and in fact, the Irrationalist theories of Bergson, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Freud were widely known in China, while Symbolism, Expressionism, Futurism, and the stream of consciousness technique were brought into China and influenced Chinese writers (H. Liu, 2010). Secondly, even though Shen was, in every aspect, a native Chinese writer, he stayed close to the Chinese writers who had strong Western connections. When Shen started his career, he received help and advice from established writers like Xu Zhimo. As the chief editor of the supplement Morning Post (《晨报副刊》), in which Shen published many of his early works, Xu encouraged Shen and invited him to poetry reading groups from 1925 to 1926 (H. Liu, 2005). Furthermore, from September 1933 onwards, Shen worked as the chief editor of the literary supplement Ta Kung Pao (《大公报·文艺副刊》), and the supplement at the time rather encouraged translations of, and introductions to, foreign literary works (Zhong, 2008). In 1935, after Liang Zongdai came back from Europe, he started to host a page in Ta Kung Pao—Poetry Special (《诗特刊》)—under Shen’s editorship. This special addition to Ta Kung Pao’s literary supplement, according to Zhang Jieyu, started a new movement in modern Chinese poetry (Ibid.), and a large and
Influential range of poets were involved. Many poets who published in *Crescent Moon* (《新月》) and *Les Contemporains* (《现代》) contributed, including many of the Chinese Symbolists.

It is also a known fact that the Symbolists and their advocates, such as Dai Wangshu, Bian Zhilin, Liang Zongdai, and Feng Zhi, greatly impacted the development of modern Chinese literature, especially poetry. At the same time, Romantic poets like Xu Zhimo also occasionally joined the discussion and translation of Symbolists, such as Charles Baudelaire. In the translation of “Une Chargone”, Xu also provides an introduction to Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal*, and remarks that “I believe that the substrate of the universe, the substrate of human life, the substrate of every visible subject or invisible idea is, and only is, music—splendid music” (“我深信宇宙的底质，人生的底质，一切有形的事物与无形的思想的底质——只是音乐，绝妙的音乐。”) (Xu, 1924, p. 6). While Xu also mentions the metrics in Baudelaire, he apparently focuses on Baudelaire’s inner music, or “inaudible music”. Xu claims that “not only can I hear music with sounds, I can also hear music without sounds (it actually has sounds, but you cannot hear them)” (“我不仅会听有音的乐，我也会听无音的乐（其实也有音就是你听不见。）”) (*Ibid.*). Shen Congwen more than once mentions soundless music, for example, “I am mad. I am mad for abstraction. I see some symbols, a form, a ball of string, a kind of soundless music and a wordless poem” (“我正在发疯。为抽象发疯。我看到一些符号，一片形，一把线，一种无声的音乐，无文字的诗歌。”) (Shen, 2009, Vol. 12, p. 43). What is this soundless music? It is poetry and it is painting, like what Xu describes as “sounds” in Baudelaire’s poetry—“the tone and colour of his poetry is like the blueness reflected in the beams of setting sunlight—distant, bleak, and sinking” (“他诗的音调与色彩像是夕阳余烬里反射出来的青芒——辽远的，惨淡的，往下沉的。”) (Xu, 1924, p. 5).

Xu goes on to describe another kind of music in poetry, “imaginary music”: “for music, as long as you listen—the chirps near water, the swallows chatting in between the beams, the sound of water flowing through the valley, the soundwaves of the woods—as long as you have the ears to listen, when you can hear it, ‘hearing’ means ‘understanding’ […] It is all in your imagination” (“但音乐原只要你听：水边的虫叫，梁间的燕语，山壑里的水响，松林里的涛声——都只要你有耳朵听，你真能听时，这‘听’便是‘懂’。[…] 都在你自己的想像里。”) (*Ibid.*, p. 6). Here, while the sound of the words is only referring to the audible sound, there is also a metaphorical music the reader can hear in their imagination. Xu continues to explain that, “therefore, the real essence of the poetry does not live in the words’ literal meaning, but in its subtle, uncatchable syllables; what he (Baudelaire) provokes is not your skin […] but your uncatchable soul—like falling in love—the touching of the lips is only a symbol, what really connects are your souls” (“所以诗的真妙处不在他的字义里，却在他的不可捉摸的音节里；他刺戟着也不是你的皮肤 […] 却是你自己一样不可捉摸的魂灵——像恋爱似的，两对唇皮的接触只是一个象征；真相接触的，真相结合的，是你们的魂灵。”) (*Ibid.*). After Xu published this article, it drew criticism from not only Lu Xun (1924), but also Liu Fu, who sarcastically gave four speculations concerning Xu’s theory: 1) Xu has a microphone
in his ears; 2) Xu can hear sounds in the distance; 3) Xu is sensitive to ultrasonic sounds; 4) Xu has something that is not yet invented in his ears that can make sounds for him (F. Liu, 1925). Such criticism only shows that Liu Fu does not understand that hearing here does not mean receiving sounds, but understanding, so the essence of Xu’s imaginary music is not in the sounds at all. Combined with what Xu says at the end of the introduction about the substrate of everything that is music, we can roughly divide what Xu thinks as music into three levels:

1. Rhythm of the syllables
2. Metaphorical music in the imagination
3. Spiritual music, the substrate of everything

1. The rhythm of the syllables is the literal sound that can be heard.
2. This refers to the music the reader of the poem would imagine in his/her mind, according to his/her understanding, completely belonging only to the reader.
3. The deepest and most profound level of music is the music that flows between the reader and the writer, the substrate of everything, which is soundless, but completely based on something like what Kuriyawaga may have called “universality” (共通性).

As Shen almost considered him to be a mentor, it is very likely that Shen would have gathered thoughts similar to Xu Zhimo’s. As much as Xu cares about the audible musicality in poetry (for example, when Xu introduces Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale”, he focuses on both the sound and the meaning beyond it), what he could have passed onto Shen would not have been that kind of musicality; the main argument here is that Shen is much more of a novelist or prose writer than a poet. Shen wrote poems, but in a very small quantity. Most of them are collected and translated folksongs and free verses; only in his later years (post 1949) did he compose poems in traditional Chinese poetic forms. In consequence, what Shen could possibly have learned from Xu Zhimo is potentially exactly what Lu Xun posits mockingly—“everything is music”.

However, Xu Zhimo died early, in 1931, before most texts by Shen that contain such ideas were written. It is most possible that Shen read the Romantic master’s works after his death, but there could also be other influences, one of which is Liang Zongdai.

In a letter in 1951, Shen wrote that seventeen years ago (1934) Ma Sicong, Liang Zongdai, and he, listened to a collection of music by Beethoven and other composers for seven hours in one session (Shen, 2009, Vol. 19, p. 178). In this letter, Shen described Ma learning something about composing, conducting, and instruments, which Liang and Shen did not understand, and Liang having some “literary ideas”. What kind of literary ideas
could those be? Shen himself did not learn anything directly, but only “transferred [it] onto [his] later works, especially a few books and short pieces, in which there existed the rhythmic process of music, which is also closer to some experiments in translating music into something concrete” (*Ibid.*). It is unlikely that Shen would have been influenced by any theory of composition, or of musical techniques, described by Ma, which he did not understand at the time (as nothing suggests Shen had any professional knowledge of musicology); however, it is quite possible that Liang’s “literary ideas” came through in Shen’s work in the end.

First, how did Liang describe Beethoven?

[What exactly is the melody and tone of Beethoven’s *Symphony No.3* like? Extremely slow, extremely deep, intermittent, drop by drop, like a deep sigh, like a sobbing, like the heavy sorrowful steps of mourners; no, it is almost like the water dripping from the ancient wall of a bottomless cave, drip by drip, till it touches the deepest part of your heart, and arouses a sad but sacred horrible emotion, which is exactly what Yao Nai would call the art of “yin”; but it is sublime! It is sublime art!]

Béldofen *Chōngji āoxiaoqutü* zhè jīdá qíxùn yè yù jiào jìngde shì zěnmè yī nián? Xuěji, lèncíjiù, duánduándúde, dàntiāndàdi, xiàng zhǎngtuì, xiàng xuèqì, xiàng sònghú de zhòngchén èr xiézāi de báoxué, bù, zhǐdǐn xiàng wúdǐ shēndòng dé guì wǎnlǐ de shuǐ lòu yìyàng, yīdī yīdī dī dào nǐ xīn kǎn shēnchù, qǐyǐ yīzhǒng biānliáng ér yòu bāi shéndìng de tòngbù xīn qíng, zhèngshì yǔ yáo nài zhī huí suǒ zhě “yìn” de yìshù; ránhòu suǒbùshì qí wéi “yín” de yìshù yà! (Liang, 2003, Vol. 2, p. 114)

Much like Xu Zhimo’s description of Baudelaire’s poetry, Liang’s appreciation of Beethoven’s music develops through the actual sound—“extremely slow, extremely deep, intermittent, drop by drop”—to the metaphorical music in the listener’s imagination, “like a deep sigh, like a sobbing, like the heavy sorrowful steps of mourners...” If music has any function of description, it only exists in the listener’s mind as metaphorical music. At last, the music goes into one’s heart and one’s soul, having started from the musician’s soul and thus finally making the connection. The connection is spiritually sublime. Therefore, we can observe that this is why Xu Zhimo finds Baudelaire’s poetry musical. This is a subtle and interesting observation, as they share the process of “appreciation”, much as Kuriyawaga illustrates: the appreciation of art is only founded when the unconscious of the author and that of the reader bring about resonance (*Kuriyagawa*, 2000). Baudelaire’s poetry produces it by the correspondences created by the symbols. The resonance, in Liang’s words, is created by “the water dripping from the ancient wall of a bottomless cave”. It is of course uncertain whether Liang also made such a description to Shen while they were listening to Beethoven together, but it is possible that through Liang, Shen learned how Symbolism sees literature and music.

[When it comes to poetry, music is an absolute condition: if the author does not pay attention to music or does not put any effort into it, if the author’s ears are insensitive, and if, in the
composition of the poem, rhythm, meter, or music hold no important position which is equivalent to the meaning, then we must have no hope for this man, who wants to sing without feeling the need to and who offers only words that suggest other words.]

Que s’il s’agit d’un poème, la condition musicale est absolue: si l’auteur n’a pas compté avec elle, spéculé sur elle; si l’on observe que son Oreille n’a été que passive, et que les rythmes, les accents et let timbres n’ont pas pris dans la composition du poème une importance substantielle, équivalente à celle du sens, - il faut désespérer de cet homme qui veut chanter sans trop sentir la nécessité de le faire, et tous les mots qu’il offre suggèrent d’autres mots. (Valéry, 2003, Vol. 1, p. 139)

Liang certainly agrees with the necessity for music in poetry, just as he thinks Valéry’s poetry has the most beautiful rhythms. However, the music in poetry has much more significance than metrics to Liang (and perhaps Valéry, too). Although the audible music is important, the actual music is truth. In Poetry and Truth (《 诗 与 真 》), completed in 1934, Liang writes, “truth is the only profound basis of poetry, and poetry is the most supreme and ultimate realisation of truth” (“真是诗唯一深固的始基, 诗是真底最高与最终的实现。”) (Liang, 2003, Vol. 2, p. 5). Although, for him, truth is far away and difficult to reach, the joy lies in a poet’s pursuit of truth, just like “the magical beauty of a song is in the process of the ups and downs, and the quickness and slowness of the melody, but not when the tune is finished” (“一首歌底美妙在于音韵底抑扬舒卷底程序, 而不在于曲终响歇之后。”) (Ibid., p. 6). It follows that a poet is always in the process of approaching truth; there is a form of poetry, like “the ups and downs, the quickness and slowness of the melody”, which contains the truth, or at least, so Liang considers, which still awaits after the tune fades.

To Liang, Valéry is the master of poetry, as he sets out:

[Yet if he is happy only with discovery, but pursues not the expression, or expresses, but not with the skills of an architect or craftsman, the rocking emotion of a musician to build a crystal palace to sing and cry for, he is barely a poet but a mere philosopher. […] The sentiments, the sighs, of common poets are no more than the flowers and weeds that decorate the way to the temple of truth, despite every flower and weed exhibiting to him a deep world; they are but the wood and rock that build the sacred temple, despite every piece of wood and every rock carrying soundless music.]


The first half of this statement presents Liang’s argument concerning the two important elements of poetry: the form of the poem and the discovery (of truth). The
second part focuses on “the truth”. For Liang, the momentary sentiments of a poet can be used, but to a greater poet, such as Valéry, these are merely decorations and masonry. Liang is also suggesting what these trivial things are carrying “a deep world” and “soundless music”, from which he deemed Valéry a great Symbolist. To common poets, flowers, the moon, birds, or any other image are nothing but a momentary sentiment, but to Symbolists, these things carry “a deep world” and “soundless music” because they lead to greater truth. Therefore, “a deep world” and “soundless music” indicate the symbolised.

Liang goes on to suggest that Valéry is a student of Mallarmé, who knows how to use words to create music: “the creator of music that is the most subtle, most rich, most original, and with most complicated words” (“那最精微，最丰富，最新颖，最复杂的字的音乐底创造者。”) (Ibid.). He says that “to use words to create music, that is to say, to sublimate poetry to the pure realm of music, is the common intention of all Symbolists, despite their division in approaches” (“把文字要创造音乐，就是说，把诗提到音乐底纯粹的境界，正是一般象征诗人在殊途中共同的倾向。”) (Ibid., p. 20). To Liang, a good Symbolist, like Valéry, should not only master the architectural beauty of poetry, but also lead the reader to discover the essence in the poetry through a process of “recreating” (“重新创造”) (Ibid., p. 22). A good poem should not be in only one medium, but should stand outside the art form. A good poem should be “a painting full of sweetness, fragrance, songs, and dances, but not a photograph that only has a shape” (“充满了甘、芳、歌、舞的图画，不是徒具外表与粗形的照相”) (Ibid.), and it should be able to “guide the reader deep into the secrets of the universe and to feel the same pulse between me and the universe” (“引导我们深入宇宙底隐秘，使我们感到我与宇宙间底脉搏之跳动”) (Ibid.). Is Shen Congwen, therefore, a Symbolist?

The only time Shen directly addresses the question of being a Symbolist is in “The Housewife” (《主妇》) (1945), where he writes that “someone says I am a Symbolist, and I will not argue. Maybe he was referring to me as a person, not my writings, but what is written resembles its writer, so fair enough” (“所以有人说我是一个象征主义者，我从不分辨。他指的也许是人，不是文章。然而‘文如其人’，也马马虎虎。”) (Shen, 2009, Vol. 10, p. 314). Liu Hongtao uses this to prove that Shen related himself to Symbolism (H. Liu, 2010, p. 147). However, it does not necessarily mean that he admitted being a Symbolist. First, “The Housewife” was published, and later anthologised, as a work of fiction, even though the characters seem to resemble Shen and his wife (for example, their wedding anniversary, like that of the characters, is September 9th). Second, Shen’s undertone in this quote suggests an almost self-mocking denial—“as a person, not my writings [...] fair enough”. It may be a little imprudent to state that Shen claims to be a Symbolist, based on this statement in a work of “fiction”, semi-autobiographic though it may be. However, Shen was never far away from the group of Symbolists among Chinese writers. Also, according to Liu Hongtao, in his early career, Shen wrote poems like “Dream” (《梦》) and “Untitled” (《无题》), which resemble Baudelaire (or the Chinese poet Li Jinfa) and imply Shen’s contact with Symbolism (Ibid., p. 148). Although not directly shown in Shen’s poetry, the themes of “human arts not able to describe beauty”
and “soundless music” also occupy Li Jinfa’s poetry. For instance, as Li Jinfa writes in “Gentleness” (《温柔》), “I play all the music, / but nothing can please your ears; / I painted all the colours, / but cannot illustrate your beauty” (“我奏尽音乐之声, / 无以悦你耳; / 染了一切颜色, / 无以描你的美丽。”) (Li, n.d.a), and, in “Love and Hate” (《爱憎》), “Our hearts are full of soundless music, / like the shaking of the light air in space” (“我们的心充满无音之乐, / 如空间轻气的颤动。”) (Li, n.d.b). It is almost certain that this idea was borrowed from the French Symbolists by Li Jinfa, although it’s difficult to know from exactly which one, as Li was very familiar with many French Symbolists. He even quotes Verlaine (who wrote the famous Romances Sans Paroles) to start this very poem, “Soyons scandaleux sans plus nous gêner”, 6 from Verlaine’s Chansons pour Elle. Shen also has expressions of such Symbolist and intermedia related quotations, such as “[it] was a painting without colour, a song without sound or mimic, and a poem without words” (“无颜色可涂抹的画, 无声音和摹仿的歌, 无文字可写成的诗”) (Shen, 2009, Vol. 7, p. 88), and “we know beauty, approach beauty, but silence is the only suitable way in which we can do so. Humans’ songs, like humans’ words, are both rather simple and poor. What can be sung or written is no more than the superficial gain and loss, happiness and sadness of life” (“我们认识美, 接近美, 只有沉默才是最恰当的办法。人类的歌声, 同人类的歌声, 同人类的文字一样, 都那么异常简单和贫乏, 能唱出的, 能写出的, 皆不过是人生浮面的得失哀乐。”) (Ibid., Vol. 7, p. 363). Therefore, it is very likely that the similar ideas present in Shen’s works have their roots in French Symbolism.

It seems that Shen stands always on the edge of Symbolism. Yet, if Liang considers “using words to create music” a prime shared intention of Symbolists, maybe Shen’s works can be examined from this angle.

When Poetry Special started, Shen, as the chief editor of Tao Kung Pao’s literature supplement, wrote “The Old Accounts of New Poetry” (《新诗的旧账》) to introduce the column, according to Zhang Jieyu, in every way echoing and supporting Liang, including Liang’s ideas on the form of poetry (Zhang, 2011). Like Liang, Shen asserts that, “if poetry wants its effect, words and form can help it” (“诗要效果, 词藻与形式能帮助它完成效果”). Together, Liang and other participating poets, as well as the editors of Ta Kung Pao, were trying to create a new experimental field for “pure poetry” which could bridge traditional Chinese poetry, Western poetry, and Chinese New Poetry (Zhang, 2011). As mentioned above, although Shen did write some poems, he is never seen as a poet. His early free verses, except for a few, bear obvious marks of imitation. That makes his involvement with the poets and poetic movement, as described by Zhang Jieyu, intriguing, as he had no intention of being a poet at that time.

As shown in the diagram above, musicality in poetry can be physical musicality as well as that which is beyond the material elements of poetry. As the chief editor of Tao Kung Pao, Shen was inevitably at least a witness to the discussion, and it makes one wonder if there is anything about such discussion that may have influenced Shen’s prose writing. Baudelaire asks rhetorically, “who has not, in bouts of ambition, dreamt this miracle, a poetic prose, musical without rhythm or rhyme, supple and choppy enough to
accommodate the lyrical movement of the soul, the undulations of reverie, the bump and lurch of consciousness?” (Baudelaire, 2010, p. 3). Thus, according to him, literature is poetic or not based on whether it is musical, and such musicality has nothing to do with form, rhythm, or rhyme.

Among the discussions in Poetry Special, opinions differ, as Zhang Jieyu points out. For example, Luo Niansheng, by comparing Chinese poetry to classical English poetry, holds that the key to the metrical pattern of Chinese New Poetry should depend on “the meter determined by the stressed and unstressed syllables” rather than ping-ze (平仄: level and oblique tone) (Zhang, 2011, p. 31). Ye Gongchao, quoted by Zhang, thinks that “music is the ideal type of art, because only in music can form and content be united” (“音乐是一种最理想的艺术，因为唯有在音乐里形式与内容是根本合一的”) (Ibid., p. 31). However, to French Symbolists like Mallarmé, actual pieces of music are not an issue in such circumstances; instead, “music” means “the idea or category of music” (Acquisto, 2006). As for words, Ye thinks that, although words have shape, sound, and meaning, the most important element is meaning; the rest are only the media for expressing meaning (Zhang, 2011). Luo and Ye together represent two sides of the argument—poetry should be metrics-focused or meaning-focused. However, Liang, in addition to his emphasis on metrics (including ping-ze), also says that a single word has no individual value; it is only an element in poetry, and, according to Mallarmé, “a line in poetry consists of a group of words that have magical power and are complete, brand new, and unfamiliar to its original language” (“一句诗是由几个字组成的一个完全, 簇新, 与原来的语言陌生并具有咒力量的字。”) (Ibid., p. 31). According to Acquisto, “Mallarmé highlights the gap between sound and sense […] to privilege the sound of a poetic word in order to highlight poetic musicality” (Acquisto, 2006, p. 47). The sound of a poetic word is not the same thing as poetic musicality, in Luo and Ye’s thinking. A poet has to focus on the power of words and language, but in order to create inaudible music. Shen also pays great attention to the “magical power of words” (“文字的魔力”): “painting needs colour and it needs the painter to know how to blend colours. If a writer does not pay attention to the use of words, then he/she cannot express good thinking even when there is any” (“作画需要颜色且需要会调弄颜色。一个作家不注意文字, 有好思想也表达不出这种好思想。”) (Shen, 2009, Vol. 18, p. 204). Liang and Shen think similarly: artists should know how to use their materials. However, it seems that what Liang indicates as the meaning of words in poetry does not come from the literal meaning of a single word, but from organisation of the words. At the same time, as an advocate of “pure poetry”, Liang sets out its definition in “About Poetry” (《谈诗》):

[So-called pure poetry discards all objective landscape writing, narration, reasoning, and over-sentimental emotions, and only depends on the elements that form its body—music and colour—to bring about a suggestive power almost like a spell, in order to arouse the reaction of our senses and imagination, and to redeem our souls into a spiritual and bright, heavenly realm. Like music, it is an absolutely independent, absolutely freer and purer and more
immortal universe than reality; its own phonology (metrics) and colours are its inherent reason for existence.]

This does not mean that poets should actually use notes and paints to create pure poetry, but rather to sway the magical power of words to create “music and colour”, which then become the elements of pure poetry. What Zhang Jieyu points out perceptively in this definition is that Liang uses “like music” rather than “through music”, which means that Liang never means to equate music with metrics (Zhang, 2011). Therefore, Liang has no intention of applying the form of music to the form of poetry. More importantly, Liang considers poetry as parallel to music, rather than an art form that depends on music. The music here is soundless. In 1972, Shen wrote a letter to his wife, reviewing some of his old works: “my stories and prose have the essence of poetry, and they are even more like poetry than those of many ‘great poets’! I personally think there is melody of music in them; they are very good pieces of music as far as I am concerned! Yet not many professionals in music would agree” (“故事散文中也有诗情流注, 比许多‘大诗人’分行写的更像诗!我自己却以为有音乐旋律在其中, 还自以为即很好的乐章! 可是很少有搞音乐的内行认可。”) (Shen, 2009, Vol. 23, p. 185). Here, Shen considers good poetry to be music, and it echoes with Baudelaire’s ideal to have poetic prose that is music. However, this must not be audible music, as stories and prose lack even the audible musicality of conventional poetry. Shen sometimes even goes a step further than common poets in that he tries to create a piece of art that combines all media; for example, Shen experiments with “Gazing at Rainbows” (《看虹录》) and “Accounts of Plucking Stars” (《摘星录》) by “blending the three different creative methods of lyrical poetry, watercolour painting, and symphony” (Ibid., Vol. 24, p. 378) to create pure art, which is more similar to Liang’s idea of pure poetry, which hovers in between, yet beyond all.

Zhang Jieyu makes another interesting argument that Liang’s theory of pure poetry, which follows his mentor Valéry, aims at a higher form of literary ideal: Liang suggests that poets should use metrics to improve pure poetry’s musicality, and, in order to achieve that, a poet needs to consider the special features of the Chinese language. He argues that, by combining principles of poetry of the West and of the East, this highest standard of pure poetry could be achieved (Zhang, 2011).

However, what exactly is this highest state of art, and who can be the judge of it? Zhang does not give a clear answer. Maybe it is true that this state is not entirely unreachable, as Liang suggests in his description of Valéry’s poetry:

[It does not indirectly knock on the door of our understanding, but, instead, it directly tells us
the secrets of our perception and imagination, though perhaps not plainly. On this matter, the poetry of Valéry, we may say, has already reached music, the purest and highest state of art.

It is not an indirect door to our understanding, but a direct, though not necessarily clear, appeal to our senses and sensations. On this point, the poetry of Valéry, we may say, has already reached music, the purest and highest state of art.

This recalls Goethe’s idea that “music [creates] mood”, and it echoes Suzanne Bernard in that “true music, capable of speaking to the mind more than to the senses, is poetry” (Bernard & Acquisto, 2006, p. 56). True music and true poetry are both “the purest and highest state of art”. Other than Valéry, Liang may have never crowned anyone so clearly with this honour. Modest or not, Liang thinks that he himself is still on the way to the state of art, or the state of truth, as suggested previously, rather than having achieved it. Whether an unreachable ideal or not for Liang, this state of poetry is definitely even harder for Shen to achieve as a novelist in this context.

Since the topic of “music as the ideal state of art” is a central discussion in Poetry Special, we have reason to believe that Shen witnessed these discussions and then formed his own thoughts.

Shen praises music as the highest form of art on several instances—“to describe an abstract and beautiful impression, words are not as good as paintings, paintings are not as good as mathematics, and mathematics is not as good as music” (“表现一抽象美丽印象，文字不如绘画，绘画不如数学，数学似乎又不如音乐。”) (Shen, 2009, Vol. 12, p. 25). This, we can now see, may have much to do with Symbolist ideas. Shen’s ideas on music and words, the individual, and the universe, resemble Liang’s. Shen may have had other sources, but Liang is the easiest source to pin down. After all, if Shen could recall their session listening to music and sharing literary ideas from previous seventeen years, Liang’s ideas must have been very influential.

As Shen sets out in “The Lyricism of Abstraction” (《抽象的抒情》):

[When life is developing, change is normality, conflict is normality, and destruction is normality. Life itself cannot congeal. When it congeals, it is then near death or actually dies. Only by transferring it to words, to images, to musical notes, to rhythm, can one form of life or one state of life be congealed, and it will produce another kind of existence and continuity of life, through a long time and distant space, connected with another person from another time or another place, with no barrier.]

生命在发展中，变化是常态，矛盾是常态，毁灭是常态。生命本身不能凝固，凝固即近于死亡或真正死亡。惟转化为文字，为形象，为音符，为节奏，可望将生命某一种形式，某一种状态，凝固下来，形成生命另外一种存在和延续，通过长长的时间，通过遥遥的空间，让另外一时另一地生存的人，彼此生命流注，无有阻隔。(Ibid., Vol. 16, p. 527)

Just as Beethoven kills harmonious sounds to create something else, writers can congeal one state with words, sentence it to death but give it another form of existence. Such
ideas of artistic creation were put forward and developed by artists from Beethoven to the French Symbolists, and were, apparently, received by Shen.

At the same time, while explaining Baudelaire’s “Correspondences”, Liang states that “all the objects and phenomena of the universe […] are only a link on the infinite chain of life, sharing the same pulse and blood” (“宇宙间一切事物和现象 […] 其实只是无限之生底链上的每个圈儿，同一的脉搏和血液在里面绵延不绝地跳动和流通着”) (Liang, 2006, Vol. 2, pp. 70-71), because “the diverse world is no more than the incarnation of the spirit of the universe: where life reaches, it changes into various phenomena and shows through every visible thing in the Flower Garland; such process, as we know, originally is an important prime motive of life” (“这大千世界不过是宇宙底大灵底化身: 生机到处, 它便幻化和表现为万千的气象与华严的色相一一表现, 我们知道, 原是生底一种重要的原动力。”) (Liang, 2006, Vol. 2, pp. 70-71). Liang perhaps finds the similarity between Baudelaire and Oriental Buddhism, just like Kuriyawaga, but he understands Symbolism deeply. For Liang, “the way of Symbolism can be explained by one word—correspondence” (“象征之道也可以一以贯之，曰，‘契合’而已。”) (Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 68). I believe that Baudelaire’s “correspondence” and Kuriyawaga’s “universality” are connected, or, in fact, mean the same thing. They both work, according to Liang, through the pulse that all lives in the universe share, as if echoing the same sound wave. In “Gained from the Music of Beethoven”, Shen declares “music, indeed, has its greatness, / it is told through the universal emotion, / it is fairer and purer than words / and full of friendship and true love” (“音乐实有它的伟大，/ 即诉之于共通情感，/ 比文字语言更公正，纯粹，/ 又充满人的友爱和至情。”) (Shen, 2009, Vol. 15, p. 222). I believe that, here, Shen’s “universal emotion” (“共通情”) comes from the same thing Kuriyawaga’s “universality” (“共通性”), if not directly from it. Music is fairer and purer than words because it connects lives; it passes through senses rather than through rationality.

Both Liang and Shen imply that we are nothing but one part of the universe, and, when they mention life, it is not only a person’s actual life, but also, more metaphorically, a greater life. For Shen, life cannot be congealed because the pulse needs to be carried on. Through music, or the kind of poetry that is “like music”, this life can reach further.

In conclusion, even though Xu Zhimo and Liang Zongdai seemed to belong to different schools of Chinese writers, they must have more or less received influence from French Symbolism. While Xu Zhimo, despite his accurate insight into the essence of Baudelaire, only had a rather perceptual understanding of Symbolism, Liang, on the contrary, truly grasped the core of the Symbolist relationship between music and literature. Therefore, Liang Zongdai can be considered a very important influence on Shen’s understanding of Symbolism and the relationship between words and music. Shen may also have gained a broad perceptual idea from Xu Zhimo that “everything is music”, and shared the fear of many writers that no human art can capture beauty and truth. However, being an editor of Ta Kung Pao’s literary supplement and a friend of Liang, Shen achieved a more rational and systematic idea of Symbolism and music from Liang’s theories, and pushed his own works into a more abstract universe. This kind of discussion
about music and literature can bring writers from different backgrounds together because they, like all humans, share the same ultimate spiritual pursuit of beauty. It is easy for them to turn to French Symbolism because this school of poetry initiates deep discussion of such matter. Infinite beauty, or truth, is a most abstract concept; thus it is not difficult to understand why writers would constantly connect it with the most abstract form of art—music (whether audible or inaudible).

Notes
1 All translations in this article, unless otherwise noted, are by the author.
2 “The appreciation of all kinds of art, which is also the sense of resonance, is founded upon generality, universality, and permanence” (“一切艺术的鉴赏即共鸣感，就以这普遍性、共通性、永久性为基础而成立的。”) (Kuriyagawa, 2000, p. 66).
3 [He is the nightingale; the nightingale is him. When the nightingale sings low, he sings low; and when the nightingale sings loud, he sings loud [...] The dark night is filled with music—so he rushes to the epilogue with the word and sound “forlorn” to return to the motive [...] The connection of sounds and tones and the turning of it are also very natural; in the end, he mixes the two opposite motives, and finishes with the waking (reality) and dream (the imaginary world). It is like throwing a stone into the deep pond of the valley, and you hear the loud, clear, and consonant sound, with lingering aftersound in the valley [...] The music is finished, the dream has ended, the blood is dried up, the nightingale is dead! But the aftertaste will always echo lightly in the universe [...]” (Xu, 1983, Vol. 3, p. 78)
4 [Sicong learned from the composer, the conductor, and the instrumental solo process many things that were not easy for us to acquire. Zongdai had some appreciation of the history of music, something to talk about in the drawing room as well as something about literary ideas.]思聪从作曲者，指挥及种种器乐的独奏过程，领会了许多我们不易学习的东西。宗岱得的音乐史中一些欣赏印象，一些在客厅中可以增加谈风的东西，也可能得到些文学思想上的东西。（Shen, 2009, Vol. 19, p. 178)
5 Yao Nai (or Yao Jichuan), a late 18th-century to early 19th-century Chinese scholar, had a theory, in which he categorised arts into four types—“masculine”, “strong”, “feminine”, and “gentle” (“阳”“刚”“阴”“柔”)—or, roughly, into two categories of “virile” (“阳刚”) and “effeminate” (“阴柔”). It has nothing to do with genders, but the former means a majestic type of art and the latter means a more graceful type and that “the charm of the music will linger and the meaning of the music is deep and far-reaching” (“韵味深远”) (R. Zhu, 2004).
6 The quote is in French, and Li quotes it as “Soyons scandaleux sans plus vous gêner”, to be exact.
7 “Goethe answered, ‘It is the great and noble privilege of music to create a mood within us without using ordinary exterior means for the purpose’” (Rolland, 1968, p. 127).
8 A Buddhist term which refers to the *Flower Garland Sutra*, also known as *Avatamsaka Sutra*, which expresses the idea that the cosmos consists of realms containing realms, infinitely: “All in One, One in All. The All melts into a single whole” (Dumoulin, 1994, p. 47).
9 I believe here the word “universal” (“共通 (gong tong)”) comes from “universality” (“共通性 (gong tong xing)”), thus the translation.

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