

## From Image to Sound. Searching for New Parallels and Intersections Between the Visual Arts and Music

The intricate connections between the visual arts and music have been revealed by a plethora of philosophers, as far back as the antiquity. So much of who we are is defined by what we see and hear, and whether we choose to create art through images or sounds, the bonds between these two modes of expression are strong. They are also enigmatic.

Starting with our very first steps learning a language, we seamlessly connect images with sounds. Within the anarchic world of child play, before the rules of life and art are imposed, drawing, architecture, and music are all intertwined. This fertile world is governed by pure ludic pleasure, spontaneity, and unpurposeful playfulness. During childhood, we are all artists and musicians, driven solely by imagination and the pleasures of instant gratification. Only later on, when we learn how to paint or play a musical instrument, we are taught to divide the study of visual arts and music into techniques and styles, periods and systems of valuation, assigning everything and everyone to categories and boxes. Mastering the rules of the canon has remained the promised path to attaining the sublime, it seems. Yet, for children, the arts and the intersections between images and sounds are innocent and harmonious. For us, they seem complex and mysterious. Why is it that the early energies of artistic freedom are all boxed as we grow, until we need to unbundle them back, once we become older and wiser?

Music doesn't come from music. For composers, much more often, the birth of a musical idea carries the desire to express what words cannot. For the epigone, composing music is an exercise. For the artist, it is a transcendental experience. We observe, reflect, and eventually engrave our ideas into sound during a mysterious process that often, we cannot explain ourselves. We wonder what inspiration is, especially when Euterpe is away. As we strive to create unique sonic landscapes, our work is minute at times, concerned with the meticulous shaping of the unseen and its ultimate realization into sound. We are at times watchmakers, working with imaginary mechanisms. But we are also architects, seeking balance and concord. For many of us, music comes from image, which makes us feel like translators without a language, living within an illusive world.

Occasional intersections between image and sound have occurred throughout the last few centuries, when composers aimed to move beyond the realm of absolute music. From the technique of word painting in choral Renaissance works, opera, ballet, program music, Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, to the fascinating world of multimedia, so many composers aimed to bridge music with the visual world and story-telling. Reaching out towards image and the narrative was meant to enhance the musical experience, help it grow, with the ultimate goal of adding new layers of meaning. Yet, like poetry, music thrives on its suggestive powers. It plays with semantics, because meaning in music is so elusive. Regardless of genre or style, musical ideas are represented by everyone's imagination in a variety of unique ways, which fuse together a myriad of personal experiences, emotions, and images.

Quite often, composers create elaborate drawings before starting a new piece. Such sketches describe the general shape of a work, the growth of an idea, changes in texture, volume, or register. In many cases they tend to have a linear aspect, with time passing from left to right. Darker colors generally imply intensity, or a heavier sonic fabric within the piece. Although most of these sketches are of little aesthetic value, they help with the visual representation of sound and the overall design of the work. Composers also talk about the color of sound, especially when describing the unique qualities of orchestral instruments. In fact, in most orchestration books musical timbre is a synonym with sound color, with instruments, strings, and mutes being described as dark, bright, brilliant, well-rounded, and so on. More recently, the variety of microphones and speakers used in electronic music is also associated with colors, in order to provide the composer a more poetic description of specific acoustic properties. Even concert halls are described in this fashion by conductors and performers.

The parallels between painting and music can be constructive, at least as far as the interpretation of visual and sonic objects. There are also quite a few points of intersection. For centuries, in representational painting, the strong bond between reality and the artists' interpretations offered a solid functioning framework. Portraying specific objects, people, and situations offered a solid anchor into reality, with little room for semantic questions. A common ground existed between reality and art, before viewers were called upon to evaluate the artists' skills and imagination. No matter the period, style, or brush technique, in representational paintings, trees are always going to be trees, and hats shall remain hats. Only later on, the question whether a pipe is actually a pipe, was cleverly asked by René Magritte. In similar ways, during the common practice era in music, tonality and motivic development provided a strong foundation for composers. Within this system, the main themes in a composition were musical characters to be identified by the listener and followed on, as they developed. I like to call them sonic objects, because the listener was expected to focus on them and recognize their identity. The use of major and minor keys or binary and ternary meters provided an archetypal foundation for working out contrasting musical characters. Thus, a certain amount of speculative storytelling through music became possible through the use of these specific elements, commonly agreed upon. Together with the growth of representational painting after the Renaissance, tonal music and motivic development blossomed in Europe starting with the Baroque era. In music history, the term "common practice" describes this relatively stable period of about three hundred years, which ended roughly at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As tonality gave way to new musical frameworks, the works of Debussy and Schoenberg were often compared with and placed within the context of impressionism and expressionism. Such a parallel would be a mistake in the case of Debussy, who actually disliked the comparison. By the time Debussy developed his unique compositional style, towards the turn of the century, impressionist painters were no longer in vogue. In fact, a more meaningful connection should be made with symbolist poets, especially Baudelaire and Mallarmé. While the association between Debussy's music and impressionist paintings may have some pedagogical benefits for the amateur music lover, this remains, in my opinion, a classic example of an artificial bridge between the arts.

In the case of Arnold Schoenberg, who was also a painter, the parallel with expressionism has much more substance, especially when looking at his works from the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, prior to the development of the twelve-tone system. Schoenberg's music from this period is tumultuous at times, displaying moments of intense anxiety, and involving unexpected changes of direction and emotion. His paintings exhibit many common features with the expressionist movements originating in Dresden and Munich, so it is quite natural to search for such links. A unique case-study for the relationship between image and sound is the third movement from his *Five Pieces for Orchestra* of 1909, called *Farben* (Colors), a static, non-developmental piece that employs slowly moving chords describing a summer morning by a lake. Later on, Schoenberg developed a new compositional technique called *Klangfarbenmelodie* (sound-color melody), which involves repeated timbre changes within a melodic line. All these multifaceted links between image and sound place Schoenberg at the very center of the organic symbiosis between painting and music.

The freedom to finally challenge the relationship between reality and the visual arts emerged towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as artists moved away from representational art. Picasso, Marc Chagall, and Paul Klee were pioneers, in similar ways with Schoenberg, Webern, and Varèse, a bit later. From the intensity of abstract art and the Second Viennese School in music to the white paintings of Robert Rauschenberg and John Cage's 4'33, many fundamental questions were asked, especially by the artists of the avant-garde. In music, the dissolution of tonality led to the development of new compositional techniques, involving modes, the use of intervals, and the manipulation of textures. Beginning with the 1920s, Schoenberg's twelve-tone system captured the interest of many composers, who started to gradually abandon tonality and motivic writing. In painting, representational art gave way to the appearance of abstract and non-objective art. Regardless of style or technique, painting and music continued to move in parallel ways, as both of them challenged the multiple meanings and interpretations of reality.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, numerous composers attempted to create drawings of their music, as the translation from image to sound was particularly useful when writing textural music. Iannis Xenakis was a mathematician and architect, so he often talked about this process. In the early 1960s, György Ligeti's linear drawings and sketches prior to the composition of *Atmosphères* show the rupture between the high and the low registers in the orchestra. Clearly, his prior experience working with Stockhausen in the electronic studio played an important role, since tape manipulation involves a two-dimensional approach to musical time. Similar connections between image and sound can be found in the scores of John Cage, Krzysztof Penderecki, and Morton Feldman. Witold Lutosławski's unique approach to musical notation, for example, was developed with the help of his wife, Danuta, who was a graphic designer and the daughter of an architect. This is where the visual arts and music intersect in enigmatic ways. This is where, for practical purposes, musicians can become visual artists at times. In fact, many composers, including Mendelssohn, Schoenberg, Gershwin, and Luigi Russolo, were quite accomplished painters themselves. All of them knew how important time is in music, but also understood that with visual arts, having a sense of perspective is paramount.

Olivier Messiaen's system of connecting chords with colors represents a particularly unique chapter in the history of modern music. Contrary to what has been written by uninformed musicologists, Messiaen did not have synesthesia, which is a condition involving the involuntary stimulation of the brain that triggers unintentional links between sounds and colors. Following in the footsteps of Debussy, Messiaen looked at harmony from a completely different angle. As tertian chords and the tension-release constructions from the tonal era were replaced by the use of modes and other intervals, he developed a novel system of composition, which he taught for many decades at the Paris Conservatory. Messiaen's connections between harmony and colors were clearly intentional, and were based on the interaction between intervals within chords, the spacing between voices, and the resonance of these chords in different registers. Although subjective, this remains in my opinion one of the most systematic attempts to connect sound with color in a logical and coherent way. One wonders what would have happened with Scriabin's "keyboard with lights", if he only lived longer.

A unique sense of synergy between the visual arts and music came about in the 1960s, with the proliferation of graphic scores. Through a mix of traditional music notation and drawings, performers were given the freedom to interpret and improvise, thus creating works of music that would sound different with every new performance. These scores ranged from small graphic modifications in George Crumb or Helmut Lachenmann to the use of surreal and abstract drawings in John Cage, Sylvano Bussotti, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Roman Haubenstock-Ramati.

Today, the wide spectrum of bonds between visual arts and music is rich and multifaceted, with numerous painters, architects, and composers continuing to bridge their unique modes of expression. From all the new artistic avenues in front of us, at the beginning of a new millennium, one is particularly promising: multimedia. It is no secret anymore that computer technology is a fascinating new tool for the arts, albeit a fairly dangerous one, which could even enslave our imagination one day. Yet, if we can forge a meaningful and organic connection between our creative instincts and the tools of our time, the possibilities are limitless. For the first time in centuries, we, visual artists and composers have a new companion, ready to help us unravel the enigmatic bonds between what we see and what we hear.

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