

The Classical Beat

By Stephen Dankner

PARALLELS IN VISUAL ART AND MUSIC

I've always had a love of visual art and for its history. As a student I would haunt museums, which was easy to do in New York City. It didn't matter what the style – classical, Impressionist or modern – the paintings seemed to call to me, to bring me into their world, their time and place. Of course, as a musician, listening to music does the same thing, but visual art is so much more immediate.

I recently audited Senior Lecturer Eva Grudin's art history classes at Williams College, and in the process learned more and made stronger ties with schools, styles, trends and artists than ever before. She teaches so well, drawing you into society's evolving contemporary social history, which is, after all, the reason art exists.

The parallels are there in obvious ways. Do you want to visualize Handel? Look at Poussin. Looking for an analog to a Chopin scherzo or ballade? Check out Delacroix. Try this experiment: look at one of Monet's paintings of Rouen Cathedral, then (or while) listening to "Nuages" of Debussy. The two form a perfect fusion of complementary visual and auditory harmony.

The comparisons get really interesting when you get to 20th century art. Stravinsky and Picasso (Cubism); Kokoschka and Schoenberg (Expressionism); Matisse and Varese – Fauvism in music. John Cage used to hang out with Jackson Pollock at the Cedar Bar in Greenwich Village, and you can feel the balletic movements in their work - action painting and "Music of Changes." The minimalism of Ellsworth Kelly or Barnett Newman has a counterpart in Steve Reich and Philip Glass. What about Michael Daugherty's pop creations, such as his "Metropolis" symphony and Roy Lichtenstein's pixilated pop art, inspired by comic books? The synchronicities are there, across the board. The eye meets the ear, and they both connect to the brain.

What is so refreshing in sitting in on Ms. Grudin's lectures is how stylistic change is a powerful constant. There's been no shortage of innovative artists who force us to see in new ways. And so much of that change has been

defined by artists outside the academy, who were not at first accepted by the academicians or by the art-loving public. The artist as outsider really takes hold from the 1860s on, with Manet, through the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists van Gogh, Gauguin and Cezanne, leading to the Cubism of Picasso and Braque, and so on, into the 20th century.

So much of this art was considered outrageous in its day, yet now, of course all of it is accepted as canonical. Would that music lovers had the same sense of history for the outré composers of the last century – the ones who are talked about more than heard, the displaced persons, the fugitives of the concert hall.

Tolerance is a wonderful attribute of the cultivated and enlightened mind. In that art history course I never heard the phrase “I don’t like it.” It’s important that as educated people, we don’t develop a dismissive attitude. I teach my students that it is crucial for them to know that great art exists; it’s not my mission to convince them to like it. We may find certain art repugnant, even repellant. Recognizing that standards of beauty change, no serious viewer would compare Renoir with DeKooning, Schiele with Magritte. The secret is to look with different eyes. What you learn how to do in a good art history or film class is how to “read” a painting or a film, to recognize the signals the artist has put into the work, often in subtle ways.

Granted, music is the most abstract of the arts, and often it’s not “about” anything. There are rarely pictorial clues to tell us what to listen for, or what Arnold Schoenberg was thinking of when composing, say, “Erwartung” in 1909. But if you want to test my theory of cross-compatibility between the arts, look at “The Scream” by Edvard Munch, then listen to the Schoenberg piece, above, and see if you don’t make a meaningful connection.

Apprehending difficult-to-hear, complex music can be done; we just have to try a little harder by looking for parallel perspectives in other art forms. As an experiment in the process, try to exclude from consideration – at least temporarily – the notion of making a judgment call about liking or disliking any new and unfamiliar piece of music. Ask yourself if any similar mindset is being put forth in the other arts, look into it, then see if you can make that mental leap back to music and compare notes. Minimalism, collage, expressionism, Cubism, surrealism, Dadaism – all these started as visual art movements and have more or less concurrent musical equivalents.

If there's one thing my art history class has illuminated, it's that the progressive artists are "onto something," and that they have a lot to say about their time and place in society; think of Picasso's anti-fascist masterpiece "Guernica." I believe this is true of modern music as well. Artists "see" with clarity of vision most of us lack. And they're usually right. If you had only bought that van Gogh in 1889 or that Jackson Pollock in 1950...

RECAP

I was fortunate to be welcomed back to teach at Williams College, after evacuating New Orleans last August due to Hurricane Katrina. I had taught at Williams in the 1970s, so in a sense it was like coming home.

This semester I taught a class of six brilliant and talented composers; in the audience was the father of one of them. When I saw him, I had a shock of recognition; I had taught him at Williams in 1976. Thereby, the circle of teaching was completed.

Each student produced seven works, and they presented a concert of seventeen of their new pieces last Saturday. To review their efforts would be a conflict of interest for me as a writer, and I don't think student work should have to bear public scrutiny and appraisal. I don't believe it would be crossing the line, though, to print some of my advice to them as budding composers in the forum of this column, as a sort of credo. Tolerance, as mentioned above, is only a half-measure; the young thrive on encouragement. After the concert, I wrote to them the following:

"You all should be very proud of the hard work and talent that went into the recital today. I hope the memory of your success stays with you, and will spur you on to many more and bigger triumphs down the road.

By now you've probably learned that composition is the hardest thing to do in music. Considering your innate talents and work ethic, I hope that the risk/reward of putting everything you have into your music - and it is yours, no one else's - becomes habit forming.

We need good new music, and composers with something personal and important to say, who have the talent and ambition to say it. You can be that composer."

Send your comments to Stephen Dankner at sdankner@earthlink.net