

## Connections between Music and Painting in Arnold Schoenberg's Works

Mădălina Dana RUCSANDA<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *In this paper we aim to highlight some of the directions taken by the artistic trends connecting music and painting at the beginning of the twentieth century, with special reference to the musical creation and paintings of the expressionist composer Arnold Schoenberg. The epoch of his creation was characterised by continuous tensions between classicism and modernity, between old and new, between tradition and innovation. The artistic aspiration towards an impersonal and conventional music, to rationalism, objectivity and constructivism was frequently noticed in those times. The artists who made use of the synaesthesia created astonishing correspondences between colour and sound, between colour and idea, which resulted in so many different analogies, due to the attempt to convey human sentiments, feelings, and emotions in a refreshed manner. Than was the time the idea that painting could emulate music, and the other way round bloomed, a fact which inspired a part of the most progressive visual arts of the twentieth century.*

*The aim of our research is to formulate concise correlations between some of Arnold Schoenberg's paintings and his musical creations belonging to his expressionist period, having as starting premise the fact that he goes beyond the possibilities of music in his pictorial endeavours, characterized by a blunt, sombre, often striking and contrasting palette, by the combination of split and sinuous lines and a broken rhythm.*

Keywords: *music, painting, Arnold Schoenberg, expressionism*

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

The symbiosis between music and the visual arts is not a discovery of the contemporary. Up to the end of the twentieth century, the two arts were subordinate to each other and the new trend of Expressionism was spreading the wind of change for the perception of the visual arts. The rendering of spiritual

---

<sup>1</sup> Transilvania University of Braşov, m\_rucsanda@unitbv.ro

impressions or emotions by breaking the borders between sounds – colour – form – movement, or even by their association in products of synaesthesia was frequently the goal of the Expressionist artists.

Referring to the connections between the artists of the epoch, it was said that “there are contingencies, due nonetheless to hazard, but rather to some unrevealed spirituality of some completely extraordinary personalities, who relate symbolically, enigmatically – above trends and times – and whose marks remained imprinted over the twentieth century.” (Brezianu 2006, 25)

Here originates the idea that 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 increased by a sound echo (Georgescu 2018, 545).

The *Manifesto of Futurism* appeared in the first decade of the twentieth century, provoking a total, global revolution of existence, by the proposition of the infiltration of the current’s principles in every form of human expression. References to the relations between chromatic and sound were included here, as painting was seen to be as closer to music than any other art, more of a subject to the fluctuation and intermittences of the human sensibility. During that period, the artists started to discover possible correspondences between worlds of irreducible appearance: plastic arts, but also music. We witnessed a movement oriented towards retrieving the pure forms, modelled by a spiritual existence which was built upon a pantheist communion with the universe, where colour, sound and form are the constituent elements of language (Bălaşa 2015, 207). For instance, if, in the plastic arts the notion of colour cannot be placed in interdependence with only the other colours used in a work of art, in music, the height/interval is the main form of expression (melody, harmony and polyphony). Nonetheless, in an attempt to make an analogy between the height of sounds and the colour in painting, or between the pitch of voice and the colour of matter, it can be said that, if, in the art of sounds their height is the main form of expression and conveys the melody, harmony or polyphony, in the plastic arts, the notion of colour is in interdependence with the other colours in a painting, but also with the notions of form or volume. On the other hand, the analogy between the high tones and light colours and the low tones and dark colours was a frequent supposition and terms such as saturation, intensity, luminosity, chromatics, and so on, have similar meaning for colours or sounds.

## 2. Expressionism in Arts

Expressionism as a radical form of art, conceptualized at the beginning of the twentieth century in the German space, can be encountered in all the forms of art, acquiring fecund expression until around the year 1925, comprising all the future modernist artistic orientations. The essence of the movement is to be found in the intensity of expression, a tendency to give an outer shape to the inner experience, feelings and human restlessness, as well as an overwhelming longing for completeness. Edvard Munch's painting, *The Scream*, is considered a manifesto of the Expressionism.

In the programme of the group *Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider)* (led by the painter Vassily Kandinsky), where the musician Arnold Schoenberg activated intensely, the music – painting connection is intensely used “out of yearning towards rhythm, movement, abstract construction, ‘symphonic harmony’ or ‘counterpoint effects’ in painting” (Grigorescu 1969, 69).

There are two known tendencies in music, one generated by *The Second Viennese School*, whose initiator was Arnold Schoenberg, followed by his compatriots, Anton Webern and Alban Berg, the second having Igor Stravinsky, during his *Russian period*, and Béla Bartók, through his scenic works, as representatives (Banciu 2009, 227).

Schoenberg describes, through his creations, two complementary type of attitudes who complete the artistic being: on one hand, he reminds of the attitude of the artist exposed to any type of emotion, the one who lets live inside him the aesthetic phenomenon in order to extrapolate that state later, in the domain of reason, through inner thinking and reflection (Lakatos 2011).

On the other hand, he attempted to render emotions and states of mind according to a series of personal and subjective rules, aspiring to reach the independent condition of the music through making connections between sounds – colour – form – movement in his compositions, or even by associating the two genres in synaesthetic oeuvres.

The aesthetic connection between music and colour was embraced by many other composers: Berlioz, Wagner, Rimsky-Korsakov, but also by Debussy, Messiaen or Scriabin. There are few cases of composers preoccupied with the plastic arts. Arnold Schoenberg is such an example of complex personality, who goes beyond the borders of music in his plastic attempts, characterized by blunt, sombre, often striking and contrasting use of colour, by the combination of split and sinuous lines and a broken rhythm.

### 3. Schoenberg as a painter

Lead by the desire to find new paths for musical expression or to innovate above all, the composer Arnold Schoenberg was also a painter and a writer, deeply emerged in the attempt to cross the barriers between the different arts, as the painter Vassily Kandinsky used to do. Schoenberg started to paint around the year 1907, focusing on painting especially between 1907 – 1912, a period when he finished eight of his atonal musical compositions (Auner 1997, 119). He left behind seventy portraits and 'visions', some of which were included by V. Kandinsky in *Der Blaue Reiter* exhibition. In his paintings, he displayed a similarly violent Expressionism as in his musical works from 1909.

Shawn ascribes three categories to Schoenberg's paintings: portraits, more abstract visionary expressions, and realistic works from nature (Shawn 2002, 59-60).

The self-portraits are very important for the composer, reflecting his inner states and feelings. Even if he draws more of his self-portraits around the same period, each of them is different and expresses another spiritual disposition. Grouped under the name of *Vision* or *Gaze* are to be encountered some of his most suggestive paintings, expressing a vast gamut of inner processes marked by isolation and loneliness, artistically defined by a vague background and the emphasis of the look in the eyes, which are perceived as the mirror of the soul by the composer (Courtney 1995, 5-21).

Schoenberg had often declared that he painted out of the desire to map the inner universe and inner feelings rather than the outer world.

In his first self-portrait (Figure 1), the painted space is dominated by a massive head with piercing eyes, where the predominant nuance is an altered green, which reflects the detachment from the surrounding world, together with the rendition of the unfocused, piercing look, seemingly lost into nothingness. The second self-portrait (Figure 2), initially called *Vision*, was exposed for the first time in 1911, in a *Blaue Reiter* exhibition, and does not resemble any of his other self-portraits; it is considered to be a transition towards the painting *Red Gaze* (Figure 3). Kandinsky appreciates the inner force of these portraits and, in the *Blaue Reiter Almanac*, where the painting *Vision* was reproduced, can be read: "Realism = Abstraction, Abstraction = Realism. *The greatest difference in the external becomes the greatest likeness in the inner.*" (Kandinsky, Marc 1912, 85)

Referring to his self-portraits, which are fascinating through the inner universe they express, Schoenberg said: "Ich habe Blicke gemalt [...] Das ist etwas, was nur ich getan haben konnte, denn es ist aus meiner Natur heraus und ist der Natur eines wirklichen Malers vollkommen entgegengesetzt. Ich habe niemals

Gesichter gesehen, sondern, da ich den Menschen ins Auge gesehen habe, nur ihre Blicke. Daher kommt es auch, dass ich den Blick eines Menschen nachmachen kann. Ein Maler aber erfasst mit einem Blick den ganzen Menschen – ich nur seine Seele." ("I've painted looks [...]. That's something only I could have done, because it's in my nature and it's totally opposite to the nature of a real painter. I have never seen faces, though, since I have faced the people in the eye, not only their looks. Therefore, it is also that I can imitate a man's gaze. But a painter captures the whole human being at a glance – I, only his soul") (Budde. 2004).

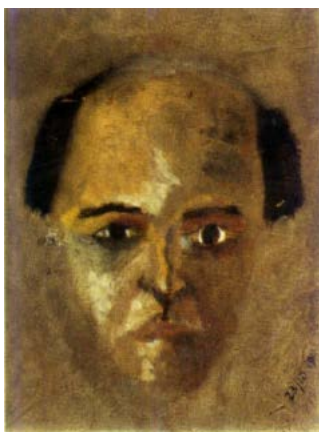


Fig. 1. *Green Self-Portrait*



Fig. 2. *Self-Portrait (Vision)*



Fig. 3. *Red Gaze*  
Municipal Gallery in the  
Lenbachhaus, Munich

His blue self-portrait<sup>2</sup> (Figure 4) is remarkable through the simplicity of the colour palette, through the scarce luminosity of the image, but especially through the determined look in his eyes. The colours he used, though, are carefully and very sensibly chosen, preferring a cold, unrealistic nuance of blue for the skin, which symbolizes the inner soul.

The asymmetry is created here by exposing only one ear, the right one, which occupies a prominent space in the painting, maybe as an influence of Van Gogh, with whom Schoenberg often identified, being profoundly moved by his death.

Of his abstract paintings, *Thinking* (Figure 5), is an expression of his artistic conception, rendered through the golden colour filling the space above a human

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.google.com/search?q=blue+self+portrait+Schoenberg&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjG9YyQ68\\_fAhUptYsKHeXmB2cQsAR6BAgAEAE&cshid=1546457503457001&biw=1280&bih=530#imgrc=o2zZ0PBpxw5M2M](https://www.google.com/search?q=blue+self+portrait+Schoenberg&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjG9YyQ68_fAhUptYsKHeXmB2cQsAR6BAgAEAE&cshid=1546457503457001&biw=1280&bih=530#imgrc=o2zZ0PBpxw5M2M)

head, giving the impression of an empty space in a place where the decor or the ornamentation are purified to the essence. The golden-yellow is not unusual for him; he uses it in other of his paintings (*Green Self-Portrait*) and it symbolizes the subjective experience of the thinking which is not mediated by the usual conceptualization language that determines the conscious thinking.

This painting can be compared to the monodrama *Erwartung* [Expectation], which is non-thematic, asymmetrical and lacks repeatability. The musical themes and ideas there are different; it proves expressive authenticity, conferred by the rhythmic or melodic variation. As in his paintings, the entire action is shaped by the axis of the inner life of the heroine, and all the details referring to the identity of the nameless woman, to the time and place of the action remain surrounded in mystery.



Fig. 4. *Blue Self Portrait*<sup>3</sup>



Fig. 5. *Thinking*

The same elements of the inner universe together with the alienation are themes to be encountered in other of Schoenberg's musical creations. The most prominent example is the opera *Die gluckliche Hand* [*The Lucky Hand*], centred around the philosophical theme of pessimism, for which he wrote both the music and the libretto. The musical texture results from combinations of random, arbitrary atonal sounds which are meant to create a strange, irrational universe, transformed into a pretext for ciphered monologues by the presence of the supra-real element which

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.google.com/search?q=blue+self-portrait+Schoenberg&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjG9YyQ68\\_fAhUptYsKHeXmB2cQsAR6BAgAEE&cshid=1546457503457001&biw=1280&bih=530#imgrc=o2zZOPBpxw5M2M](https://www.google.com/search?q=blue+self-portrait+Schoenberg&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjG9YyQ68_fAhUptYsKHeXmB2cQsAR6BAgAEE&cshid=1546457503457001&biw=1280&bih=530#imgrc=o2zZOPBpxw5M2M)

contains the mystery of the universe. The combination of colour and sound, the erotic theme, having a poignant philosophical meaning, are doubled by the expression of antagonistic feelings (amazement, fear, joy, despair, loneliness), caused by the imaginary relationship with the ideal woman.

#### 4. Schoenberg's Connexions between Music and Painting

From a musical perspective, the period between 1908 and 1912 represents the beginnings of the atonalism, when Schoenberg composes some of his important works: *Three Piano Pieces* (Op.11), *15 Poems from The Book of the Hanging Gardens* (Op. 15), *Five Pieces for Orchestra* (Op.16), *Erwartung [Expectations]*(Op.17), *Die glückliche Hand [The Lucky Hand]* (Op.18), *Six Little Piano Pieces* (Op.19), *Herzgewächse [Foliage of the Heart]* (Op.20), *Pierrot lunaire* (Op.21). It is the moment when his search for the total musical expression begun: melody, rhythm, harmony, dynamics, pitch, in parallel with the tendency to deny the symmetry and destroy the tonal or structural harmony.

For Schoenberg, painting was not leisure, it was a serious endeavour, as he stated in one of his interviews: "the painting was the same to me as making music" (Stevens. 1978: 179). The fact that he craftily combined the two forms of art, music and painting, and, implicitly, the sound and colour, helped him design costumes for his scenic compositions, *Erwartung* and *Die glückliche Hand*, and "to provide detailed instructions as to the lighting required for the specific moment between sound and color" (Shawn 2002, 61).

If, with regard to painting, the composer declares that he is an amateur – "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" Bauer, Marion *Twentieth-Century Music*, 211; In *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute*, V. II, no.3, 1938, p.166.

In his music, it can be noticed that structurally there are no identical passages or equilibrium and, when the main theme is resumed, it suffers melodic or rhythmical modifications; the recitative is also present, the "spoken song", or a very different melodic succession of what is normally required of the voice to sing. The melody, characterized by wide leaps and unusual intervals, seems like an escape from the cantabile. The incessantly changing and exaggeratedly dissonant harmonies annihilate the functional order, going towards poly-tonalism and atonalism, and, as the musician himself declared: "I had a good sense of relations,

*of space relations, of measurements. I was able to divide, let us say, a line rather correctly in three, four, five, six, seven, even eleven parts, and they were quite near the real division...this sense of measurement...is one of the capacities of the composer, of an artist"* (Stevens 1978, 180).

A significant element sustaining the atonalism is the rhythm. Generally, the atonal music does not reflect strong pulsation, and in most of his compositions there are changes in tempo and measure, hence the rhythmic irregularity. One of the simplest modalities to express rhythm in painting is to temporally display the volumes, contrasts and colours, through the repetition of the lines and forms, all these elements being in close connection with their perceiving by the viewer.

## 5. Conclusions

The Expressionism is one of the most expansive artistic phenomena of the twentieth century. The correspondences between music and painting, applied to the creation of Arnold Schoenberg refer to the way the sounds are organized in the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic musical compositions, in parallel with the formal organization of forms, colours, textures in the plastic compositions of the visual arts. If Schoenberg uses the twelve sounds to create the shift from the tonal to the atonal, the same is visible in his visual art, where the chromatic equilibrium is gradually destroyed.

Schoenberg made the transition towards atonalism in the same time he discovered the principles of the abstract Expressionism in painting, during the activity of *Der Blaue Reiter*, a group he collaborates with only in his quality as a painter. His experimentation with atonalism during the Expressionist period met with difficulties, due to the lack of the benchmarks of the compositional process. This is why the dodecaphony was conceived, by the inclusion of the twelve sounds of the chromatic scale into a system based on series as the ordering element, a fact about which Schoenberg declared in 1912 that *will establish the domination of the German music for the next hundred years*.

## References

Adams, Courtney S. 1995. *Artistic Parallels between Arnold Schoenberg's Music and Painting (1908-1912)*, *College Music Symposium*, Vol. 35, p. 5-21. Published by: College Music Society Stable Available at: URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40374266>. Accessed on: 26. 12. 2018.



- Auner, Joseph. 1997. "Heart and Brain in Music: The Genesis of Schoenberg's Die glückliche Hand". In: *Constructive Dissonance, Arnold Schoenberg and the Transformations of Twentieth-Century Culture*, ed. by Juliane Brand and Christopher Hailey, University of California Press. Available at: <https://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft52900620&chunk.id=d0e3923&toc.depth=1&toc.id=d0e2483&brand=ucpress>. Accessed on 24.12.2018.
- Bălașa, Ariana. 2015. "Pleading for an Aesthetics of Colours, Sound and Forms. Kandinski, Satie and Brâncuși". *Journal of Romanian literary studies*, Issue no.6.
- Banciu, Ecaterina. 2009. *The History of Music (Module of study for University Studies by Distance Learning)*. Cluj Napoca: MediaMusica Publishing House.
- Bauer, Marion. 1938. "Twentieth-Century Music, 211". *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute*, Vol. II, no.3. Available at: <https://www.schoenberg.at/index.php/de/archiv/schoenberg-spricht?id=976:vr01>. Accessed on 24.12.2018.
- Brezianu, Barbu. 2006. *Brâncuși in Romania*. București: All Publishing House.
- Budde, Elmar. 2004. „Ut musica pictura – ut pictura musica’ Musik und Bild. Ein Rückblick nach vorn zu Arnold Schönberg [Music and Painting. A Look Back to Arnold Schoenberg]”. *Der Maler Arnold Schönberg: Bericht zum Symposium [The Painter Arnold Schoenberg: Symposium Bulletin]*, 11-13 September 2003, Universität für Musik und Darstellende Kunst Wien, Wissenschaftszentrum Arnold Schönberg.
- Georgescu, Corneliu Dan. 2018. "Colours of Sounds – Sounds of Colours. Composing with Sounds and Images – an Experiment". In: *Atemporal Music. Archetypes. Ethnomusicology. Romanian Composers*, vol. I, București, Muzicală Publishing House.
- Grigorescu, Dan. 1969. *The Expressionism*. Bucuresti: Meridiane Publishing House.
- Kandinsky, Vassily, Franz Marc. 1912. *Der Blaue Reiter*. Munich: R. Piper & Co. Verlag, p. 85. See also *The Blaue Reiter Almanac*, New York: Viking Press, 1974.
- Lakatos, Gabriela Luciana. 2011. *Expresionismul azi*. Rezumatul tezei de doctorat [*The Expressionism Today - PhD Thesis Summary*], Cluj Napoca. Available at: <http://www.uad.ro/Public/Docs/05%20PROGRAMA%20DE%20STUDII/03%20Doctorat/Rezumate%20romana/Lakatos%20Gabriela%20Luciana%20rezumat%20ro.pdf> accessed in 3.01.2019).
- Shawn, Allen. 2002. *Arnold Schoenberg's Journey*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Stevens, Halsey. 1978. "A Conversation with Schoenberg about Painting". *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute*, vol. II, no.3: 178-80.