

Ut Pictura Musica: Interactions between Igor Stravinsky' Concerto for Piano and Wind Instruments and Analytic Cubism in Visual Arts

*Music.
The breath of a statue.
Or, perhaps:
the silence of a painting. The words beyond
where all words end.¹*

There are many proofs regarding Igor Stravinsky's deep connection to visual arts. Igor Stravinsky had visual ideas during composing his masterpieces (The Firebird, The Rite of Spring etc.) according to his letters, books and conversations. Unfortunately, there is no information or any evidence about the correspondence between aural and visual elements in his Concerto for Piano and Wind Instruments... In my opinion, this concerto generally and the first movement particularly have a visual equivalent, which could be found in the cubist movement. In order to prove this argument we have to find common characteristics between the musical style/language of this musical work and the analytic cubism style in painting. In my paper I'll try to examine these questions through deep analyze of the first movement of Stravinsky's work and its connection to paintings by P. Picasso and G. Braque.

There is certain amount of questions regarding this topic (music and visual arts). For example: Could any work of visual arts be translated into music? (and vice versa). How precise could it be? What would our expectation be like, if we are aware to the interaction between them? Could these relations change our understanding (as listeners) and interpretation (as performers) drastically? Etc.

The incredibly interesting and long history of this interactions started thousands of years ago from the short sentence of Simonides of Ceos, the most eminent of the Ancient Greek lyric poets (6 century B.C.), who proclaimed painting and poetry as sister arts and said, "Poetry is vocal painting, as painting is silent poetry".

This thought was quoted by Plutarch (46–120 A.D.) who changed it to "Painting is a mute poetry and poetry is a speaking picture" in his *De Gloria Atheniensium*. And also by Longinus (1st century A.D.) in his "On The Sublime". However between those three great thinkers there were many others, who were intellectually busy with the idea of concerning the essence, comparison and identity of poetry, paintings and later music, such as: Plato (427–348 B.C.) in "The Republic", Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) in "The Poetics" and Cicero (106–43 B.C.) in "Tusculans" etc. During the 3,000 years when painting was regarded as mimetic it was easy enough to claim its parallel with poetry, because according to the ancients, they both "imitated" human action (Aristotle even discussed music as mimetic).

This relation reached the greatest popularity during the Renaissance, which continued until the middle of the 18th century. The contemplations regarding this interaction weren't limited by resemblance of arts, but was spread to following spheres of discussions, such as: differences and superiority of arts. In these intellectual battles and even wars participated all of the thinkers mentioned above. Almost all of them were convinced that poetry is surpassed over painting. Since poem develops in time and painting remains the same, and in addition poem can depict what cannot be visually depicted. In the 18th century was an opposite view on this comparison: poetry has no thematic limitations and endless capability, when painting is limited to visually perceptible objects in a single moment and incapable of dealing with logical relationship.

In 19th century the paradigm of painting as silent poetry was replaced by the paradigm of painting as silent music. The new paradigm was made explicit in 1859, in an article in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* by the critic Louis Viardot, who wrote an essay with a provocative title: "Ut pictura musica", or "As with music, so with painting". It was a kind of turning point in the history of relations between music and visual arts. Musicologists and art historians begun to explore the reciprocal influences between music and painting during the nineteenth century, a critical period when instrumental music was identified as the paradigmatic expressive art and theoretically aligned with painting in the formulation *ut pictura musica*.

¹ Rilke, R.M., 1981, *Selected Poems of Rainer Rilke*, ed. and trans. Robert Bly New York: Harper Perennial.

Under music's influence, painting approached the threshold of abstraction, concurrently many composers cultivated pictorial effects in their music. Following terminology was developed in this period of time: visualization in music, musical pictorialism in painting etc. Great French poet and writer Charles Baudelaire tried and fully succeeded (in his opinion) in depicting paintings by musical terminology. Another great artist of this time, French painter Eugène Delacroix talked about musical harmony in paintings. Much later the American painter Jackson Pollock, and the Italian sculptor Anthony Caro, both invited the viewer to see their work as music. A French artist André Derain announced the dissonant principle in the paintings of the Fauves as well. During the 19th century (the second half) composers, painters and philosophers actively participated in interacting discourses in seeking to redefine the very identity and the aims of their arts, but they also dealt with comparisons, differences and superiority. For example: German philosophers Friedrich Schiller and Arthur Schopenhauer both claimed that music is undoubtedly a superior art. Later, following them, a great Russian painter Wassili Kandinsky with his usual emotionality stated that "...they (arts) are finding in Music the best teacher ... music has been for some centuries the art which has devoted itself not to the reproduction of natural phenomena, but rather to the expression of the artist's soul, in musical sound."²

There are many proofs regarding Igor Stravinsky's strong connection to visual arts, the composer was deeply in love with painting, sculpture and architecture throughout his whole life. "An artist must avoid symmetry, but he may construct in parallelisms ... as in The Last Judgment mosaic in Torcello, where the sizes and proportions, movements and rests, darks and lights of the two sides are always varied"³ expresses Stravinsky his opinion about the 12th-century Byzantine mosaic, The Last Judgment in Torcello cathedral. In the following words he depicts another visual work, this time by the Dutch artist Piet Mondrian "Blue Façade" (1914): "This painting is composed of elements that tend to symmetry, but avoids symmetry in subtle parallelisms... Of all musicians of his age Haydn was the most aware... that to be perfectly symmetrical is to be perfectly dead"⁴. Not once he compares between two arts: "just as our eye completes the lines of a drawing which the painter has knowingly left incomplete, just so the ear may be called upon to complete a chord and cooperate in its resolution, which has not actually been realized in the work..."⁵ Or another one: "A color only has value in relation to the other colors... Red has no value in itself. It only acquires it through its proximity to another red or a green... And that is what I have wanted to do in music..."⁶.

Other than that, the composer expresses his opinion regarding differences between music and visual art: "The plastic arts are presented to us in time: we receive an over-all impression before we discover details little by little and at our leisure. But music is based on temporal succession and requires alertness of memory. Consequently music is chronologic art, as painting is a spatial art."⁷

There are many artists who talked about the importance of "visual component" in Stravinsky's oeuvre, and perhaps the presence of this component could explain this fact that so many composer's works were translated into the visual language of ballet? For example: *Dances Concertantes*, *Ragtime*, *Movements for piano & orchestra*, *Variations*, *Capriccio for piano & orchestra*, *Symphony in three movements*, *Violin Concerto*, *Duo Concertante*, *Choral variations*, *Symphony of Psalms*, *Tango*.

One way or another the "visual component" of his music was very attractive to painters, such as Natalia Goncharova, Marc Chagall, Nikolai Roerich, Alexander Benois, Pablo Picasso etc.

As it was already mentioned, The Concerto for Piano and Wind Instruments was written in Paris in 1923–1924, after the Symphonies of Wind Instruments. These two compositions belong to the period known as neo-classic period (departing from the composer's previous Russian style). This concerto stands among many works for piano written about the same period of time and were to be played by the composer himself, such as *Capriccio for Piano and Orchestra*, *Sonata*, *Serenade in A Major*, etc. The Concerto for Piano and Wind Instruments is the first original full-scale work of the "neo-classical period" (by the way, Stravinsky himself didn't support this division in his own words ever).

The Concerto for Piano and Wind Instruments was written in that time when the relations between different arts were crucial. But before dealing with the visual equivalent of this composition I'd like to spotlight some formalistic tendencies in the concerto. Generally in this period and specifically in this work the composer

² Kandinsky, W., 1977. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Revised edition edition, Ch. 4. Dover Publications Inc.

³ Craft, R., 1959. *Conversation with Igor Stravinsky*, p. 92. New York: Doubleday&Company.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁵ Stravinsky, I., 1993. *Poetics of music*, Revised edition, p. 34. Harvard University Press.

⁶ Carr, M.A., 2010, *Stravinsky's Pulcinella: A Facsimile of the Sources and Sketches*, Wisconsin: A-R Editions.

⁷ Stravinsky, I., 1993, *Poetics of music*, Revised edition, p. 34. Harvard University Press.

wanted to find objectiveness and an essential universal principle of rational necessity with celebration of musical construction (without any personification or self-gratification).

In his books Stravinsky crystallized some of the basic ideas of the formalistic aesthetics with his famous thesis about the “inability of music to express virtually anything other than itself”. A Finnish musicologist and semiotician Eero Tarasti relates Stravinsky’s music to formalism: “Stravinsky has been influenced by the modernistic movements prevailing in Russia at the beginning of the century and which later were crystallized into aesthetics of the Russian formalists...”⁸

The comparisons and all kind of parallels between Cubism and Stravinsky and more specifically between Picasso (as the Stravinsky of art) and Stravinsky himself (as the Picasso of music) are well known. Unfortunately, there is no information or any evidence about the correspondence between aural and visual elements in the Concerto for Piano and Wind Instruments. In spite of this I’d like to try and find the common characteristics between this work (the 1st movement) and the Cubism movement. Moreover, I would like to take one step forward in attempt to find correlations between this composition and one of the major branches of the artistic movement of Cubism-Analytical Cubism, which was developed between 1908 and 1912.

There are a few fundamental characteristics of this branch: 1) Analytic cubists “analyzed” natural forms and reduced the forms into basic geometric parts on the two-dimensional picture plane; 2) Objects are depicted from different viewpoints simultaneously; 3) Movement is based on rhythmical obsession, non-symmetrical structure and juxtaposition of static and dynamic; 4) The figure and ground are given equal importance; 5) Color is almost non-existent, except for the use of a monochromatic scheme.

Now we are on our way to find the same characteristics in the work of Igor Stravinsky:

1) The equal importance of “figure and ground” in concerto could be easily found in blending of melody and accompaniment and blurring between consonances and dissonances (or renouncing of the dialectical relationship between dissonance and consonance).

2) Movement is precise, with not symmetrical structure (as in paintings in analytical cubism); mechanical and non-stop movement creates a feeling of rhythmical obsession; juxtaposition of static and dynamic sticking out because of endless repetitiveness of very small patterns.

3) Depiction from different viewpoints simultaneously we can find in Stravinsky attempt to “show” the same sound (A) from different viewpoints, putting it in the center of his observation, using different intervals, chords/harmonies and rhythmical patterns.

4) Monochromatic color in concerto is created because of unusual using of wind instruments, avoiding their melodic ability; unusual using of piano, as “crispy”, percussive quasi-mechanical instrument (avoiding romantic colorfulness); confusion between two different colors – major and minor gives us uncomfortable feeling of inability to recognize the color; massing together chords of various types, depriving them of their specific tonal pull causes the same result, likewise using a number of harmonic blocks, segments of melody which belongs to different tonal orbits and avoiding (almost) dynamic nuances in concerto.

In this paper were attempts to discover the hidden “visuality” of musical language in Stravinsky’s Concerto for Piano with Wind Instruments. After the short trip through correlations between two arts, we can be if not completely convinced, at least eagerly ready for contemplations on this topic... But surely, we are left with a few intriguing questions: Does this kind of “marriage” between these two arts help us understand/decode Stravinsky’s music? Would it serve the composer’s score? Does it clear up the nuances of his works? Or maybe, Stravinsky’s music can speak forcefully enough without any help?

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⁸ Tarasti, E., 1979. *Myth and Music*, p. 276. The Netherlands: Walter de Gruyter.

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Santrauka

Ut pictura musica: I. Stravinskio Koncerto fortepijonui ir pučiamiesiems bei analitinio kubizmo dailėje sąsajos

Yra žinoma daugybė įvairių muzikos ir vaizduojamųjų menų sąsajų apraiškų: F. Lisztas ir Raphaelis, C. Debussy ir C. Monet, O. Respighi ir S. Botticelli ir t. t. Nagrinėjant šį reiškinį (muzikos ir vaizduojamųjų menų sąsajas), kyla keletas klausimų:

Ar įmanoma vaizduojamojo meno kūrinį perkelti į muziką (ir atvirkščiai)? Kaip spalvą „perkelti“ į muziką? Kaip tiksliai tai įmanoma padaryti? Kokie yra mūsų lūkesčiai, kai žinome apie tokią ar panašią sąveiką?

Straipsnyje mėginama atsakyti į šiuos klausimus detalai nagrinėjant Stravinskio Koncerto fortepijonui ir pučiamiesiems I dalį bei jos sąsajas su P. Picasso ir G. Braque'o paveikslais ir daugiausia dėmesio skiriant spalvų problemai.

Autorės manymu, visas šis Koncertas (ir ypač jo pirmoji dalis) turi vizualinį ekvivalentą, randamą kubizmo judėjime (tiksliau, analitiniame kubizme), kuriam būdingas statiškumo ir dinamiškumo priešpriešinimas bei vaizdavimas iš skirtingų požiūrių vienu metu; figūros ir fono klausimas, ir pan. Be to, ir analitinio kubizmo darbuose, ir Stravinskio muzikoje galima pastebėti bendrą požiūrį į spalvą, tiksliau – beveik spalvos nebuvimą (monochrominę spalvą).

Šį teiginį siekiama patvirtinti ieškant bendrų bruožų Stravinskio Koncerto muzikinėje kalboje bei analitinio kubizmo tapybos stiliuje.