

## Aspects of the relationship between Music and Painting and their influence on Schoenberg and Kandinsky

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**Abstract:** *Without any intention of comprehensiveness, this research discusses a few of the directions where the relationship between music and painting manifested itself at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with special reference to the works of Wassily Kandinsky and Arnold Schoenberg. During their epoch of creation, they witnessed the incessant tension between classic and modern, old and new, between tradition and innovation, but one could notice their aspiration towards an impersonal and conventional music, towards rationalism, objectivity and constructivism. Both of these artists, endowed with “dual artistic gifts”, are supporters of Modernism and share the passion for artistic unity. The simultaneous discovery of the atonal music for Schoenberg and of the abstract art for Kandinsky is revealed through their long lasting friendship. While Schoenberg painted, exploring with self-portrait and exposing his works together with famous painters, Kandinsky, fascinated with the emotional power of music, played the cello and the piano as a talented musician, seeking the analogies between colour and sound.*

Key words: *music, painting, Expressionism, influence*

### 1. Aspects of the Relationship between Music and Painting

The symbiosis between music and plastic arts is by no means a discovery of the contemporary arts; until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the various arts were in positions of subordination, and the apparition of the Impressionism also brought the winds of change, on a perceptive level, in the visual arts. The urge to render states of mind or emotions by breaking the limits between sounds – colour – form – movement, or even by a combination of these in synesthetic works of art became more and more acute.

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The references to the connections between the artists of the epoch mention that „here are contingencies that owe nothing at all to hazard, but rather to some undisclosed spirituality of very particular personalities who symbolically, enigmatically related – over time and trends – and whose labels marked the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (Brezianu 2006, 25). The emotional impact of music over the audience can be enhanced by an adequate visual echo, and the reverse, the effect of an image can be amplified by a sound echo (Georgescu 2018, 545). In the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century appeared the *Futurist Manifesto*, a total revolution of the existence, proposing the infiltration of its principles in all the forms of human expression. It included references to the relationships between chromatics and sound.

The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century does not stray from the laws which govern the evolution of arts, as the coexistence of the conservatory and the newest aesthetics is the expression of the permanent tension between classic and modern, old and new, tradition and innovation. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, artists begun to explore the correspondence between apparently irreducible worlds: plastic arts and music. It was a movement oriented towards the revival of the pure forms, moulded by a spirituality sprung out of a pantheist communion with the universe, where the colour, sound and form became constitutive elements of language (Bălaşa 2015, 207).

For instance, in the plastic arts, the notion of colour is in a relationship of interdependence with the other colours in a painting; in music, the pitch is the main form of musical expression (melody, harmony and polyphony). Nonetheless, an attempt to make an analogy between the pitch of sounds and colour in painting or between the pitch and colour of mater, reveals that, if in the art of sounds, their height variation is the main form of expression creating the melody, harmony, and polyphony, in the plastic arts the notion of colour is indeed interdependent with the other colours, but also with the space and volume. On the other hand, the high and low tones were considered the correspondents of light and dark colours, respectively, and the notions of saturation, intensity, luminosity, chromatics and others have a similar meaning for colours or sounds.

These intertwining between arts were explored by Expressionism, a radical form of art, defined at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with representatives in all the branches of arts. In the program of *Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider)* group, whose leader was Wassily Kandinsky and where Arnold Schoenberg was intensely active, the connections between music and painting were intensely explored through „the long for rhythm, movement, abstract structure, symphonic harmony, counter-point effects in painting” (Grigorescu 1969, 69).

## 2. Schoenberg as painter

The Austrian composer Arnold Schoenberg had always seen himself as the true heir of the Classic and Romantic Germanic tradition. The composer would later stray from the coordinates of the traditional language and would investigate new forms of organising sound. The consequence would be the essential modification of the consonance-dissonance ratio and the liberation of the musical language from the tyranny of major-minor and the tonal structure, taking as the basis for chords construction a series of twelve different sounds, all equally important. No sound is repeated in this series which uses all the sounds in the chromatic scale, although in a different order, so that the result is not similar to the chromatic scale (Bălan 1975, 326). In this modality, the chords become independent and the classical antithesis between consonance and dissonance is dismissed. In his creations, Schoenberg imagines the atonal system, followed by the serial-dodecaphonic system.

Schoenberg imposed himself as a painter and writer and was so thoroughly involved in the idea of dissolving the limits between the various arts, the same as Kandinsky. The musician started to paint around 1907 (Auner 1997, 119), and he concentrated on his paintings especially between 1907 and 1919, a period when he also finished 8 of his atonal works. On his canvass he displays a similarly violent Expressionism as in his music composed around 1909.

If the composer affirms that he is an amateur in painting, as he “had no theoretical training and only a little aesthetic training – this only from general education but not from an education which pertained to painting”, in music “I always had the opportunity to study the works of the masters... in quite a professional manner, so that my technical ability grew in the normal manner” (Sohee Kim 2010. [https://etd.ohiolink.edu/!etd.send\\_file?accession=osu1269203770&disposition=inline](https://etd.ohiolink.edu/!etd.send_file?accession=osu1269203770&disposition=inline), accessed on 27.10.2019).

His paintings were seen as “realistic paintings directly derived from nature and visions that indicate more abstractive works” (Hahl-Koch, 1984, 125). The self-portraits are particularly important, as they reflect his inner states and feelings. Even if he paints most of his self-portraits around the same period, each of them seems so different due to the distinct state of mind.

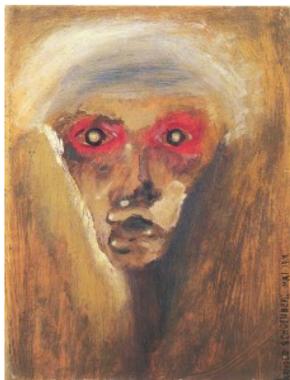


Fig. 1. Arnold Schoenberg's "Red Gaze", 1910.  
[Oil on pasteboard, 32 x 25 cm].  
May 1910. Municipal Gallery in the Lenbachhaus, Munich.

### 3. Kandinsky and Music

Two major events concurred to the shaping of the conception on creation of Wassily Kandinsky, one of the first theoreticians of the symbiosis between sound and image.

The first was the visit to the French Impressionist exhibition in Moscow in 1896, where one of Monet's paintings made him realise that the image can capture the viewer's attention even if he is not capable to recognize it on the spot. He stated that the origins of his abstract art should be looked up "in the religious paintings of the 10 – 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, but also in the folk Russian paintings, which taught him not to look at a painting from outside, but to live inside the painting" (Hahl-Fontaine 1993, 26). The second event was the fact that he had seen Lohengrin by Wagner, in the same year and the same place, occasion which made him say that "I saw colours before my eyes, while almost mad lines drew themselves in front of me..... Wagner had painted 'my hour' musically" (Hass 2009, 42).

Some critics suggest that he invented abstract art because he had a revolutionary approach to painting and was amongst the first artists to produce abstract pieces. Inspired by Wagner and Scriabin's music, Kandinsky elaborates his personal theory of correspondence between musical tones and colours. „Our hearing of colours is so precise. Colour is a power which directly influences the soul. Colour is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand that plays, touching one key or another purposively, to cause vibrations of the soul" (Kandinsky 2014, 61).

In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky was preoccupied with finding the musical equivalents for each colour: „In music a light blue is like a flute, a darker blue a cello; a still darker a thunderous double bass; and the darkest blue of all-an organ.....Light warm red has a certain similarity to medium yellow, alike in texture and appeal, and gives a feeling of strength, vigour, determination, triumph. In music, it is a sound of trumpets, strong, harsh and ringing” (Kandinsky 2014, 868).

Stating that „in a painting, the colour must, in the same time, both fascinate the viewer and dissimulate the profound meaning” (Brion 1972, 128), Kandinsky renounces the intellectual abstraction, rejecting the forms resulted from logic processes, in order to accept only those generated by the inner impulse of the artist’s sensibility.

All through his life, the painter stayed true to the idea he expressed in his theoretical work, *Régard sur le Paseé*, that art, “acting upon sensibility, can act by sensibility alone” (Brion 1972, 133). At the perceptual level, the sensations acquired through sight and hearing, although so different, act together with the common purpose to produce the recognition of an object, its most real representation, to place it in time and space.

In *Point and Line to Plane*, Kandinsky considered that the graphic representation of music is possible through a combination of points and lines. In Figure 2 can be seen that Kandinsky translated a fragment of the Vth Symphony by Beethoven and made a graphic representation, trying to express the same content by use of point and line. He did not use the same procedure in his paintings, though. He wrote in one of his lectures that he did not want to „paint music”. Music was, for him, a source of inspiration, it was an equivalent of painting, but he did not intend to compose his oeuvres to illustrate pieces of music. (Rucsanda Madalina, Pepelea Roxana).

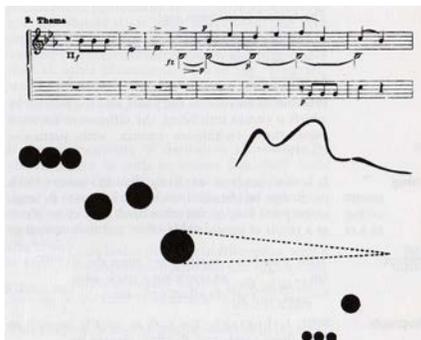


Fig. 2. *Kandinsky translated music graphically using points and lines*  
(Image taken from Kandinsky 1982)

The stage composition *Der gelbe Klang* is one of the works that illustrate Kandinsky's views on art, the idea that the only source of art is inner necessity. The composition begins with a short introduction, followed by six scenes. The protagonists are: five giants, indistinct beings, a tenor, a child, a man, people in following garb, people in tights, and a chorus (behind the stage) (Hahl-Koch 1984, 117-125; Kandinsky 1974, 207-225).

The critics compared this work with Schoenberg's composition, *Die glückliche Hand*, stating that "both artists crafted the total artwork, that is, Gesamtkunstwerk, by treating musical sound, colors, and text equally: Kandinsky's *Der gelbe Klang*, like Schoenberg's *Die glückliche Hand*, is justifiably dealt with in the context of German Expressionist drama. [...] Besides the Expressionist music, there is the theme itself, and the general human, not individualized action, the quick, compressed course of the plot and the concentrated, clipped speech style which fits it, as well as the symbolic use of colors" (Hahl-Koch 1984, 162). The music taken from the opera is used as one of the main sources of expression for the inner soul.

Kandinsky considered music to be superior to painting, due to its abstract language. He showed his admiration for the music of the composer from Wien, Albert Schoenberg, with whom he started a beautiful friendship and a long time correspondence. The affinities beginning to show between the two artists are observable even from the first letters they exchange, in their exchange of ideas concerning the analogies between abstraction in visual arts and music. Kandinsky recognized interesting resemblance between Schoenberg's music and his own paintings which concerned with the pure expression.

#### **4. Connections between Music and Painting at Kandinsky and Schoenberg**

There are papers comparing the creations of the two artists. In a letter from January, 14, 1911, after listening to the String Quartet no. 2 by Schoenberg, a critic noted: „Can you imagine a music in which tonality (that is, the adherence to any key) is completely suspended? I was constantly reminded of Kandinsky's large Composition, which also permits no trace of tonality [...] and also of Kandinsky's "jumping spots" in hearing this music, which allows each tone sounded to stand on its own (...). Schoenberg proceeds from the principle that the concepts of consonance and dissonance do not exist at all. A so-called dissonance is only a more remote consonance – an idea which now occupies me constantly while painting..." (Hahl-Koch 1984, 136.)

The two artists "found they shared the same ideals, both of them breaking time honoured rules of composition in their own fields" (Gregory 1991, 253).

Kandinsky played the piano and loved the cello as much as he loved painting, and about Schoenberg's passion for painting was said that „Schoenberg's music and Schoenberg's pictures together will tear your ears off and put out our eyes at the same time" (Annette and Luc Vezin 1992, 115).

In 1911, the painter was in Wien, attending a concerto by Schoenberg and painted *Impression III/Konzert*, about which was said that "this picture is not the particular concert he heard, but his overall impression of the music performance" (Buja 2016; at <http://www.interlude.hk/front/music-art-schoenberg-kandinsky/>).



Fig. 3. Kandinsky. "Impression III" (Concert)

The painting illustrates his general impression on the music performance, placing in the centre "the black angular block", symbolizing the piano and the listeners are represented by circles or ovals, covered by the sounds reverberating from the piano. In a letter addressed to Schoenberg in 1911, he said: „I am very pleased that you speak of self-perception. That is the root of the 'new' art, of art in general, which is never new, but which must only enter into a new phase – 'Today!'" (Hahl-Koch 1984, 25).

The two artists started a long-lasting friendship which often proved turbulent, implying, in the same time, a sharp criticism of the other's works and an intense sharing of ideas and influences. Both supported the idea that, although different, the sensations created by hearing and seeing work together to form the representation closest to reality.

They managed to get together in 23th of September, 1911 and talked about the group *Der Blaue Reiter* and about Schoenberg's book, *Harmonielehre*.

In 1909, Kandinsky began to give some of his paintings titles associated with music: *Improvisations* and *Compositions*. The impact of Schoenberg's atonal compositions is the most powerfully seen in the set of 10 of Kandinsky's compositions, appeared between 1910 and 1939, defined as his most mature

works: large-format, most radiant, the result of lengthy processes, numerous drawings, sketches and compositions (Elger 2007, 50). The compositions were considered the most mature of Kandinsky's works, the result of a sustained effort and of many searches, sketches, attempts (Elger 2007, 50), and an example of playing with consonance and dissonance in the juxtaposition of forms on the canvas, and "the jostling, the confluence or dismemberment of the individual form" (Düchting 1996, 48).

For instance, in *Composition VI*, "a seemingly indecipherable vortex of shapes and colours, diagonal movements, bright and muted colours, extremes of light and dark, areas of thinner and thicker paint" (Graham-Dixon 2008, 438) on a red-blue, somehow discordant, harsh background (Duchting 1991, 38), one can apprehend the painter's synesthetic experience and the way Schoenberg understands dissonance and rich chromaticism.



Fig. 4. Kandinski – "Composition VI"

For Kandinsky, „visual art, which would take a position essentially between visual art and music, is something like a "musical seeing" and "music is the best teacher" (Weiss, 1979, 297).

In the period between the two World Wars, Schoenberg immigrated to America and Kandinsky immigrated to France, where he was able to continue to explore the modern style of painting. A vast part of his original work was lost during the war, and 57 of his paintings from the German museums were confiscated under accuse of Degenerate Art (Entartete Kunst) and sold later on.

Kandinsky died on 13<sup>th</sup> of December 1944 in Neuilly-sur-Seine, France, and Schoenberg, although he was never truly appreciated during his lifetime, secured a successful teaching career and died on 13<sup>th</sup> of July, 1951, in Los Angeles, California.

## 5. Conclusions

Both artists are supporters of the Modernism, and their combined heritage is immense. Although they came to life in different cultural spaces, they lived and created in predominantly different environments, each shared the passion for the unity of arts. Their simultaneous discoveries – of the atonal music for Schoenberg and of abstract painting for Kandinsky is revealed through their friendship, in parallel terms, „Schoenberg was leaving tonality behind, Kandinsky representation” (Annette and Luc Vezin 1992, 164). Even more, both artists considered that abstraction was their best means to reveal the unseen.

They both imposed themselves as theoreticians as well as artists, their ideas revealing as a manifesto against tradition. They gained their most significant artistic development almost at the same time while struggling to find their own voices, that is, their inner necessity, within an indifferent social environment (Sohee 2010). Their friendship is a special example of the intellectual affinity of artists in search of new vehicles for expressing their inner emotions.

Both Schoenberg and Kandinsky shared similar artistic thoughts and ideas and strived to find the novelty beyond the real world; they both realised that their goals could only be reached and expressed through inner strength.

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