

Commonalities Between Music and Painting: Palette of Movement and Sound

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The purpose of the paper

The originality and significance of this paper lies in using a cross-modal perspective to examine the commonalities in music and visual art. In this paper, the author will focus on the dimension of 'intensity' between music and visual arts and discuss how 'intensity' affects our perception and appreciation of the arts.

The role of cross-modal transfer in our perceptual experiences

Cross-modal experience is inseparable with our daily life. Cross-modal experience (Marks 1978) is the transferability of sensory information from one sensory modality to another. Human beings have a natural tendency to share information across different modalities. For instance, starting from infant period during feeding time, babies are exposed to multi-sensory experiences: such as oral, tactile, auditory, visual and taste stimulation (Pomerleau-Malcuit and Clifton 1973).

Marks (1978) stated that there are some sensory attributes that their dimension of experience can apply to most or all sensory modalities. Notable example is the dimension of intensity. All sensations have intensity, no matter weak or strong. It is obvious that we can feel the intensity of brightness (colour), the intensity of loudness and softness (sound), the intensity of a specific fragrance (odour), the intensity of sharpness and roughness (tactile), regardless the intensity is strong or weak.

The facets of intensity affect our perceptual experience. For instance, bright sounds usually evoke bright images (and vice versa). Marks' (1978: 82) empirical studies demonstrated that people pair brightness of lights with loudness of sounds in a systematic manner from person to person. Further, Zwimpfer's (1988) study revealed that square pattern which used red, yellow, blue and green are perceived by spectators as 'brighter' and 'louder' than square pattern that used black, white, brown and grey colours. Besides, terminology such as dark and bright are frequently applied to musical sounds or tone colours.

The intensity of brightness and darkness in music and painting

In the following section, the intensity of sound and colour and its influence on our art experience will be discussed by using Impressionist's music and painting as illustration.

According to Roberts (1996), the impressionist movement is regarded as the greatest revolution in visual arts since Renaissance period. The impressionists aim at capturing the mood of the depicted object. The Impressionists demonstrated their cross-modal perception (such as visual-auditory, visual-tactile) in their compositions and artworks. Take the subject Fireworks as an example. Debussy uses a visual title, 'Fireworks' and Whistler uses a musical title, 'Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket' (see pic. 1) to depict the 'image' of the fireworks. Nocturne is a musical term for night music.

In the following paragraphs, the author will illustrate how the level of intensity shaped spectator's art or music experience. In Debussy's 'Fireworks', the facets of intensity (such as the brightness and movement) of fireworks are expressed through the alternation of softness and loudness.

In the beginning section of the 'Firework', Debussy used the term *pp* (very soft) and *léger, égal et lointain* (evenly and lightly, from distance near and far) to imply the spatial distance of the fireworks. From bar 12 and onwards, the expression sign shifts to *en se rapprochant peu à peu* (little by little, gradually coming closer). The movement of the firework is depicted by the manipulation of dynamic: alternation of softness and loudness. Also, the *glissando* (sliding) in bar 17 is stressed by *forte* (loudness) and then suddenly *piano* (softness). The contrast of loudness and softness is like an object being shot from near to far.

Referring to Marks (1978), he stated that loud sound elicited bright image. Loudness affects our perception about the spatial distance of an object. For the softer the sound, the more distant an object we perceive it to be and, the louder the sound, the closer the object we presume it to be. Furthermore, Hanslick (1974) regarded that 'qualifying adjectives' can be expressed through the intensity of 'touch' (strong or weak; slow or fast) attach upon a specific single note or a chord.

On the other hand, the intensity of brightness in 'Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket' is reflected in Whistler's handling of the strokes. The dabbing, splashing, scrubbing of the brushes create dynamic force to the painting.

Kandinsky stated the "scale of values from pianissimo to fortissimo can be expressed by increasing or decreasing intensity of line, or by its degree of lightness" (Lindsay & Vergo 1982: 572). Kandinsky's concept is reflected in Marks' (1975) empirical studies when people tend to pair increasing loudness with increasing luminosity in a systematic manner, similar from person to person. In *Nocturne of Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket*, Whistler used contrasting colours, such as bright (yellow, red) and dull (dark blue green) colours to highlight the intensity (brightness and loudness) of the fireworks. The bright colours are like staccato and glissando notes winking against the dark-green blue sky. Musically, in 'Fireworks', bar 79, the word '*éclatant*' (brilliant, dazzling, bursting out) is accompanied by increasing loudness.

On the contrary, Debussy's *Brouillards* (Mists) and Whistler's *Nocturne in Blue and Gold: Entrance to Southampton Water London Bridge* are examples of 'dimness' in music and painting. Both of them illustrate the vagueness and softness of mists through sound and colour.

In Debussy's *Brouillards* (Mists), the dynamic level, *p* (soft), *pp* (very soft) penetrated the whole piece of music, except in bar 29-30, where *f* is temporary used and vanished. Towards the end of the piece, *en retenant et en s'effaçant* (slowly fading to nothing) is denoted by the dynamic level *pp* (very soft) and *8a bassa* in the bass part. The tie notes within the chords created a static moment (like the mists hanging around). Besides, *extrêmement égal et léger* (extremely even and light), which required special attention on the intensity of touch, is used as performance direction in the opening section. The softness and quietness of the sound created light and dim photism (sounds evoke images) to the listeners.

On the other hand, in order to achieve the visual effect of even and light, Whistler blended the contours and colours in 'Nocturne in Blue and Gold: Entrance to Southampton Water London Bridge'. In this painting, Whistler emerged contours and lines into misty and shadowy background (Holden 1976). Everything in the canvas seemed to dissolve with each other. This design format created a sense of dimness and vagueness to the audience. Specific colours are being chosen to highlight the mood of the painting.

Whistler's treatment of visual elements shares common background with Debussy's auditory elements: that is, the mood and impression of the depicted objects overweigh the emotional content of an artwork. Both of them interpret the facets of intensity (brightness and dimness) in their music and art materials. The intensity of 'brightness' and 'dimness', like the intensity of 'dynamic', move along the 'dimension' from weak, moderate, strong or vice versa.

The other dimension of intensity, 'intensity of timbre', is illustrated by Schoenberg in his 'Orchestral piece Op.16, No.3'. 'Orchestral piece Op. 16 no.3' is derived from Schoenberg's impression on the Traunsee at dawn (Wellesz 1969). According to Wellesz (1969) and Reich (1968), Schoenberg intended to capture the reflection of the sun upon the water. Different instrumentation used on the same pitches implied the changing sunlight. The brightness of this piece lied on the 'tone colour' or 'timbre' of the instruments. As a result, the focus is the timbre (tone colour) instead of the pitch. Therefore, the choice of the pitch in this piece is under careful consideration.

In brief, the whole piece is a prolongation and variation of the chord, c, g #, b, e and a. It was the timbres that created colours. Further, Schoenberg precisely indicated the performance direction. He required the performers to attach the correct amount of intensity upon each note. Schonberg perceived each note has its own colour. This tone colour concept is similar to Kandinsky, as Kandinsky re-

garded that each point on the plane has its own distinctive colour and when the shape or size of the point changes, the inner colour also changes.

The intensity of timbre is stated by Kandinsky as: "The pitch of the different instruments corresponds to the breath of a line: violin, flute, and piccolo produce a very thin line, viola and clarinet a somewhat thicker one; and by way of the lower instruments, one arrives at broader and broader lines, right down to the lowest notes of double bass or tuba" (Lindsay and Vergo 1982: 618).

Music and art making: an outcome of cross-modal interaction

Schopenhauer (Fubini 1990) stated that music acts as a direct image of the world. Therefore, music serves to release certain image from the reality. Debussy once argued that "why could we not use the means that Claude Monet, Cezanne, Toulouse/Lautrec and others had made known? Why could we not transpose these means into music" (Lockspeiser 1980: 49).

Also, Hanslick's (1974) regarded music can 'express qualifying adjectives' (such as gentle, delicate and powerful). It can depict objective phenomena, such as snowing, raining and whispering. The depiction of 'objective phenomena' is a distinctive feature in Impressionist paintings. In other words, music acts as a kind of symbolism, a representation of the depicted object.

The picturesque of Debussy's music is reflected in the titles of his *Préludes* (Vol. 1 and 2). Examples include *Le vent dans la plaine* (The Wind on the Plain) which suggests a moment of tactile and visual correspondence. *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir* (Sounds and perfumes mingling in the Evening Air) depicts the abstractness of the sound and odour in the evening air, *Brouillards* (Mists) illustrates the veil of mists (visual), and *Feux d'artifice* (Fireworks) displays the movement of the fireworks. These music titles displayed Debussy's cross-modal composing concepts: "My desire is to produce what I hear" and "I love pictures as much as music" (Debussy 1980: 207). These titles imply rather than describe the depicted objects. They pave ways for the listeners to imagine the image. Music, therefore, acts as a kind of representation. For the impressionists aimed at capturing the atmosphere of an object instead of accurately depict the perceived object (Dunstan 1983).

On the other hand, Kandinsky's (1997) cross-modal nature in the arts is reflected in his common usage of musical terms (such as Impressions, Improvisations and Compositions) as his painting titles. Kandinsky's artworks revealed the movement and improvisational essence of music. In parallel to his artistic development was Schoenberg's musical development, from tonal to atonal period. When Kandinsky painted *Impression III* after he attended Schoenberg's concert in January,

1911, it marked the long term friendship and correspondence between them (Becks-Malorny 2003).

Hahl-Koch (1984) stated Kandinsky and Schoenberg regarded content outweigh the form and appearance of a depicted object. They strive for truthfulness instead of purely beauty. Therefore, they embrace and emancipate dissonance of tones and colours. They aim to pursue and illustrate 'inner visions' of human thoughts through the arts.

In brief, Debussy uses music to portray an impression, a 'contour' of the worldly objects through the eyes of the beholder. What really counts is the mood that infused upon the object instead of the object itself. On the other hand, Schoenberg takes away the 'contour' of the depicted object in order to express the inner truth. Therefore, the appearance of the object not only becomes vague but in an abstract and unrecognizable manner. Eventually, the unconscious level of the artist's mind is being introduced to the conscious level.

From their journey of representation to abstraction, Debussy and Schoenberg present to us that the visual 'kaleidoscope' of sound is the "direct product of a creative mind" (Hanslick 1974: 68). Also, their creative journey illustrated the existence of cross-modal interaction in the making of the arts.

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Painting example

- Whistler, James Abbott McNeill Whistler. 1875. *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket*. Image permission obtained from The Detroit Institute of Art. Gift of Dexter M. Ferry, Jr. 1988



Picture 1: Nocturne in Black and Gold:
The Falling Rocket, 1875