

Meditation on Music and The Visual Arts

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There has long been a fascination with connections between music and the visual arts. Much of music's terminology is based on visual metaphors and virtually all musical styles draw their names from earlier painting styles. These connections make a lot of sense metaphorically, but music and art have a fundamental irreconcilable difference - how they exist in time.

A visual work of art can be viewed all at once and the features of its form and composition can be perceived together. Carefully examining a piece over time will help these features become more apparent, but the fact of the matter is that they can be conceived of a-temporally. In music the form and the meaning of a work are slowly revealed through the course of time. When a piece begins one doesn't know where it will wind up or how it will get there, and this is a fundamental part of what music is. Music is an art irrevocably tied up in the unfolding of time.

Picasso and Stravinsky are often compared as doing something similar in art and music so that would be a good place to look for a specific example of this. Let us compare Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)* with Stravinsky's *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*.

Both pieces have qualities that might be called 'cubist.' In Picasso's painting it is clear that this refers to the unnaturally angular quality of the lines and shapes, and the juxtaposition of perspectives from which the different objects and parts of objects are depicted. In Stravinsky's composition on the other hand, these 'cubist' qualities manifest themselves in the piece's punchy rhythms, and in the constant transition-less juxtapositions of different musical ideas. While most music spends a lot of its time developing one musical idea, and slowly transitions into introducing other ideas, in this piece, Stravinsky is constantly cycling through his musical ideas just as Picasso depicts objects in his painting from many different perspectives. Another similarity of these two works is their primitivism – Picasso's painting features African masks while Stravinsky's piece features Russian folk melodies.

These visual and musical connections do explain a lot of the stylistic features of Stravinsky's piece, but they don't get at what is really interesting about the composition. In Picasso's painting these perspectives are juxtaposed, the lines are angular, the women are depicted and that is the painting. In the Stravinsky piece on the other hand, the analogue of this happens in the first minute and a half or so – the style with its juxtapositions and punchy rhythms has become apparent and most of the main musical material (or 'characters' if we imagine each

motif as one of the women in Picasso's portrait), have been presented. Are we to think then that the next 8 minutes of the piece are just more of the same?

On the contrary, it is precisely what happens in the rest of the piece that makes it music. The little chunks of musical ideas enter a dialogue with each other, and gradually one of the very rhythmic punchy parts takes over for a while. After this the piece finally recovers and settles into an elegiac chorale texture at the end. It is this progression, and the way in which the musical ideas build up a relationship to each other throughout the piece that makes it an art in time.

In the Picasso what we see is a moment – a moment with rich relationships and juxtapositions, but just a moment. In music we have the same kind of 'moments' in chunks of material, but what makes it truly an art in time is how the initial moment or moments, develop, interact and ultimately go somewhere. In a piece of music there is a beginning, middle and end. While in a painting we are free to compare different parts of the painting and meditate on the different possible relationships between them, in music all of the parts are always related to each other by what part in the journey through time they make up.

This is a too often overlooked difference between the visual arts and music. Too often music is misunderstood to be something more like the visual arts for which a sound byte would be enough to understand a piece. By the same token music is often treated as sonic furniture to adorn one's experience. This understanding of music also treats it like visual art creating the same kind of synecdochical error denying the importance of time in music.

IGIGI, Yale's undergraduate Composer's organization has explored this issue in a number of collaborations with Yale University's Art Gallery. In previous years our concerts have consisted of pieces of music responding to specific paintings in the Gallery's collection, finding ways to translate their visual, a-temporal ideas into music and time.

One common way of dealing with the visual arts' a-temporality that composers explore is that they slow down the process of viewing an artwork. Such pieces morph the gradual understanding of a visual gestalt into a piece of music that gradually reveals itself. Other compositions take the visual they are presented with as if it is a snapshot from a larger narrative that the piece then explores. Yet other pieces of music take from their visual counterparts a certain spirit, or relation to the artistic conventions with which they interacted, and then make music with that in mind.

All of the approaches to marrying music to visual arts find some solution to the problem of time – some way to stretch the visual experience into the dimension of time. As much as such

works can be very much related to each other across these different artistic media, they exist on different dimensions.

IGIGI will be presenting its latest collaboration with the Yale University Art Gallery this Thursday, November 4th at 5:30pm. This year instead of attempting to translate visual ideas into music, all of the pieces in the concert are dealing with ideas of water and fluidity. They will be presented alongside a show of work by John La Farge which deals largely with the same issues. The combined music and art then will be musical and visual interpretations of the same ideas – yet another way to explore the deep connections but fundamental differences between the art forms.

Media:

Igor Stravinsky Symphonies of Wind Instruments:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uIL7wnx6Yy8>

Pablo Picasso Les Demoiselles d'Avignon:

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/4/4c/Les_Demoiselles_d'Avignon.jpg

A Picture of Stravinsky Sketched by Picasso:

<http://www.fotos.org/galeria/data/523/31920-Portrait-d-Igor-Stravinsky-pablo-picasso.jpg>