

## Uncertain Harmonies

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### All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music

Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, 1873

Since the time of Aristotle, who famously ascribed colours to the individual notes of the musical scale, artists, writers and musicians have explored the relationship between music and visual perception. From Raphael Mengs, who wished to paint 'in the style of' the composer Corelli, to Philipp Otto Runge who believed he could apply the principles of fugal composition to painting, countless artists have sought inspiration from a variety of musical forms. In the process they have radically altered the way in which we look at paintings.

Walter Pater reflected the views of a new generation of British artists in the late nineteenth century when he asserted the importance of form over subject. From the early 1860s onwards, there had been a concerted effort to create paintings that, like music, would 'obliterate' the distinction between matter and form, so that: '... this form, this mode of handling, should become an end in itself, should penetrate every part of the matter...' [1].

Pater's contemporary James McNeill Whistler is only one, though certainly the best known, of a new 'formalist' generation of artists, who famously used the vocabulary of music: symphonies, nocturnes and arrangements, to title his landscape paintings. At the same time that Whistler was promoting the importance of tone and line over subject matter, artists of the Aesthetic movement, notably Frederic Leighton and Albert Moore, were also experimenting with decorative arrangements of form and colour. Leighton's *Leider ohne Worte* or *Song without Words* (1860–61, Tate Gallery, London) was the first of several paintings in which the nude or draped figure was purged of associative meaning, paintings in which direct allusions were made to music, either in the title or in the subject matter. The restrained colour harmonies of Moore's classical composition *A Musician* (c.1867, Yale Center for British Art) were described by a contemporary critic as '... a sort of pictorial music drawn as from a lyre of but few strings' [2].

By the 1870s British artists were very much alive to the possibilities of Symbolism. Spurred on by the example of the European Symbolists, they were ready to take one step further in the rejection of naturalistic representation. Parallels were again drawn between the increasingly abstract nature of their art and the non-referential nature of music. A key example of British Symbolism is Edward Burne Jones' *The Golden Stairs* (1872–80, Tate Gallery, London). The heavily stylised and repeated forms of a descending file of musicians are a deliberate reflection of the rhythmic patterning and counterpoint of music.

While the developments of the Impressionists, Symbolists and neo-Classicalists helped, in some measure, to prepare the ground for an acceptance of more abstract and expressive forms of painting, literary and narrative art remained the dominant trend in Britain well into the 20th century. It was left to the great European pioneers of abstraction to further explore the equivalences between music and painting.

Where Whistler had drawn an analogy between his paintings and musical composition,

Kandinsky insisted on a complete unity of the senses. Kandinsky's first love was music and his biomorphic, weightless forms were intended to evoke in the viewer the sound of Schoenberg's atonal compositions and Scriabin's experimental symphonies.

Described in 1912 as 'a purely abstract language of form – a visual music' by the critic Roger Fry [3], Kandinsky's synaesthetic approach, his complete identification of particular musical sounds with specific colours, was enormously influential on both the Scottish Colourists and the artists of the Bloomsbury Group. John Duncan Fergusson introduced his fellow 'Glasgow Boys' to Kandinsky's ideas as art editor of the periodical *Rhythm* in 1911. He and Peploe contributed drawings, which explored the abstract, rhythmic qualities of line. Fergusson also painted a number of decorative figure paintings with dance-like rhythms and vibrant Fauvist colouring inspired by performances at the Ballets Russes. One of the most ambitious works by a British artist during this period was Duncan Grant's *Abstract Kinetic Collage Painting with Sound* (1914, Tate Gallery, London), a long collaged scroll designed to be unwound mechanically and viewed through an aperture while listening to Bach.

For a brief period before the First World War, artists pursuing very specific links between painting and music dominated the revolutionary modernist movement in Europe. These ranged from the short-lived Orphist movement incorporating the work of Robert and Sonia Delaunay, to the decorative, curvilinear compositions of Matisse and Mondrian's rhythmically geometric forms.

Following the war, British artists turned again to more traditional subjects with a particular focus on paintings inspired by nature. Formalist theories had taken root however, resulting in a rich diversity of artistic styles and approaches, leading at mid-century to numerous forms of abstract art that were inspired by nature without being directly referential. The correspondence between art and music was by now less rigorously pursued, though music was commonly used as a metaphor for abstract painting. Victor Pasmore, for example, whose main concerns were the essentially painterly ones of colour relations, space and texture, could still be described as 'a music maker', one who 'composed' with colour and form.

In 1980 John Hoyland drew a broad analogy between music and abstract art, in the sense that both appealed directly to the emotions rather than the intellect. 'We have refused to look at and enjoy abstract relationships, harmonies of colour and form which we do without question in music' [4]. Contemporaries like Gillian Ayres used colour in a more gestural and intuitive way that has been compared with improvisational jazz, in common with the work of many American abstract expressionists of the 1950s. Bridget Riley has compared her own work with that of Haydn and Mozart but only in the limited sense that they too employed complex formal structures to present sensory information, not as parallels or as direct inspiration for her paintings [5].

In the last two decades scientific interest in the phenomena of closely associating music and colour has been rekindled as scientists have begun to plot synaesthetic processes in the brain using PET and MRI scans. This in turn is leading to a number of experiments by painters and artists using time-based media, and again this avenue of enquiry seems to be opening up to a range of new practitioners.

## Kevin Laycock and Visual Music

Walter Pater's model of an artist who most successfully melded form and content was the Venetian painter Giorgione (c.1476–1510), a gifted musician whose enigmatic and evocative landscapes often featured concerts and musical performances. Kevin Laycock is also a

musician whose deep involvement in music has informed his work as an artist from his earliest student days.

In common with Kandinsky and Klee, Laycock has been concerned with analysing the correspondences between music and the visual image. As early as 1992 he was using a grid-like structure to echo the bars of sheet music, while patterned touches of colour suggested the mood and complex interplay of symphonic music. Like the painters who briefly came under Apollinaire's Orphist banner, Laycock has often used high-keyed, complementary colours to achieve maximum visual impact and vibrancy, painting over a white gesso ground for even greater luminosity. He has consistently produced work in series, exploring a range of approaches through which the principles of musical composition can be adapted to the creation of abstract paintings.

The rigorous approach to colour theory of Laycock's early work owes something to the example of Bridget Riley. While the underlying structure of his paintings is carefully, even scientifically, arrived at however, it is then over-written with a wide variety of marks, touches and dribbles of paint. There is a constant interplay between order and intuition. Structural elements are re-imposed over painterly, tachist marks, passages of paint are rubbed down and obscured or contrasted with well defined blocks and bands of pure, flat colour.

The balance, and often the tension, between order and instinct, ethereality and definition, give Laycock's paintings their characteristic feeling of rhythm married to fluidity, their 'musicality'. That same tension is present in the work of several contemporary abstract artists. It can be seen in Alexis Harding's large, powerful abstracts made by pouring a grid of enamel or gloss paint onto a ground of oil paint and then exploring and manipulating the relationship between the two media. Like Laycock, Tomma Abts works on series of works, which inform each other as they progress. Using a gradual and intuitive process of accretion, her geometric compositions eventually resolve themselves into autonomous finished works.

Laycock's ideas have been developed from his own practice as a musician and from conversations with composers. *Tectonics*, the last series of paintings completed in 2004, was created as a direct response to Sir Arthur Bliss's *Colour Symphony* of 1921–22. The symphony contains four movements, Purple, Red, Blue and Green. Bliss explored the heraldic and symbolic associations of each colour and in response Laycock's series of twelve paintings adopted parallel compositional structures.

*Tectonics* was the most rigidly structured series to date, the picture plane of each composition having 36 horizontal divisions to mirror the 36 instruments that the symphony is scored for. Further divisions of the picture plane reflect the tempo of each movement; broadly spaced and clearly defined for the Green movement, for example (moderato, symbolising hope, joy and victory), overlapping, turbulent bands of deep, mixed colour overlaid with rectilinear blocks of solid colour for the Purple movement (andante maestoso, representing royalty, pageantry and death). The colour range was informed by Laycock's study of paintings by the Scottish Colourists Samuel John Peploe and Francis Campbell Boileau Cadell, who, in the early 1920s, were using flat, largely unmodelled areas of strong, rich colour.

Laycock's most recent series of paintings, *Uncertain Harmonies*, takes its title from the composer György Ligeti's comments on his composition *Ramifications for String Orchestra – Nocturnal Landscapes*, written in 1968–69. Ligeti described how the string sections were tuned separately a quarter tone apart, creating an 'uncertain harmony'. After the closely structured approach of the *Tectonics* series, the idea of uncertainty as a compositional principle seemed particularly appealing. Ligeti's comments led the artist to begin a new series of work looking specifically at the theory of harmony in Western music and particularly at the use of cadence as a structural device.

Cadence refers to the use of a concluding musical phrase. A 'perfect' cadence is often used to conclude a piece of music, consisting of a dominant chord followed by a tonic chord, or the fifth and first notes of the scale. In the current series of paintings Laycock has experimented with sequences of secondary colours which imitate the tonal qualities of the musical scale, some playing on 'perfect' colour intervals, others on 'imperfect' and 'interrupted' visual cadences. *Uncertain Harmonies No 20* employs a mesh of secondary tones of yellow and green and vertical slashes of dark violet over a pale blue ground. The colour scheme is much simpler and flatter than in earlier work. All of the colours are mixed with lemon yellow to give the image sharpness and clarity, and, unlike a musical cadence, all the colour notes sound at once to give an instant visual hit.

As in Laycock's previous series, all of the paintings have been worked on at the same time. Layers of colour have been built up, each one in response to what has gone before. For a number of the paintings an earlier series of lithographs was reused to provide both the paper ground and the initial range of colours. Selected areas of the paintings have been sanded down to reveal the 'archaeology' of the image, often so vigorously that the paper is completely worn away. A very recent development is the introduction of laser cutting to further enliven the surface of the painting.

Laycock's strong sense of design frequently predominates, as in *Uncertain Harmonies No 10*. In this piece the heavily worked surface is broken up by irregular horizontal bands of varying tones of Prussian blue mixed with burnt umber. Combined with vertical stripes of Indian and lemon yellow, this loose grid controls and structures the underlying colour field.

A rigorous investigation of the analogy between painting and musical composition has occupied Laycock to an almost obsessive level but his paintings are ultimately self-referential. The aim has been to arrive at a form of 'absolute' abstraction that will parallel 'pure' instrumental music. At the same time there is an equal concern not to let the analogy of music control the artwork.

The intellectual basis of Laycock's paintings is not immediately obvious to the viewer, nor is it intended to be. For most of us, our enjoyment and appreciation of music does not come from an understanding of the way in which patterns of sound are structured but from their capacity to evoke emotional energy. The success of Laycock's paintings rests on their ability to engage our emotions so immediately and forcefully without reference to the external world.

## References

1. W Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, Ed. A Phillips (Oxford: OUP, 1998).
2. F G Stephens, quoted in an on-line catalogue note to Albert Moore 'A Musician' B1980.7, *Art and music in Britain: Four encounters* (Yale: Yale Center for British Art, 2006). [www.artandmusic.yale.edu/](http://www.artandmusic.yale.edu/)
3. R Fry, Preface to the catalogue of the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition (1912).
4. J Hoyland, Introduction to *Hayward Annual 1980: Contemporary painting and sculpture: selected by John Hoyland*, Hayward Gallery, London (1980).
5. [www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/riley\\_transcript.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/riley_transcript.shtml)

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