# *Transcriptive Actions*: proposal for a systematic analysis of musical transcription

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**Abstract**
In this article, we introduce the concept of *transcriptive actions* as a foundation for a systematic analysis of musical works or specific passages that have undergone a process of transcription. Given the various meanings that the term "transcription" encompasses, we focus on the notion of taking a pre-existing work to give it a new form, which includes ideas such as arrangement, adaptation, reinterpretation, rewriting, among others. We present the purposes and possibilities of musical transcription, which, among our proposals, emerges as a tool that explores diverse perspectives and, in this sense, can play a role in analyzing and enhancing the understanding of transcribed works. Finally, we define and categorize transcriptive actions into three classes—namely, adaptation, parallelism, and recomposition—promoting connections among the domains of composition, analysis, orchestration, instrumentation, and arrangement.

**Keyword:** music transcription; transcriptive actions; systematic analysis; arrangement; re-writing.

## 1. Introduction: Terminological Frontiers

*Transcription, adaptation, reduction, arrangement,* and *reinterpretation* are among the commonly used terms to describe *transcriptive actions* in music. Analyzing these practices reveals that, while each term has distinct meanings, they also exhibit significant overlaps as creative approaches to engaging with pre-existing works. The complexity of studying these practices presents challenges, even when focusing on a single term. Examining *transcription*, for instance, exposes the inherent polysemy of the term and highlights how its meanings vary across historical contexts, languages, and specific settings.

Luciano Berio is one of the composers who engaged deeply with the concept of transcription. Through his writings, lectures, and interviews (Berio, 1988; 2006; 2017), he developed a broad and nuanced perspective on this musical practice. Berio identifies multiple

dimensions of transcription: musical notation, which transcribes sounds into graphic symbols; musical performance, which transcribes compositional thoughts into actions and sounds; discourse about music, which transcribes musical impressions into verbal text; the musicalization of texts, which transcribes stories, emotions, and impressions into music; and, finally, music that transcribes other music (i.e., works that engage in a dialogical interaction with one another) (see Vasconcelos, 2023). Berio primarily focuses on the last dimension, which constitutes the central theme of this study.

Echoing Berio's thought, we employ the term transcription as an "umbrella term" encompassing diverse activities in which a transcriber transforms a pre-existing work into a new instrumental form, with or without significant structural changes (Vasconcelos; Maia, 2022). This approach includes terminologies such as arrangement, adaptation, orchestration, paraphrase, reworking, recomposition, re-creation, and (re)instrumentation, among others.

In an interview with Rossana Dalmonte in the 1980s, Berio remarked that the history of transcription had yet to be told (Berio, 1988, p. 100). He expressed interest in teaching courses on this subject, proposing a potential historical trajectory for such a discipline. Beginning with Claudio Monteverdi, this trajectory would encompass works by Johann Sebastian Bach, Franz Liszt, Ferruccio Busoni, and others, culminating in Berio's compositions and those of his contemporaries, such as Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Igor Stravinsky.

By stating that a history remains untold, Berio underscores both the lack of systematic studies on the topic up to that point and the vast field awaiting exploration from musicological and creative perspectives—a field that remains largely uncharted.

Although theoretical contributions to this area have emerged in recent years (e.g., Sciarrino, 2001; Ferraz, 2008; Pereira, 2011; Szendy, 2016), they often introduce a proliferation of terms and meanings without achieving broad consensus. For example, Flávia Pereira (2011) and Peter Szendy (2016) explore distinctions between arrangement and transcription, drawing from dictionaries and other references. Pereira suggests *reelaboration* as a broad term encompassing adaptation, arrangement, transcription, paraphrase, orchestration, and reduction.

The terminological complexity is further amplified by the diverse terms employed by composers and transcribers (or their editors). Similar processes are often labeled differently, while distinct processes may share the same designation. For instance, classifying an orchestral version of a piano piece as an adaptation, arrangement, or transcription may all seem plausible. Similarly, a piano version of an orchestral work might fit these terms as well. While the degree of transformation involved may vary, these distinctions rarely serve as consistent criteria for differentiation. Some composers have even introduced new terms to describe unique transformations of prior works. For instance, Salvatore Sciarrino prefers the term *elaboration* over transcription, emphasizing the creative element of the process (Sciarrino, 2001, p. 200). Likewise, Silvio Ferraz uses *rewriting* to describe a process of

invention driven by imagination, which he defines as "crossing a music with an idea alien to it" (Ferraz, 2008, p. 47). Boulez, cited by Dufour and Rens (2014, p. 124), employs *proliferation* to describe the creative processes underlying the orchestral versions of certain pieces from *Douze Notations*, originally composed for piano.

Considering these examples and broader trends, this study aims to analyze and classify transformative actions in creating new versions of musical works, referred to here as *transcriptive actions*. We propose analyzing segments of works individually and identifying localized actions (even when the same action persists throughout a transcription). This approach allows for the study of transcriptions—whether entire works or specific sections—without being constrained by traditional terms such as arrangement, paraphrase, adaptation, or instrumentation, which often lack precise definitions or fail to fully encompass the diverse procedures involved.

To present our approach, we will first discuss the roles of transcription, reflecting on its historical and contemporary uses. Next, we will explore the possibilities and limitations of transcription as a practice. Finally, we will propose a taxonomy of transcriptive actions, aiming to delineate interrelated boundaries that facilitate the study and conceptualization of transcription as a creative process.

## 2. Roles of Transcription

Transcriptions fulfill a variety of purposes, including homage, concert adaptations, virtuosic paraphrases, and more. Their roles are well-documented, studied, and debated within the literature (Pauset, 2016, p. 131). This discussion highlights specific functions of transcription: expanding instrumental repertoire, disseminating works and composers, and serving as outcomes of creativity and analytical effort.

Berio (1988, 2006, 2017) underscores the pivotal role of transcription in the historical development of musical language. He observes that *"the practice of transcribing the parts from a vocal polyphony for a solo instrument (the lute, for example) was fundamental in the process of giving birth to accompanied melody"* (Berio, 2006, p. 34). In other words, transcriptions aimed at expanding instrumental repertoires, such as those for the lute and vihuela, contributed to transformative changes in musical thought, including the emergence of homophony. Similarly, the concept of instrumental music after the Renaissance can also be traced to transcriptions of vocal works. For instance, *canzoni da sonar*, instrumental transcriptions of French chansons in the mid-16th century, provided the foundation for early Baroque sonatas (Kiefer, 1987, p. 76).

Berio further highlights other significant roles of transcription. For instance, piano reductions and arrangements for small chamber ensembles served purposes akin to recordings by enabling performances of large-scale works in domestic settings or smaller

venues. Such transcriptions also facilitated the exchange of ideas among composers across different countries, as they made scores more accessible for study and performance. Berio recalls discovering the works of Joseph Haydn and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart by playing four-hand piano transcriptions with his father—a more active and engaging way of appreciating and studying music compared to merely listening to recordings (Berio, 2017, p. 366).

The transcriptions made for the Society for Private Musical Performances in the early 20th century exemplify this trend. Works by Claude Debussy, Johann Strauss II, and Gustav Mahler were transcribed to accommodate reduced ensembles and smaller performance spaces. Even today, transcriptions are created to adapt instrumental forces to limited resources or to enable performances with fewer musicians. For example, Roland Freisitzer has transcribed Béla Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra* (2018) and Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier Suite* (2019) for small ensembles.

"Reductions" also play a role in facilitating rehearsal processes. Soloists (singers or instrumentalists) and conductors can prepare performances individually or in smaller groups without the need for a full ensemble. Moreover, these reductions often become standalone performance pieces. For instance, it is common to hear concertos for soloist and orchestra performed in transcription for solo instrument and piano.

Transcriptions for piano, particularly those by Franz Liszt based on symphonic works, demonstrate another important role: contributing to the evolution of instrumental technique. These virtuosic transcriptions not only became integral to the piano repertoire but also facilitated musical exchange and enriched interpretative practices (Berio, 2006, p. 39; Roberge, 1993).

In pedagogical contexts, simplified transcriptions are instrumental in teaching musical instruments. They provide early learners with accessible repertoire, promoting technical development and expanding the scope of works available to beginners. For example, Haydn's *Douze Pièces Faciles* includes simplified piano versions of excerpts and themes from his orchestral works.

This practice aligns with the Suzuki Method, which emphasizes the progressive learning of instrumental technique through traditional Western repertoire (Barber, 1991). Originally designed for violin, the Suzuki Method uses transcriptions of works by Johann Sebastian Bach, Robert Schumann, Georg Philipp Telemann, Ludwig van Beethoven, Johannes Brahms, Antonín Dvořák, and others. Presented in progressively challenging arrangements, these transcriptions engage students with classical repertoire while fostering technical growth.

For the pedagogy of musical composition, transcription can be an effective tool to stimulate and practice creativity, beyond being a study object. The study and practice of transcriptions can aid in developing creative thinking. By examining an original work and its transformation (the transcription), students can deduce techniques, identify significant aspects, assign semantic values, and explore dialogical relationships between composers, works, and

periods. Going deeper, transcription practice can help shape a composer's identity. Silvio Ferraz (in Menezes, 2015, p. 223) notes that Bach would not exist (or at least would not be the same, we might argue) without "all the work he did early in his career, transcribing Italian concertos for harpsichord—transcribing seven or eight concertos by Vivaldi, then by Marcello, reworking all that harmony."

If we consider copying as the most basic form of transcription, as Berio (2006, p. 35) suggested, we can add that much of Bach's compositional inspiration came from his copies of works by Georg Friedrich Handel, Antonio Vivaldi, and Dieterich Buxtehude, as recalled by his wife, Anna Magdalena Bach (1938, p. 93).

Berio (2006, p. 39) argues that, beyond being a learning act, transcription can also be seen as an act of love for another's work. This is how he explains his motivation for transcribing pieces by Franz Schubert and Gustav Mahler. Viewed this way, transcription can exceed certain passions. Alternatively, it takes on a dialogical role that extends connections from the individual to the collective; by uncovering a composer's preferences, creative links are revealed, offering investigation points about compositional decisions throughout a career.

Berio elaborates on other reasons for his transcriptions, saying, "With my *Chemins* and *Rendering*, there were profound musical reasons. But sometimes, I simply want to make a friend happy. Violists and clarinetists often lamented the lack of repertoire with orchestra. This was why I orchestrated Brahms's Sonata"[1] (Berio, 2017, p. 330).

At this point, the composer mentions the purpose of pleasing a friend but also highlights how transcription can address repertoire scarcity for specific instruments or ensembles. This role is evident in adapting works for ancient instruments (rare, little-used, or extinct) to modern ones, as happened with the piano repertoire (which absorbed many harpsichord pieces and works for other keyboard instruments). Similarly, transcriptions allow performers of more recent instruments to experience important works from the past, enabling active engagement with music from earlier periods. This happens with transcriptions of Baroque works for saxophones, for example.

Another point raised by Berio is that transcriptions, like *Chemins*, can arise from "profound musical reasons." The composer noted that he used *Chemins* to "develop elements of the solo parts that could not be fully explored with a single instrument" (Berio, 2017, p. 328). This highlights transcription as a creative manifestation in music, with independent artistic purposes, capable of pushing the language forward by revisiting and reinterpreting existing repertoire.

In this way, transcription can revitalize a work in a different context from its origin, fostering new dialogues and reaching new spheres of the creative process. At the same time, it can function as a form of "listening writing": "a listening that does not settle for merely

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[1] It is the Clarinet (or Viola) Sonata, Op. 120, No. 1.

receiving or perceiving works, but incorporates them, giving them, through a new instrumental body, the experience of their resistance" (Szendy, 2016, p. 15).

Another purpose worth noting, supported by Berio's thinking, is transcription as a means of "commenting on and assimilating elements from past and external experiences" (Berio, 2006, p. 39). "Commenting" refers to an analytical process, while "assimilating" suggests studying and forming frameworks with which composers engage and dialogue during their creative process. According to Berio, "transcription always implies an analytical act" (Berio, 2017, p. 367).

This analytical process reveals subtleties about both the transcribed work and the transcriber, who imprints the new version with objective and subjective elements that can provide valuable insights into musicology, including creative processes and human/musician dynamics within society. Combined with the humanities, especially the philosophy of language, transcription becomes an important text, particularly when "text is broadly conceived as any coherent set of signs" (Bakhtin, 2016, p. 71). Mikhail Bakhtin states, "The science of the arts (musicology, the theory and history of visual arts) operates with texts (works of art). They are thoughts about thoughts, experiences about experiences, words about words, texts about texts" (Bakhtin, 2016, p. 71).

What are musical transcriptions if not, explicitly, thoughts about thoughts, experiences about experiences, texts about texts? From similar reflections, Berio (1988, p. 69) engages with ideas from Hanns Eisler, who suggested that Mozart was uneducated because "from his earliest childhood, he studied only music and could learn nothing else." Berio uses this comment to critique certain tendencies in musicology and musical criticism that "deny music autonomy and intellectual authority" and implicitly "deny that human thought, in its highest and most conscious forms, can also express itself musically." By opposing these tendencies, the Italian composer ascribes epistemological and ontological roles to musical works and the entire process of music-making.

Considering this, transcription, as analysis and commentary, but above all as a dialogical attitude of musical creation, connects not only to the transformed piece but also to creative processes, musical contexts, the nature of instruments, composers, and the humanities. For Berio (2006, p. 49), anything can be musically conceptualized.

Similarly, Salvatore Sciarrino argues that transcribing means "exercising a critical activity of appropriation and recreation using the tools of a composer" (Curinga, 2008: 347). When analyzing or commenting on another's work, the italian composer humorously (according to our perception) declares that if he were a musicologist, he would write an essay; being a composer, his product is musical—he writes a piece (apud Curinga, 2008: 348). Along these lines, he poses a provocative question: "What fruits might musicological awareness produce when combined with the courage to imagine?" (Sciarrino, 2001, p. 200).

Transcriptions can musically reveal analytical, creative, and opinion-based perspectives. This is evident in Sciarrino's commentary on his transcription of Scarlatti:

> For me, Domenico Scarlatti sometimes writes Beethovenian pieces. Thus, in my transcriptions for string quartet, I highlight this characteristic, not only through the choice of instrumentation but also through adaptations in the writing (Sciarrino apud Curinga, 2008, p. 348, our translation)[2].

The idea that Scarlatti writes with Beethovenian elements might seem anachronistic, but the transcriber's subjective perceptions, shaped by an instrumental formation typical of classicism, bring forth the latent dialogue between the two composers (Scarlatti-Beethoven) and also between them and Sciarrino himself. This results in an artistic work that combines musicological and compositional insights about these three interlocutors.

Following similar reasoning, Berio concludes that for a composer, "the best way to analyze and comment on something is to create something using the materials.

## 3. The Viability of Transcription

In one of his lectures, Berio states that certain musical works resist transcription. Among these, he includes *Jeux* by Debussy, *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta* by Bartók, *Le Marteau sans Maître* by Boulez, among others, for which transcription would be "improper or even destructive act" (Berio, 2006, p. 38).

In these cited works, we perceive that timbre emerges as a highly valued and identity-defining compositional element, and we agree that simple instrumental transformation might fail to capture essential properties. However, there are other aspects to consider in transcription. Even if it "destroys" certain pillars of the original work, new foundations and perspectives on compositional elements can certainly be constructed, generating a kind of "constructive demolition," as Berio (2006, p. 45) expressed regarding the transcription process.

Moreover, it is important to consider the intrinsic role of transcription, whether for dissemination or study, which can justify approaches considered "destructive". An illustrative example is the piano duo reduction of *Five Orchestral Pieces* by Arnold Schoenberg, created by Anton Webern in 1913. In this transcription, Webern deliberately renounces the broad range of timbres crucial to the original work, especially in moments of *Klangfarbenmelodie*, such as in *Farben* and *Vergangenes*. This choice was likely aimed at a broader dissemination of his mentor's work.

Regarding his own work, Berio states that the *Sequenzas*, such as the ones for piano or trombone, do not need to become *Chemins* (Berio, 2017, p. 329), i.e., transcribed into the concertante form of soloist and instrumental ensemble. Paul Roberts, who emphasized the importance of the *Chemins* as a research source for analyzing the *Sequenzas*, claims that

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[2] Original: "secondo me Domenico Scarlatti scrive a volte pezzi 'beethoveniani': allora nel trascriverli per quartetto d'archi rendo evidente questa caratteristica, non solo con la scelta dell'organico, ma anche con gli adattamenti della scrittura" (Sciarrino *apud* Curinga, 2008: 348).

"Berio only created Chemins where there was material to be expanded" (Roberts, 2007, p. 117). But where might there not be materials to expand? Or rather, are there materials so fully realized that they resist transformation?

Sciarrino (apud Curinga, 2008, p. 348) proposes that the first step in creating a transcription is to find in the piece to be transcribed a potential that the transcriber will bring to light, envisioning what the piece can become rather than clinging to what it already is. As the composer adds, "the gradations of transcription are infinite" (Sciarrino, 2001, p. 200).

The multiplicity of possibilities can be observed in the various transcriptions of the *Chaconne* from *Partita No. 2* (BWV 1004) by J.S. Bach. The piece exists in numerous versions: solo violin (original), versions for violin with piano accompaniment (Robert Schumann, Felix Mendelssohn), a version for solo piano (Ferruccio Busoni), as left-hand piano study (Johannes Brahms), several versions for guitar (such as that by Andrés Segovia), a version for violin and four voices (Helga Thoene), at least two orchestral versions (Alfredo Casella; Leopold Stokowski), among many other more or less widely known transcriptions. In the field of language philosophy, Bakhtin states that "the text can never be completely translated; there is no singular text of texts" (Bakhtin, 2016, p. 76). Given the above example, Bakhtin's assertion can also be understood as true for musical transcriptions: as an inexhaustible source for creation, with diverse purposes and many levels.

Although certain works may offer greater resistance, there are purposes, potentials, means, and tools that justify transcription. It is Berio himself (2006, p. 45) who asserts that transcription "seems to delve into the very core of the formative process" of a given work, enabling the "transcriber to assume total and complete responsibility for the structural definition of the work." Therefore, it is up to the transcriber to outline the role of their work and take appropriate actions to highlight the potentialities they perceive. From this perspective, there seem to be no obstacles to transcription.

## 4. Transcriptive Actions

In this section, we propose a systematic analysis of musical transcriptions, focusing on the exploration and interpretation of what we define as "transcriptive actions," which operate in the transformation of musical materials. Situated within a creative spectrum, these transcriptive actions are subjective and varied, encompassing a wide range of musical parameters, such as harmony, density, texture, dynamics, rhythm, and timbre. Our analytical framework categorizes these actions into three distinct groups: (1) *Transcriptive Actions of Adaptation* (ATA – *Ações Transcritivas de Adaptação*): These aim to organically transfer original elements into the new version, involving adjustments in tempo, articulation, dynamics, and other aspects. (2) *Transcriptive Actions of Parallelism* (ATP – *Ações Transcritivas de Paralelismo*): In these, the transcriber creates new materials that overlap with or juxtapose the originals, such as

counterpoints, reharmonizations, and texture modifications. (3) Transcriptive Actions of Recomposition (ATR – *Ações Transcritivas de Recomposição*): These are used to generate new ideas by reworking the original materials through variations, expansions, and contractions. These groups are not mutually exclusive and may coexist within the same work.

We recognize that the examples presented here represent only a fraction of the broad range of possibilities. Therefore, our aim is not to provide a conclusive study but to offer a starting point and an invitation for further exploration. To this end, we seek to diversify the examples across periods, genres, and styles, extending our reach into the vast territory of transcription.

## 4.1 TRANSCRIPTIVE ACTIONS OF ADAPTATION (ATA)

Transcriptive Actions of Adaptation (ATA) aim to preserve the original elements as much as possible while ensuring an organic transfer to the new version. The most basic cases involve the exact transposition of pitches, durations, dynamics, and articulations into new timbres. An example of this "basic case" can be found in György Kurtág's transcription of *O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig* by J.S. Bach for two pianos (1958), originally composed for organ, where this principle is consistently applied throughout the work.



Figure 1. Beginning of *O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig,* original for organ (Bach)
and transcription for two pianos (Kurtág).

However, ATA often involves additional processes that adapt the original materials to the realities, possibilities, and idiomatic characteristics of the new instrumental ensemble. These processes do not aim to create structural elements but rather to preserve, enhance, and interpret aspects inherent to the original. They can be classified into three subclasses.

The first subclass, *expressive Transcriptive Actions of Adaptation—expressiveness* (ATA-E), concerns changes in tempo, articulation, agogics, dynamics, and other actions, such as instrumental techniques related to the new formation. It pertains to a transcriber's efforts to imprint their interpretative/expressive vision, either by adding indications where absent or replacing existing ones.

For instance, a simple example of ATA-E is the addition of metronome markings. Even when the original specifies tempo markings precisely, a transcriber may alter them to achieve better adaptation or meet expressive needs. George Benjamin's orchestral transcription of *Piano Figures* (first piece, *Dance Figures*) exemplifies this: the original tempo marking "eighth note circa 80" was reduced to "eighth note at 66," accompanied by the term *semplice*.

Anton Webern, in his orchestral version of the *Ricercare a 6 voci* from Bach's *Musical Offering*, recognized for its use of *Klangfarbenmelodie*, not only works with timbres but also significantly enriches the score with dynamic indications, articulations (accents, slurs, staccato, etc.), and agogics (*rubato*, *poco e molto allargando*, *poco e molto ritardando*, *fließender*, *wieder sehr ruhig*, etc.), which become as essential to this transcription as the tone color melody itself.

Within ATA-E, there are also transformations arising from the technical resources of the instrument or instrumental group for which the work is transcribed. These may be due to physiological reasons for the performer, characteristics of the instrument(s), or even expressive purposes. Figure 2, for example, shows an excerpt from the third movement of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* (1863) and the piano transcription by Liszt (Beethoven; Liszt, 1922). In the original, the notes of the chord are to be played simultaneously; however, in Liszt's transcription, an arpeggio symbol is introduced, likely for expressive reasons rather than due to any difficulty or impossibility in playing the chord in block form on the piano. It is plausible that the slow tempo and the intention to emphasize the upper voice motivated this articulation choice.



Figure 2. Use of arpeggio as an expressive resource (ATA-E) in Liszt's transcription of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*.

In Figure 3—also an excerpt from the third movement of the *Ninth Symphony*—the same technique is employed. In this case, although exceptions may exist, the intervallic distance of an eleventh (F–B♭) is generally not playable simultaneously with one hand on the piano, making the use of the arpeggio necessary.



Figure 3. Comparison of a passage from Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* and its piano transcription by Liszt. Use of arpeggio due to technical necessity for executing wide intervals (ATA-E).

Octave transpositions or transpositions to other intervals (which, in tonal music, for example, implies a change of key) are frequently used techniques that define another subgroup: *transcriptive adaptation actions-transpositions* (ATA-T). Transpositions commonly occur when a piece is adapted for an instrument (including voice) or instrumental group whose range of possible pitches differs from the original and cannot accommodate certain notes.

Many songs offer examples of transcriptions involving key changes to adjust for tessitura. In guitar repertoire—often featuring transcriptions of works originally written for other instruments such as the lute (or its relatives) and violin—transpositions of keys or simple octave shifts in certain notes are common. This acknowledges that the guitar, as a transposing instrument, sounds an octave lower than written and, even then, lacks the full lower range of lutes or theorbos[3]. Similarly, compared to the violin, playing in the same high registers is not feasible. Pieces for violin transcribed for viola or cello for double bass frequently involve ATA-T as well. For example, *Trema* by Heinz Holliger, originally composed for viola, has versions for both violin and cello.

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[3] Considering the most common guitar, the six-string guitar.

The third subclassification, *transcriptive adaptation actions-density* (ATA-D), concerns density—that is, the number of pitches involved in a given passage before and after transcription. Sometimes, transcription necessitates removing notes; conversely, it can involve adding notes. Transcriptions for piano often omit notes for practical reasons, while orchestral transcriptions typically add pitches increasing the score's density vertically. This is illustrated in Figure 4, which shows measure 65 of Igor Stravinsky's transcription for chamber orchestra of the song *Aus Goethe's Faust*4 (Beethoven; Stravinsky, 1913) from Beethoven's *Sechs Gesänge op. 75* (1863).
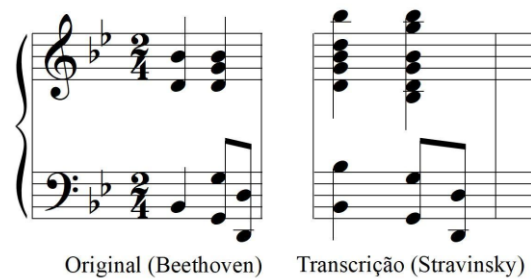


Figure 4. ATA-D. Increase in the number of pitches in Stravinsky's orchestral transcription.

Horizontal density adjustments are also possible, as seen in Ravel's orchestration of *Pavane pour une infante défunte*, where piano arpeggios are replaced with harp glissandi, reflecting idiomatic writing for each instrument (fig. 5).
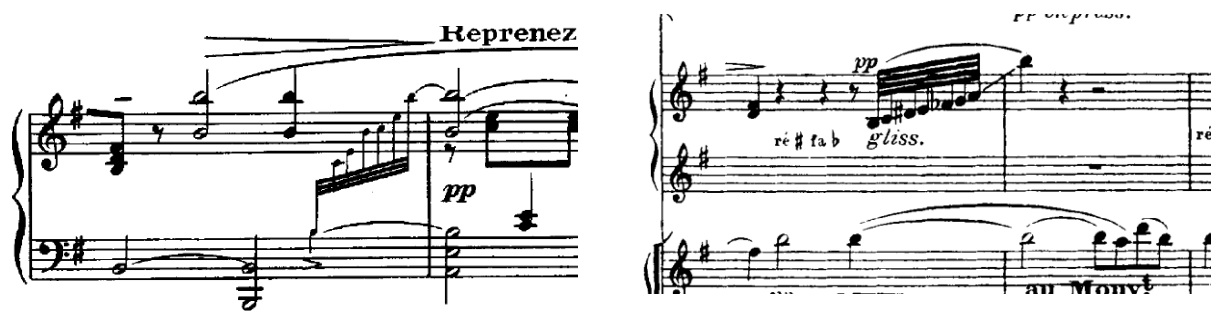


Figura 5. ATA-D. Aumento da quantidade de alturas de modo horizontal
na versão orquestral da *Pavane pour une enfante défunte* de Ravel (1899, 1910).

An illustrative case of ATA-D combined with ATA-T is Bach's transcription of the cantata *Ich steh mit einem Fuß im Grabe* (BWV 156) into the second movement of the *Concerto No. 5 for Harpsichord* (BWV 1056). The new version adds ornamentation to sustain notes originally held by the oboe, compensating for the harpsichord's shorter sustain. Additionally, the key is transposed from F major to A-flat major.

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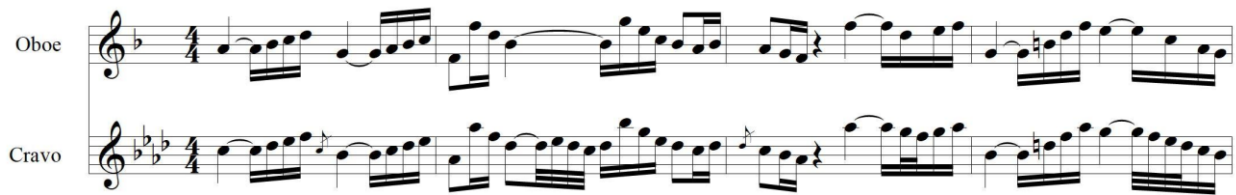4 Also publicated as *Es war einmal ein König* ou *Mephistopheles' Lied vom Floh*.

Figure 6. ATA-D. Increase in density through written ornamentation (BWV 156 and BWV 1056).

Baroque composers often granted performers freedom for ornamentation; however, Bach and Telemann initiated a trend toward more precise notation to avoid undesired interpretations. Such transcriptive actions, as demonstratred in figura 6, contribute to momentary densification.

The transcription for guitar (by Isaias Savio, 1956) of Schubert's *Ave Maria* (D. 839, Op. 52, No. 6, originally for voice and piano) employs all three types of ATA: the key change, from B-flat major to G major (ATA-T), which allows for better accommodation of the melody and accompaniment on the guitar, according its tuning; rarefaction (ATA-D), because maintaining certain intervals in the accompaniment would make performance impractical; and the tremolo technique (ATA-E), which uses speed in iterative sounds to emulate the long notes of the original vocal part.



Figure 7. Use of all three types of ATA in the same work.

## 4.2 Transcriptive Actions of Parallelism (ATP)

*Transcriptive actions of parallelism* (ATP) are those in which the transcriber creates materials and superimposes or juxtaposes them with the originals. These are actions that place the composer and the transcriber (even if they are the same person) side by side, but still distinct, in the creation process. They primarily occur in the form of counterpoint, reharmonization, texture change (from monophony to homophony, homophony to polyphony, etc.), change of genre, and the addition or interpolation of parts (such as introductions, interludes, intersections, and postludes, for example).

The first ATPs, which we call *transcriptive actions of parallelism-superposition* (ATP-S), are those in which the transcriber creates counterpoints or other types of overlapping ideas within the preexisting material. These usually occur in parallel with ATA, meaning that in the transcription, the original structures are transposed to a new instrumental formation while new materials, created by the transcriber, orbit around those that have already been adapted.

Max Reger (1914), in his transcription of An die Musik, Op. 88 No. 4 by Schubert (1895), in addition to orchestrating the Austrian composer's song using ATA, composes counter-melodies, which can be observed at the beginning of the work in the oboe. In figure 8, we can observe a passage from the original version (voice and piano) with the oboe counter-melodies that only exist in the orchestral version. These new interventions qualify as ATP-S.



Figure 8. Excerpt from *An die Musik* for piano and voice (original) by Schubert, with the oboe part added by Reger in his orchestral transcription.

Echoes, sonic shadows, and certain heterophonies can also be categorized within this subclassification. The series *Chemins* by Berio presents several examples of these transcriptive actions. The *Chemins* generally maintain the soloist part, originally composed as a *Sequenza*, without alterations, while the orchestral (or instrumental group) part performs "an exposition and

an amplification of what is implicit, hidden, so to speak, in the solo part" (Berio, 2006, p. 42). According to Berio (2006, p. 44), in the *Chemins*, the instrumental group at certain moments "functions as a chamber of echoes." Berio (2006, p. 41) invites us to envision a concert piece where the "soloist coexists with their own image reflected and transcribed in the orchestra, which can become a type of mirror of distortion and amplification", as exemplified in *Chemins IV* (BERIO, 1975), a transcription of *Sequenza VII* for oboe. In the passage below (fig. 9), the pitches present in the oboe gesture are revisited in the violins with different rhythm and new configuration.



Figure 9: Excerpt from Chemins IV: Orchestral "echoes" derived from the *Sequenza* for oboe.

In Berio's discourse, the composer also considers the possibilities of transcriptions being achieved through computer-assisted creation (Berio, 2006, p. 41). Following this line of thought, we can also consider as an interesting form of ATP-S acoustic works that later receive an electroacoustic part. A notable example is found in Boulez's *Anthèmes*, for solo violin, upon which the composer himself (assisted by the IRCAM team) creates a version for violin and electronic device (pour violon et dispositif électronique) called *Anthèmes II* (Boulez, 1997).

ATP-S initiatives can also directly affect the texture. A significant number of Lutheran chorales, extensively explored by Bach, originated from older, often popular, melodies that, following Martin Luther's reformist ideal, not only received new sacred texts (contrafactum) but also new four-voice textures. The creation of an accompanying piano part by Robert Schumann for Bach's *Sonata No. 1 for solo violin* brings together monophonic and polyphonic moments, typical of Romantic melodies with accompaniment. The iconic *Syrinx* for solo flute by Debussy, essentially monophonic, becomes homophony with the piano accompaniment composed by Daniel Kelley.

In parallel with texture, ATPs can affect genre in the broadest sense of the term. Berio's transcription of some Beatles pieces demonstrates this potential interference of ATP. For the song *Michelle*, for example, Berio creates two versions: the first transforms the English rock, typically homophonic, into polyphony, explicitly evoking Baroque characteristics; the second brings a denser harmony, typical of 20th-century avant-garde music, challenging the tonal nature of Paul McCartney's original melody. Similarly, Heitor Villa-Lobos' *Cirandas* take

children's folk songs and overlay harmonies (using modalism, polytonalism, and pandiatonism) while subjecting them to the pianism characteristic of the Brazilian composer's modernist style.

The transcription for string quartet by Stefano Gervasoni of *Recercar Cromaticho post il Credo* by Girolamo Frescobaldi is a prominent example of ATP. In this transcription, one can hear not only the two composers in parallel but also two historical periods often overlaid. Gervasoni seems to highlight the potential of non-tonal harmonies hidden in Frescobaldi, superimposing them on the original harmonies.

A similar process occurs in Hans Zender's transcription of Schubert's *Winterreise* Lieder cycle. Regarding his creative process, Zender explains that he sought the "systematic use of freedoms that each performer normally grants themselves," working with agogic elements, timbres, and pitches: "in my version, all these possibilities are subject to a compositional discipline and thus form autonomous formal processes that overlap with the original Schubertian material" (Zender, 2016, p. 93). The creative parallelism that Zender proposes leads him to subtitle his version as "a compositional interpretation" (Eine Komponierte Interpretation). The *Winterreise* by Schubert/Zender also presents examples of another type of ATP. This other subclassification of ATP—*transcriptive actions of parallelism-juxtaposition* (ATP-J)—includes creative processes that act on structure, adding, rearranging, replacing, or removing parts. The addition occurs when sections are created that overlap pre-existing structures (whether earlier, later, or interspersed), but which are clearly subordinated to the original material.

For Zender (2016, p. 93), the process of adding freely invented sounds to pre-existing music—such as "preludes, postludes, interludes, or games of simultaneities ('simultene Zuspiele')"—are actions that find parallels in the history of musical performance, especially recalling that "great pianists at the beginning of the [20th] century liked to improvise transitions from one piece to another in their programs." In the first piece of *Winterreise*, *Gute Nacht*, in Zender's version, there is an introduction absent from the original; in the second, *Die Wetterfahne*, he creates an interlude based on wind-like sounds from the woodwinds, a technique unusual in the Classical period.

Liszt also provides interesting examples of ATP-J. In his *Études d'exécution transcendante d'après Paganini*, the composer performs various types of transcriptive actions. In the first piece, *Étude No. 1 in G minor*, Liszt transcribes Paganini's *Caprice No. 6* (originally for violin) into piano. However, he adds an introduction (prelude) and a coda based on the end of Paganini's *Caprice No. 5* from the same collection. That is, the Hungarian composer, through various transcriptive actions, transcribes *Caprice No. 5*, which, in turn, becomes ATP-J for the transcription of *Caprice No. 6*.

Charles Gounod presents both types of ATP in his *Ave Maria*, which is a transcription of the *Prelude in C major* from the first book of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* (Das wohltemperierte Klavier) by Bach. First, the act of creating a melody over Bach's prelude is ATP-S, which

consequently transforms the texture from arpeggios into a homophonic texture. Second, in his version, Gounod uses the "Schwencke measure," an additional measure to Bach's original, and repeats the first four measures as an introduction. These additions characterize ATP-J.

Transcriptions in popular music are mostly filled with ATP. To comment on a particular feature of popular music, it is important to note that the original version is already presented with an arrangement[5]. It is common in popular music, when preparing for a recording or performance, for an arranger (who may be the composer themselves, a producer, or a group of musicians involved in the project) to create introductions, counter-melodies, interludes, and coordinate the actions of participating instrumentalists (all of which are ATP), with the melody being the only original element. Furthermore, in a new version, new introductions, counter-melodies, interludes, reorganization of sections, creation or alteration of percussion lines, as well as reharmonizations and changes in tonality (ATA), can occur, alongside ornamentation of the melody itself (ATA), among other transcriptive actions.

In most songbooks, it is common to find only the melody and chord symbols (*Lead sheet*) as the "complete" record of the song. For example, the song *Construção* by Chico Buarque, as shown in figure 10, leaves out the imposing arrangement by Rogério Duprat made for the original recording. Thus, this arrangement could be considered a transcription that consistently involves ATP, but so is the version by Oswaldo Montenegro, which transforms the same song into a typical minstrel and troubadour-style song, with the melody sung monophonically (the harmony is omitted) and interspersed with small instrumental interventions (a type of responsive/call-and-response texture). Moreover, Montenegro's version also removes the introduction, which is also part of ATP-J.



Figure 10. Example of a lead sheet for *Construção* by Chico Buarque. Based on Buarque, 1999.

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[5] Although we have avoided using certain terminologies up to this point, we adopt the word "arrangement" here in its most generic sense, primarily as it is understood in the context of popular music.

## 4.3 TRANSCRIPTIVE ACTIONS OF RECOMPOSITION (ATR)

Now we will discuss the third type of transcriptive actions, the *transcriptive actions of recomposition* (ATR). At this point, the original materials are reworked as generators of new ideas, leading to new developments (variation, expansion, contraction, reiteration... and the blending of these processes), all of which can still be superimposed onto new ideas that can no longer be identified as ATP. In this way, ATRs can overshadow the original, making its immediate recognition difficult, or divert its note-by-note relationship with the transcription. Seen from this perspective, there is no parallelism but rather an amalgamation in which the transcriber comes to the forefront, as they engage in new compositional processes on preexisting materials.

In this sense, ATRs can be allied with a portion of the concept of *rewriting* proposed by Ferraz (2008). Although this concept can have complex developments (which intersect, merge, and diverge from the idea of transcription proposed here), we will address it in its most generalized form and focus on certain rewriting processes as ATR:

> In general terms, rewriting is simply taking a passage of music from another composer, a phrase, a harmonic sequence, a timbre, and copying it irregularly, dragging the notes to the wrong places, making small or large delays and anticipations, stretching some passages (Ferraz, 2008, p. 50).

In other words, ATRs still allow for dissections, desynchronizations, alterations, expansions, or contractions, but also a kind of reopening of the compositional process that acts on the foundational ideas of previous works (either foreign or self-composed). In our view, the idea of rewriting is usually realized through transcriptive actions, particularly ATRs, as we can observe in the analysis Ferraz (2018) makes of his *Verônica Nadir*, written like a type of palimpsest that housed motets by Manuel Dias de Oliveira (Ferraz, 2018, p. 195). "It is mainly from Berio that I recover the notion of rewriting," says the Brazilian composer (Ferraz; Teixeira, 2008, p. 49).

One of the works with the greatest emphasis on ATRs is Boulez's *Notations for Orchestra*, a transcription from his *Douze Notations*. For the composer, the orchestral *Notations* are "originally very short piano pieces, revisited after more than 30 years and developed for orchestra. It is not so much a matter of orchestration, but, as Berio would say, of transcription" (Boulez apud Schiffer, 1981, p. 45). By mentioning Berio, Boulez reveals his familiarity with the deeper reflections of the Italian composer on this theme. According to Berio (2006, p. 45), transcribing can imply "transformation or even abuse of the integrity" of the original musical text. That is, it is possible to relativize (or even desacralize) the finished form of a piece and, in this way, take its elements as generators of different directions, new paths

that can interfere with the overall compositional construction of the work and establish unprecedented configurations and developments.

In Boulez's universe, the notion of transcription intertwines with the idea of *work in progress*. Boulez had as his ideal and maintained the practice of revisiting previous works, giving them new forms (through many ATRs, we might add). For him (Boulez apud Knipper, 2013, p. 80), generally speaking, all his works are "faces of a single central work, of a central concept." The transcription of *Piece VII* from *Douze Notations* for orchestra, for example, reveals much of what we can understand as ATR. In this article, we can only demonstrate part of this due to the complexity and large instrumental scope of the work, but it is important for us to present, even in a simplified form, an immediate example of this work for better fluency in reading this text.



Figure 11. ATR. Proliferation of the interval (B-flat – G) in the orchestral
version of Notation VII (Boulez).

In Figure 11, it is possible to observe how a simple gesture (two notes, B-flat and G) becomes more complex through its expansion both vertically and horizontally, also incorporating resonances, heterophony, and "reiteration with variation". Boulez (apud Dufour; Rens, 2014, p. 124) used the term *proliferation* to describe these creative processes of expansion and recreation, which are notably present in his works. This type of material development, of the "basic ideas", according to the composer, results from essential analytical work, which is also consonant with Berio's thinking on transcription:

> [...] I have what is probably an innate feeling for what one might call the proliferation of basic materials. This means that in general I start off with relatively simple materials; my basic ideas, and even the overall plan of my works, are fairly simple, but of course within the plan there will be very highly developed textures. When I have in front of me a musical idea or a kind of musical expression to be given a particular text of my own invention, I discover in the text, when submitting it to my own kind of analysis and looking at it from every possible angle, more and more possible ways of varying it, transforming it, augmenting it and making it proliferate. For me a musical idea is like a seed which you plant in compost, and suddenly it begins to proliferate like a weed. (Boulez, 1976, p. 15).

According to Boulez, this notion of proliferation dates back to J.S. Bach, particularly in his works involving transformations of Lutheran chorales (Knipper, 2013, p. 78). The reference to Bach as a precursor of this transcription technique leads us to think of several pieces by this composer, among which we highlight the cantata *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* (BWV 80) for this moment. In this example, Bach works on a chorale, considered by many to be the hymn of the Protestant Reformation, whose melody is attributed to Martin Luther. In the first part, the chorale is more "deformed," in the sense that its parts are modified and reorganized, undergoing vertical and horizontal extensions, in transcriptive actions that, as in the *Notations*, can be classified as ATR.

In the cantata *Ein feste Burg*, the environment of Baroque polyphony provides the variation of phrases and superimpositions between variations interspersed with other voices in free counterpoint, but also superimpositions between variations of originally juxtaposed phrases, canonic presentations of themes, exploration of new harmonic regions, among other ATRs.

Figure 12: ATR in the Cantata *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* (BWV 80) by Bach.

As in other cantatas, the final part of *Ein feste Burg* is characterized as a choral movement harmonized in four voices. This shift from the complex to the simple, like a reverse process of proliferation, helps us visualize how the materials from the first part were potentially contained in the choral form presented at the end of the cantata.

## 5. Final Considerations

In this study, we proposed a systematic analysis of musical transcriptions, presenting a new framework for classifying and interpreting them based on their conceptual underpinnings, roles, and the types of actions required to execute them. While this is a vast and largely uncharted field, our analysis sought to provide an overarching perspective, offering a broad classification system intended to support the creation, analysis, and pedagogy of musical transcription.

This work is intrinsically connected to key areas within the study of musical creation, including composition, analysis, and orchestration/instrumentation. Beyond considering transcription as an analytical and creative process in its own right, we advocate for the use of transcriptive actions as pedagogical tools in these domains. Importantly, our conception of

transcription avoids imposing restrictions based on styles, genres, or historical periods, embracing its universal applicability across diverse musical contexts.

Regarding areas yet to be explored, incorporating new works into the scope of analysis may necessitate refining existing classifications or establishing new subcategories. Additionally, there are "indirect forms of transcription" (cf. Berio, 2006, p. 39) that were not addressed in this study. These may involve creating allusions to works and styles or engaging in musical borrowing (Burkholder, 2001) through, and other practices that involve a kind of reported discourse in music. In these cases, transcriptive actions remain a central component.

Finally, we emphasize that, based on this study, we believe any piece of music can be transcribed if approached with appropriate objectives and methods. The aim is not to transcribe the sounds of a piece but rather its underlying idea (Berio, 2006, p. 45). As discussed in this text, the focus lies not on what the work already is but on what it can become (Sciarrino apud Curinga, 2008, p. 348).

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