OUT OF DOORS: WORKS OF THE LISTENING EYE

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Abstract

Visual artists often talk about music, yet rarely think about its “performative” aspect. In this article the author attempts to show why the consideration of this aspect of music and, in particular, of the way performing musicians respond to time, could be of benefit to painters – even to those who deal with traditional (purely spatial) themes. The author also explains how the notions of linear and continuous time, on which the article is based, influenced his latest work, Out of Doors.

The history of the relationship between music and the visual arts has taught us that, ever since Leonardo, dozens of known painters have tried to adapt aspects of music to their own practice. The idea of a “color harmony” is probably the most commonly mentioned – a theme which one might find not only in the writings of artists as different as Poussin and Kandinsky, but also in the work of scientists like Isaac Newton and Louis-Bertrand Castel [1]. Today, after almost five centuries of constant aesthetic correlations, technical experiments and artistic innovations, to state that this or that visual piece relates to music is a commonplace. It seems to me, however, that there is a field of musical activity that has generally been neglected, the field of the performance of music, and I believe that visual artists, painters especially, could benefit from studying that field.

Among the various parameters that contribute to the construction of a good performance, the parameter I wish to discuss here is that of time-relations; not the profound structuring of tensions and releases within the musical composition, nor the way these are communicated to the audience, but the performer’s relationship with time, time in the Bergsonian sense, continuous and linear. I shall very briefly try to explain what I mean.

In a thought-provoking essay entitled “Unity and Diversity of the Arts” Rudolf Arnheim observes that “[In the theater] the spectator may move with the action in a temporal state of mind and acknowledge the stage as a mere frame within which the events take place; or he may find himself anchored to the spatial ambiance, of which the stage is a part, and watch, as a stationary onlooker, the action rushing past him like an express train” [2]. Persistence in space may be said to occur also when the actor, or, in a musical performance, the musician, fails to grasp the structure of the entire work. The result of this weakness both in the theatre and the music hall is a fragmented meaningless sequence of verses and bars. Moving with the action in a temporal state of mind means seeing beyond what exists during the present moment; it means anticipating future events, understanding the dynamics of structure and form, being aware of the way tensions and counter-tensions are developed throughout each work. Good performers act in this way.

The question that arises now is what kind of relation such an attitude might have with the visual arts.

Bergson informs us that there is no feeling, no idea, no volition, which is not undergoing change every moment [3]. Even in the case of the visual perception of a motionless subject (in painting this could be a still life or a landscape), there are various internal and external elements that act upon our consciousness and make it realize that the vision we now have of it differs from that we had a

Fig. 1. View from Terrace, Hydra, 2010, watercolor on paper, 38 x 56 cm (detail of a 12-part wall installation entitled Twelve Studies). (© Fotis Flevotomos)
minute ago. Yet many painters and viewers, just like the unsuccessful spectator, perceive this change not as an uninterrupted transition – this would be the right approach – but as a sequence of new states placed alongside the previous ones.

I strongly believe that fragmentation, division and separation, however useful they might be for the apprehension of events, do not accord with creativity and inspiration. “Certainly the artist ought to think in the arranging of his work,” writes Schopenhauer in his The World as Will and Idea, “but only that thought which was perceived before it was thought has afterwards, in its communication, the power of animating or rousing, and thereby becomes imperishable” [4]. The point made here may be grasped more easily if we think of a sphere with two distant poles: the first is the pole of cognition, the second of immediate experience. Whatever takes place around the first pole disappears as we move closer towards the second, where the opposite events occur. Intention, reflection, pauses, corrections and deliberate elaborations are followed by involuntariness and inspired and measurable time by pure duration. The style of every artist’s working method is usually a matter of distance from each of these poles.

In the Out of Doors series (Figs. 1 and 2) I tried to act as a performing musician, but a musician who moves with the action. I think both watercolors and the landscape genre can really help an artist towards this direction. With watercolors, any mark you leave on the paper stays there, the transparency of the paint does not let you go back and correct things. On the other hand, being outdoors makes you aware of the passage of time, of the fact that what you are looking at right now will be different in ten or twenty minutes. But despite their temporal limitations (perhaps it would be more accurate to say because of them), which, I might add here, are quite analogous to the limitations musicians experience in every single concert, both landscapes and watercolors can be seen as a perfect opportunity for developing a new way of thinking, a more musical intuitive way. In my own work they led to a two-step process: First I observe my subject intently, then pick up a brush and paint it, forgetting, if possible, what has preceded. The pianist Joseph Hofmann once gave the following advice: “Learn a new composition three times and put it away three times before playing it in public” [5]. I think this behavior is absolutely crucial for the making of a picture too, and very much connected with the notions of self-discipline and self-reflection.

References and Notes
1. For a comprehensive discussion of how the relationship between art and music was conceived at various times by artists, musicians, scientists and philosophers, see Peter Vergo’s, That Divine Order (London: Phaidon Press, 2005), and The Music of Painting (London: Phaidon Press, 2010).