

THE SOUNDS OF SILENCE: MY ART AS MUSIC AND MEANING

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Abstract: *This paper presents a brief look at the connection of painting to music, with references to examples of my work and thoughts.*

1 THE ELEMENTS OF PAINTING AND MUSIC

The elements of composition in both painting and music are line, shape, color, tone, and texture: *Line* in music is a sequence of sounds in time. A line in painting can be simply an extended, narrow mark; or, a sequence of shapes in space placed in some linear fashion. *Shape* in painting is an area or form with a definite or implied outline. We can broadly define it in music as a sound space which has the attributes of size in terms of length (time) and intensity of sound, i.e., a big or little sound. *Color* in painting is the sensation produced by different wavelengths of light B the basic colors being red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet . Color or timbre in music is the quality of sound. For example, what is the color of the sound of a trumpet? We would probably agree it has a rather Abright@ sound, certainly as compared to the Adarker@ sound of a tuba. A painted color equivalent I leave to the listener. One might also consider the color of a specific musical key, a single musical note, or, for that matter, any sound or Anoise.@ *Tone* in painting is the grey scale of color, ranging from black to white. This is equivalent to tone or pitch in music which is the intensity of sound, low (dark) to high (light). White tends to express a bright, high pitch where black tends toward the heavy, deep sound. The intensity would also depend on size, i.e., the bigger, the more aggressive or easily noticed; therefore, the louder. *Texture* in painting is the real or implied roughness of the painting=s surface equivalent to music in the quality of tone; that is, the roughness or smoothness of sound B compare a bassoon to a flute. With

these basic elements I can, in either art form, create space, rhythm, melody, and harmony. *Space* in both painting and music is perhaps more illusive: In painting we use the elements to produce the illusion of different kinds of space, such as perspective, overlapping, modeled, and cubist space on a two-dimensional surface. In music, we may create space in size and distance by manipulating the quality of sound and rhythmic structure, as with vast volumes of sound or a small, brief, staccato like sound. *Rhythm* in music is the organization of space-time B a measured movement of sounds. Rhythm in painting, is a measured organization of space. For example, the varied spaces between the lines in Fig. 1 present a measured rhythm. Also, one might see and feel, in these examples, how interval manipulation can mimic the allegro (fast), andante (moderate), and adagio (slow) rhythms of music. For example, closely spaced lines and shapes (crowding) might suggest a rapid pace as those widely spaced would suggest the opposite. *Melody* is roughly an organized movement of pitches in time B a Apleasing@succession of musical tones. The equivalent to a melodic line of music in painting might be an organized succession of lines, shapes, and colors. *Harmony* in music is the simultaneous sounding of tones B a chord, for example. I consider harmony in a painting to be the relationship of the parts describing a single shape (a chord equivalent) or the whole painting.

The total organization of both painting and music is its composition. It is an arrangement of the art elements in some personal way to evoke in the viewer/listener some emotional and/or intellectual response. The artistic statement in painting and music might be, on one hand, through the depiction of scenes and events that are familiar to us, such as nature and portraiture in painting and nature (Beethoven= 6th Symphony) and portraiture (Elgar=s Enigma Variations) in music. On the other hand, the artistic statement might be totally abstract; that is, without a definitive, or literal objective except what is felt by the painter/composer and what is interpreted by the viewer/listener. Now, let us look at some attributes of painting that may be seen as music that are not commonly discussed.

2 TIME, DEPTH, MOVEMENT AND MEANING

Music can be defined as the art of sound in time. The two words that we do not normally associate with painting are sound and time. Painting obviously does not have the same physical attributes but let me suggest some parallels. In music, we have one sound event following another in time. In a painting we have one shape, or might I say, shape/event, related to another in space, all at the same time. But, do we Asee@ them all at once? I would argue that the details of each shape, and, more importantly, their relationship to each other takes place in time. Indeed, our eye is pulled from shape to shape according to the shape=s dominance of size, tone, texture, color, and psychological impact. We are guided by the skill of the artist to and through layers of relationships and meaning, leading us into the Adepts@ of the painting. This is not too different when listening to complex music such as a symphony. The more we listen to such a piece, the more we comprehend the contribution and importance of other voices

By other instruments playing in the background. I would submit that this Adepth factor is shared by all works of art, which we never fully understand including the artist.

Now let's consider the factor of sound. Though a painting's expressiveness doesn't come from sound, it can be designed to optically vibrate, thus the analogy to music. Contrasting colors and value relationships, i.e., tones, can be used. Common examples of contrasting colors, i.e., color opposites, in painting (not physics) are red/green, blue/orange, and yellow/violet on the color wheel familiar to painters. In music we have an equivalent color wheel with C major opposite G-flat (or F-sharp) major, A-major opposite E-flat major, etc. If two contiguous colors have close or equal tonal value (remember that visual tone is the measure of the lightness or darkness of a color), the edge they form will appear to vibrate. This is an optical phenomenon whose physiology I won't go into here; but the design of the painting can be such to cause discomfort in the viewer, which in the learning process of my early paintings I occasionally achieved when I wanted to see how Aloud I could paint. To maximize the edge instability or vibration, the colors must not only be of equal tonal value but fully saturated (maximum color intensity) color opposites. Indeed, a black and white photograph of two such contiguous, equal value colors would be seen as a single grey. The maximization of edge stability is in the tonal contrast by the maximum contrast being black and white. But, even here, we can achieve optical vibration if we draw a field of tightly spaced black and white parallel lines. If the lines are curvilinear, the vibratory illusion is even greater. Another interesting optical phenomenon using the visual dynamic of color to give shapes and/or regions this vibratory, Asound quality is the environment in which the painting is displayed. For example, two colors which have equal value in an environment of diffused indoor daylight may appear unequal in value in a warm or coolly lit room; that is, if the room light is dimmed, the colors toward the red/warm end of the spectrum will appear to darken while those toward the blue/cool end will appear to brighten. This would be more noticeable in a hard edged painting such as Fig 1, where the red lines will appear to darken as the blue ones brighten as light dims. Another, little known but interesting visual experience of such a painting is how it optically changes through the varying light of the day by it has a subtle vitality and life induced by light and time. This phenomenon is a function of all paintings in color, though most obvious in those specifically painted with this optical dynamic in mind. However, even in a constant light environment, such as in a museum, the relative contrasts may vary. This variation occurs with a change in viewing distance. Warm colors will appear to darken relative to the cooler colors when the distance between the viewer and picture is reduced and vice versa, and the Avibrational edge intensity will change accordingly. These phenomena are more clearly experienced in my early work such as Fig 1. I might add that these pieces tended to the more decorative, like large chords of music; that is, they just hang there trumpeting at you, being limited in depth of complexity or meaning. In my more mature work the vibrational edge and shape quality are still there but to a much subtler expressive level, which leads us more specifically to my present style of painting.

3 MY PAINTING

My painting, sometimes called AWave Space Painting@ or AGridField Painting,@ is created on a curvilinear grid system that I call AGridField Geometry@ (refer to *Publications*, above). The kind of grid system I choose is used as a guide for the formation of my rhythmic structures and thematic figures. I approach my work in either of two ways. The first is from a purely abstract point of view; that is, I organize the elements of art in a relationship of shapes and lines as one might compose sounds in music, which is without direct reference to objects of the outside world, i.e., non-objectively. My second approach is to tell a story B an abstract narrative or metaphor. An example of a purely abstract composition can be seen in my painting *Sun Song*, Fig 2. The theme and its variations are composed of six attached Acurvilinear rectangles@ in a specific relationship to each other.

The abstract narrative needs a little more explaining. For this, refer to Fig 3, *Transcendent Figure*. If we Aread@ this painting, from left to right, a clearly defined black figure in the lower left of the painting attracts our attention. This is the introduction of our shape theme B leitmotif, if you wish. Reading episodically from left to right, our figure separates into two contrasting colors. The color separation increases until at a junction it separates into two figures similar to the original. One figure ascends vertically with two colors spatially separating from each other suggesting two new shapes at the top of the painting. The other figure continues in a horizontal direction with the contrasting color sections of its left half gradually blending to form a cool, blue figure while the sections of the other half blend into a warm, reddish figure. When the new figures reach a maximum state of color saturation and contrast, they immediately transform into the extremes of black and white with all due symbolism. This occurs at about three-quarters distance across the painting. While this is happening, our previous two vertically ascending ribbed shapes have dissolved into bluish winged shapes and elemental Aghost@ shapes which with different paths progress rhythmically across the painting. In any case, the white shape of our now two part, black and white leitmotif seems to separate by undulating upward in wave form and changing into a yellow winged shape. At this point, it appears to intercept the incoming blue shapes and continue to ascend to the right. Near the apex of its ascension it is intercepted by the elemental Aghost@ shapes and finally, in the upper right region of the painting, transformed into a lone, sun saturated bird-like figure surrounded by a pure white radiance B truly, a transcendent figure. Certainly feel free to dispute basic idea and look at it from other viewpoints. For example, why not read the painting from right to left? Or, enjoy it as pure abstraction. Note, however, that the basic structure of the painting=s composition can be compared to that of the classical sonata form in music: The painting can be divided into an *Introduction* or *Exposition* of thematic material, its *Development*, *Recapitulation* (modified), and *Conclusion*.

In any case, I try to give the thematic material a life of its own, by interacting with its environment of color, space, line, and rhythm. I think of my paintings as visual music in the sense of tone poems that make use of mathematical and esthetic relationships to inspire a sense of sound, time, and life.