WHAT DOES MUSIC LOOK LIKE?

Donna Rowan Gold

A series of colourful explosions moving from left to right on a dark screen... brass is always yellow splashes, strings are a mellow background like a blue green sunset over which the other instruments’ shapes are laid... pianos move like ripples from a sky and a pale blue. Bright yellow trumpet splashes move diagonally upwards left to right... There is always movement in music and lots of colour.

Julie Ruxbrough

I see music in various forms. An orchestra looks like a patchwork quilt of many colours. Clarinets range from dark, dark blue to pale sky blue. Obleys crimson white with red ‘smile’, vocals, grey/white and cellos a ready, scratchy grey. Violas are a mahogany brown as are bassoons. Music moves around in front of me as a series of varied colours and shapes, many of which have some characters; aggressive, passive etc. The background is usually black or dark blue.

Deep bass looks like several giant, iridescent bouncing soap bubble orbs. To me music looks very different dependant on the tempo and structure. the fog then falling back in. (often purple) carpet like fog. if the music encompasses both high pitch notes being lighter and low ones darker (so a high note on a flute would be sky blue whereas a low one on a Double Bass would be almost black with a tint of brown). When multiple instruments are playing then it gets very confusing as to colour, sometimes developing into an entirely different colour like yellow or something. As to the movement, it’s very hard to describe but if you think of it as a sort of presence moving around inside the head. Itll move like the music being played, e.g. quick, slow, pizz, trem, smooth etc. But that doesn’t really begin to capture it, and I don’t think I could really.

Winter Stockwell


Keira Martin

It depends entirely on what the music sounds like - I find short sudden high pitched notes some of has ‘pasty’ ‘yew’ (thick like crystal formations) that are brightly coloured while a low reverberating bass line looks like a dark (often purple) carpet like fog. If the music encompasses both high pitch notes and a low bass line it often looks like bright lines are reaching out from the tug then falling back in...

Michael McGilnon

To me music looks very different dependant on the tempo and structure. Normally it’s shapes - squares, rectangles or a grid map in some types or a turning spiral in others.

Aboriginal Landscape by Mandi Solk

When I am painting my pictures I am most influenced by readily colourful music such as Cuban, World, Eastern European and Australian didgeridoo music. To me, what is perceived as brightly coloured music results in brightly coloured paintings.

Adam Pearce

The colour depends on the instruments (with, say, brass instruments tending towards the red and pink while string instruments being brown and woodland blue (lutes) purple) (cellos), or green (violons), also on the pitch with high notes being lighter and low ones darker (so a high note on a flute would be sky blue whereas a low one on a Double Bass would be almost black with a tint of brown). When multiple instruments are playing then it gets very confusing as to colour, sometimes developing into an entirely different colour like yellow or something. As to the movement, it’s very hard to describe but if you think of it as a sort of presence moving around inside the head. Itll move like the music being played, e.g. quick, slow, pizz, trem, smooth etc. But that doesn’t really begin to capture it, and I don’t think I could really.

"Synaesthetic representation of music " by Shibuya Haruka

It’s a from a passage from Debussy: Estude no.11. Fluid colours, move at the speed of smoke, water-like passive sensation. Debussy is the strongest trigger for colour, some others do also, - Scriabin, Bartok, some J.S Bach, Scriabin also triggers some very faint some of small, Bartok, shadow shapes and brilliant colours, Bach, more associated with keys-colours, and some kind of meaning/shapes like words. And Tchaikovsky mixture of colours but never muddy. Transparent, like fire. Synaesthesia in which vision is triggered by music and other everyday sounds is, by all accounts, particularly complex and beautiful. When we first started to study it some years ago, we made the mistake of calling it sound-colour synaesthesia as we assumed that the experiences were comparable to the colours evoked from numbers or letters. The synaesthetes soon showed us the error of our ways. Their experiences consisted of far more than colour. It contained moving shapes and textures that would swirl and pop-up at different places and all dancing in time to the rhythm. It is perhaps not surprising that many people with this type of synaesthesia are more likely to pick up a paintbrush or learn to play a musical instrument. To the researcher, studying this type of synaesthesia can also reveal important secrets about how all of our brains/minds work.

For people who lack synaesthesia (such as myself), ‘visual music’ makes far more intuitive sense than, say, numbers triggering colour. We encounter similar depictions when we walk in to a nightclub. Indeed our brains are configured to notice any similarities that occur across our different senses. A change in time together with a flash of light will feel connected even if it is a pure coincidence. It is also the case that certain visual properties and acoustic properties go together. Even for people who don’t have synaesthesia, we all appear to understand that a high pitched note should appear visually smaller, lighter and brighter, and higher up in space than a low pitched note. These are probably not culturally learned as infants and young children show some of the same trends. People with synaesthesia don’t just understand these rules they literally see them in their day-to-day life.

When listening to a piece of music, synaesthetes don’t just see the current notes that are being played they also typically see the music that has already been heard, which trails behind in space like undulating plastic snakes.

Also, the music doesn’t move in any old direction – it tends to move from left to right. I have also been asking people whether when they hear a sound (e.g. a phone ring) the vision appears to come from the direction of the sound i.e. the phone or elsewhere (e.g. it appears in front of them no matter where the phone is). This yields some different and interesting answers. For example, one person said that the sound appears to come from the phone initially, but if the thing about picking it up it then the colours reappear in front of her. From a scientist’s point of view, there is still a lot to learn and discover about this fascinating type of synaesthesia.

"Herodiade Fragmente" by Jane Mackay

More of Jane’s artwork can be found at www.soundart.com

NEXT ISSUE

Next time we will be looking at synaesthesia and gender/personality. If you would like to contribute to this or a future newsletter please write to us at: UKSA, PO Box 6258, Leighton Buzzard, LU7 0WP or email: Newsletter.UKSA@hotmail.co.uk

Please submit your contributions by 1st June 2007 if for inclusion in the next issue.

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Victoria Edmonds, Editor

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Firstly, thanks to all those who contributed to and attended the 2007 conference, I hope you found it an interesting experience. UKSA President James Warnerton shares his thoughts on the conference over the page.

Also, this issue we will be looking at synaesthesia and music.

On this page Jamie Ward gives a brief introduction into this form of synaesthesia, while we hear about Anr Dejik’s experience of coloured music, along with illustrations of what she sees, and Helen Sherrah-Dawes shares her thoughts on synaesthesia and perfect pitch.

We’ll also hear from some of our members about their experiences of ‘seeing’ music, including several examples of music inspired artwork such as the one below by Jane Mackay.

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Victoria Edmonds, Editor
A word from UKSA President James Wannerton:

Hi everyone.

The third UKSA annual conference held at Oxford was a resounding success judging from the numerous positive comments received from the attending synaesthetes and researchers. I especially liked the observation from one researcher who remarked that the thing that makes this kind of event so unique is that the subject of the scientific study is actually sitting in the audience and actively participates.

The guest speakers came from far and wide – The UK, Europe and the USA – and were widely rewarded with two days of diverse and fascinating presentations on all the latest thoughts and leading research. It was also very encouraging to see a new generation of synaesthete researchers presenting their own, fresh perspectives on what is indeed a continually emerging condition.

The thing that particularly struck me was the way all the presenters were totally open to suggestions and ideas on improvements to each other’s research methods and to see all the genuine and useful feedback they were getting from one another.

On a purely selfish level, I find these conferences particularly energizing as they give me this opportunity to meet up with and speak to other synaesthetes and researchers, an experience I find quite liberating as it makes me feel totally at ease. It was a genuine privilege to meet up with some old friends and to see so many of you making the effort to be there.

The whole weekend went with nary a hitch - the thanks for that have to go to Jennifer Green and Dr Julian Asher for their great organisation and attention to detail. The conference location at New College was an inspired choice, proving to be particularly atmospheric with the beautiful grounds providing the ideal backdrop to proceedings. And it was nice to see the lively debate continuing within the confines of one of Oxford’s finest buildings too.

These conferences are by the members, for the members and their continued success is down to you. Many thanks for an inspiring and thought provoking weekend and I’m certain that most, if not all, came away better informed.

Other UKSA news. The Association is putting pressure ahead for charitable status which will enable us to expand and provide more for our members in the future. We are also actively pursuing a very worthwhile project with the aim of providing increased awareness of synaesthesia within the UK education system. The Association is gaining a respected and well deserved reputation as the premier centre for research and investigation into all things synaesthete and we are continually working on ways to improve our response to the marked increase in media attention. The 2004 BBC documentary on synaesthesia was broadcast on prime time Australian TV mid March, leading to a lot of positive feedback and increased interest in synaesthesia and synaesthesia research.

On behalf of the UKSA conference committee I’d like to thank you once again for your continued support and much valued support.

Have a great summer.

James

SoundWear Project

The SoundWear project by fashion designer Simon Thorogood and artist-programmer Stephen Wolff aims to create a tool by implication music as part of a fashion item. A small, hand held device is a hand held block which contains tools for sensors (and the general public) to note associations between music and design and a small selection of pieces of music.

If anyone is interested in previewing an early version of the website, they can contact stephanosoundwear.co.uk for more details.

Swimming in the dark blue sea of C... Helen Sherrah-Davies

If I could ever get into grad school and I attained the powers of computer rendering, the one thing I’d really love to do is to translate one song into colour. When I’m really bored on the bus or something, I like to draw and see what pops out in the event that ever happens. The shapes seem to emerge from the notes, from the rhythm and sequence with the bass on the bottom and the treble on the top. After that, all’s a mystery. I’m not sure I even have a set colour-map to scale that some Syns have. The colour of a song is such a virtual thing, but what kind of sound is it that’s really impossible to establish any real consistency? I’d only have to do it once because like everything else Syn, the colour coding for a specific song will always remain the same. The only thing that can change that, short of changing a song or sound itself, is to change the order it’s played. If I have ten songs on a CD, no matter what song number sounds like it will have a navy blue overlay. Song five is purple, one is yellowish, etc. In extremely rare cases the music will contain so much of a certain colour of sound that it will override the track number’s colour, but that usually never happens. If the song has no track number when it’s first heard it won’t have an overlay, but if it’s re-recorded in a compilation three years later, whichever track number it is it will pick up the colour of the number. If a song was song four for ten years and suddenly is changed to track seven, it will take one or two plays before it switches colour but will change. Once I made a map that had three former track cues in one, it changed the diagram and they system were eventually reassigned different colours, but I was pretty weird having a set of purple songs one after another.

The Appearance of Music: Raving Without Drugs

By Anie Delphi

I'm a “mature” student at Berklee College of Music in Boston, having had considerable training in Classical music in the UK, starting the piano at age 4, violin at 6, going to Cambridge School of Music and continuing from there. Now attempting to cross worlds into the improvisatory realm of jazz and world music it’s a whole different ball game. Some things come naturally, like being able to play by ear or to reproduce sounds as I hear the colours and can “see” what my brain is doing.

I know, merely because it is in a different key than the track number’s colour, but that usually never happens. If the song has no track number when it’s first heard it won’t have an overlay, but if it’s re-recorded in a compilation three years later, whichever track number it is it will pick up the key colour than I’m used to!

I’m sure people’s colours differ, but in general, the colours are for me–

A, yellow, burgundy red, C, blue, white that interestingly enough is a darker blue green bordering on black, E, orange, F brown and G green. The theory and facts are interesting on this, with the sharp being more metallic and bright, and the flats being more creamy and warm. As the frequency goes higher, the colour gets lighter and as the notes get lower, the colours get darker. Different instruments produce different textures to the sound and spatially, there is much variation too, sometimes like the opening of “Fantasy” with words and fireworks, sometimes like the glistening pools of multi coloured oils on water, and sometimes as areas of points of light.

I would love to hear from anyone who shares this, or similar worlds!

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