# *Artists With an Eye for Music*

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*Washington*

"Synesthesia" is the fifty-cent word for a dime-a-dozen phenomenon: the blurring of sensory perception, sometimes bringing into play touch, taste or smell, but most commonly a linkage of sight and sound.

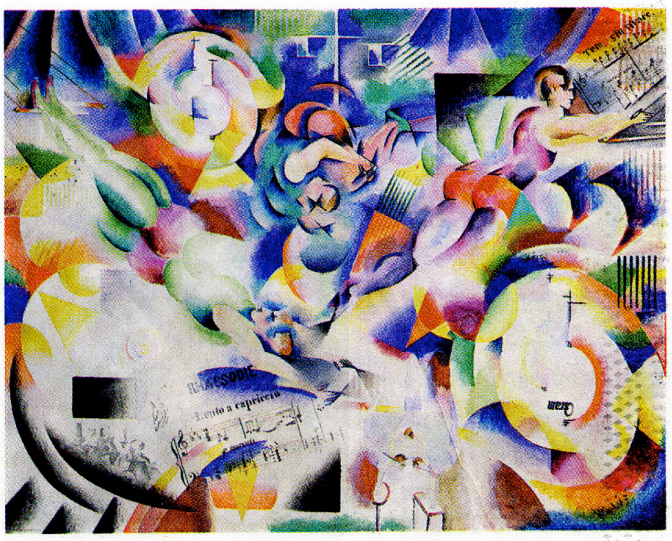
Musicians aplenty (civilians, too) associate keys or chords or instruments or voices with colors. And given how creators in one medium tend to envy their counterparts in other media, are we surprised if painters and composers have wanted to jump the fence to where the grass is greener? Long before Vivaldi's "Four Seasons," composers were trying to paint pictures for the ear. A countermovement to compose symphonies for the eye, however, began to build up steam only in the 20th century.

"Visual Music"—originally seen at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and now at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden through Sept. 11—traces the history of the once-revolutionary idea that, in the words of the catalog, "fine art should attain the nonrepresentational aspects of music." In the process, the curators propose "an alternative history of abstract art of the past century." Alternative, but strangely familiar, for the experimenters, crackpots and tinkerers whose work is honored here connect directly with the chaotic, often dazzling visual fabric of contemporary life as we know it. Think light shows at Fillmore East. Think screen savers.

Visual music—does this thing exist? Maybe not, yet artists have long dreamed of it. Cooking up an algorithm to correlate sound and light is a cinch; structuring a picture or a pageant on musical principles would be quite another. What is the visible counterpart of a note, with its dual properties of pitch and duration? How would you "stack" visual notes to mimic harmony, or string them together in melodies? How would you develop dynamic forms?

According to Karol Berger's "A Theory of Art" (Oxford University Press), cited in Richard Taruskin's monumental six-volume "Oxford History of Western Music" (Oxford University Press), published last year, "Visual media are the instruments of knowing the object of desire but not the desire itself, tonal music is the instrument of knowing the desire but not its object." Translation: Pictures show us things we might want (but not what it feels like to want them); whereas music conveys what it feels like to want things (without telling us what things in particular). It's a tough argument to demolish, and there are others just as cogent, several of them spelled out in the catalog. Even so, the curators—Kerry Brougher and Judith Zilczer from the Hirshhorn, Jeremy Strick and Ari Wiseman for MOCA—do a great job chasing their chimera.

The quest begins with paintings and works on paper by lesser-known artists of the early 20th century who sought, in various ways, to compose in color. Here we find many concentric, intersecting and exploding rings and circles of color (Morgan Russell and Stanton Macdonald-Wright, whose imagery bears an uncanny resemblance to that of the better-known Robert Delaunay, who did not share their musical aspirations). We find nestled or repetitive shapes suggestive of fractals (Frantisek Kupka and Henri Valensi). And we find, in a more literal-minded vein, the odd piece incorporating a bar or two of actual musical notation (Daniel Vladimir Baranoff-Rossiné, unlikely to be confused with Rossini).



Hirshhorn Museum

In a more literal-minded expression of the theme, **Daniel Vladimir Baranoff-Rossiné**'s work **'Capriccio Musicale (Circus)'** incorporates a bar or two of actual musical notation.

A standout among the pioneers is the unsung artist-composer Mikalojus Konstantinas Ciurlionis, from Lithuania, represented by two sheets entitled "Sonata No. 6 (Sonata of the Stars)"—one an agitated "Allegro," the other a quiescent "Andante," each graced by an angel (1908). Cosmic in perspective, *symboliste* in feeling, gold-greenish in palette, symmetrical in conception but with an overlay of freely undulant movement, the pieces convey a simultaneous architecture and flow, as music can. A cluster of works by more familiar figures—Kandinsky ("Fragment 2 for Composition VII," 1913), Klee ("Nocturne for Horn," 1921), O'Keeffe ("Music—Pink and Blue II," 1919)—reflects an apparently more casual interest in the theme at hand. In any case, their excellence raises them above the level of didactic illustration.

Can animation be far behind? Of course not. But as a prelude, we are offered Hans Richter's "Orchestration of Color" and "Fuge in Rot und Grün (Fugue in Red and Green)." Both dated 1923, these taut, disciplined exercises develop a small set of thematic elements (shapes, colors) into clear overarching forms: the musical analogy is plain to see. The same is true, in strikingly different ways, of such early experimental films as Viking Eggeling's silent "Symphonie diagonale" (1924) and Oskar Fischinger's crystalline "Studie Nr. 7" (1931), a witty, abstract visualization of the "Hungarian Dance No. 5" of Johannes Brahms. Against such gems, such entries as Len Lye's hyperkinetic, anarchic "A Colour Box" (1935) and Harry Smith's "Early Abstractions: Film No. 3 (Interwoven)" (1949), which throw in everything but the kitchen sink, illustrate exactly how *not* to make (or even accompany) music by means of shapes and colors.

**VISUAL MUSIC**
*Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden*
*Washington*
Through Sept. 11

In the long-forgotten ex-folk singer and lutanist Thomas Wilfred (1889-1968), the curators have resurrected a true visionary. Three pieces are on view, created over a span of three-plus decades beginning in the early 1930s. (One originally served as backdrop for the receptionist at the corporate headquarters of Clairol.) Stowed behind a screen, safely out of sight, are clunky mechanical contraptions, like junk in a mad scientist's garage: a light bulb meant for an airport runway here, shards of colored glass there, a tower that rotates slowly, assembled from metal plates. The "sculpted light" captured on the viewer's side rivals the Northern lights in fascination and surpasses them in variety and intensity of colors, evoking rainbow X-rays of living creatures, the dissolution of drops of jewel-toned inks in a glass of water, the spiraling of nebulae through the cosmos. Maybe even stranger, the light can seem to liquefy or turn to dust, then to congeal into substances you feel you could reach out and touch.

For up-to-the-minute sorcery, push on to Leo Villareal's "Lightscape" (2002). Among the most recent works in the show, this rectangular assemblage of light-emitting diodes is capable (we are told) of producing 16 million colors. Across the flat surface plays a never-ending fantasia of grids and blurs and color fields, glowing, flickering, flashing in hues as lush as nature's, as artificial as those of a jarful of hard candies wrapped in cellophane. Mesmerized, a viewer may wonder just how to classify these gorgeous visions. Best not to worry. Over the hundred years covered in the show, the definitions both of music and the visual arts have grown ever more provisional—as for "visual music," who knows? Call it what you will, "Lightscape" is the real McCoy.

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