Sound and Vision

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Abstract

Two “creative nonfiction” pieces: A set of instructions for conceptual musical pieces, performances, and installations, and an andragogical essay vaguely concerning color theory.

Key Words: Creative nonfiction, Instructions for conceptual musical pieces, Color theory

CONCEPTUAL MUSICAL PIECES——Music of the Mind

OVATION
A piece to be performed upon concert hall audience, (for John Cage)
The audience (formal dress) shall stand, and applaud for four minutes and and thirty-four seconds, allegro e cresendo.
Whistling and foot-stamping ad libitum.

REVERSAL SPACE
Orchestra and Audience
Conductor shall turn and direct the audience, ad libitum, Orchestra shall listen, then stand and applaud. (Cell phones, conversation, mucous-clearing operations and other sources of sound are to be permitted, if not encouraged.)

ROTten FRUIT
Piano, Audience, Produce (seasonal)
While playing a warm-up scale exercise, the pianist makes a mistake and is pelted with fruit.
Repeat until there is no mistake.

SLAM
For prepared grand piano, operated mechanically, (with an offstage string,) or manually, (with a karate chop.)
With all keys and pedals depressed, the lid shall be dropped, the end of the sound ending the piece. (Incidentally, this is in every key.)
CLOSE SHAVE!
For 19th century brick apartment building, prepared baby grand piano, and voice.
From three or four stories up, suspended by hemp rope, and with the keys facing down, the piano shall be dropped on a spot from which a cartoon cat, howling in the shadow, narrowly escapes.

NEGATIVE MAJOR SCALES
For twelve pianos and wire cutters.
From the lowest octave to the highest, up and down, the scales shall be played simultaneous-ly, while the strings of each piano are cut, chromatically, also from the lowest to the highest. *Andante, then allegro...*
Each player shall continue playing the keys until all of the strings are cut.
(This may also be performed in the minor keys for more somber effect.)

COFFIN
For spinet piano and hammer
While funeral march is being played, the top lid of the piano shall be nailed shut. Six nails may be sufficient. Following that, the key lid shall be nailed shut. Four additional performers shall enter to carry the instrument away for burial or cremation (which may or may not be included in performance.)
Applause to consist of comments upon the appearance of the instrument and exaggerations about the quality of the performance.

AUGUST 6, AUGUST 9
2 pianos and plutonium bombs, B-52 jet engine, performers in kimono

Engine *crescendo*, ‘If I Loved You’ (Perry Como) shall be performed, and a reproduction of “Little Boy” shall fall and explode. Next, “Til the End of Time” (Perry Como) shall be performed, then finished off by a reproduction “Fat Man” bomb. (Conventional explosives may be substituted, but the use of fissile materials will guarantee the performance a duration of 25,000 years, an encore whether you want it or not.)

BAD DAY IN DRESDEN
Prepared piano and crockery
The various anthems of the World War Two Allies shall be played while the piano is burned and pottery is smashed.

HORROR MOVIE
Trio, piano duet and chainsaw
Pianists embrace and kiss. “Theme from ‘A Summer Place’” and “Theme from ‘Jaws’” to be played, an octave low and an octave high, respectively. Chainsaw player enters and cuts the piano in half while the music continues, then cuts the players in half to finish.

MAPLE LEAF DRAGLINE
Performer in “blackface” and early 20th century costume, piano in large glass water tank, playing Scott Joplin’s music as the tank fills with water.

AIR GUITAR
Audio source and headphones
Performer shall listen to Jimi Hendrix and pantomime the playing of a guitar, left-handed and upside down. (This may be performed with an air power trio, as well, adding drums and bass motions.)
SWELL AND BREAK (WINTER)
Pacific Ocean, New Zealand to California
Ocean wave location recordings, from source, mid-way, and break. (Wavelength 2200 miles.)
Length may vary, but each segment should be no shorter than two minutes. To be played first
on a portable player onstage, then through house speakers. Coordinates, speed, and date
should be announced by a woman in a bikini
with a surfboard.

METAMORPHOSIS
To the music of Dvorzak and Satie, crippled
midget climbs into piano; at end rabbit is
pulled out. (Or a dead goose is transformed into
doves.)

EROTICIZE!
Pianists kissing while performing. with dancers
on tops of pianos. Tap dancing?

RECYCLE
Hold mirror to sun, ringing a bell three times,
for Earth, two higher bells for Venus after 3
minutes, one highest at Mercury six minutes
out, and, at eight and a half, a gong, if not all
available percussion, upon impact.

MUSIC OF THE SPHERE
Solar-powered player piano to be put into orbit
around the earth, playing “As Time Goes By.”

SYMPATHY FOR MUSSOLINI
Blood-stained 100 kilogram bag hanging by pi-
ano wire. Pluck.

THEY EAT THEIR DEAD
Percussion for dried cranium and femur. To
heartbeat of performer, bang on skull with
thighbone for 5 minues.

BROOKLYN/MARIN HARPS
Brooklyn and Golden Gate Bridges : Using mo-
torcyles and ultralight aircraft, large picks
shall be drawn across suspension cables.

PROMONTORY SUMMIT
At the point where the “Golden Spike” was
driven, hit the rail with a sledgehammer. The
sound should travel roughly 5,000 meters per
second. Blow a steam-train whistle when it hits
San Francisco, and again when it hits New
York. All aboard!

TAILWIND for Conductor and flatus
After elaborate preparations, the conductor
shall turn around and use a baton to direct his
own buttocks, from which shall issue a noise,
ideally flapping tuxedo tails. Take a bow.

PIECE FOR JOHNS AND JANES DOE
Your name here, and your geographical coor-
dinates. Sit on the ground and listen, (hum or
whistle or sing, if it suits you,) as long as you
like, which is the length of the piece. You are
hear. At the end, give yourself a hand.
SOUNDTRACK OF YOUR LIFE

Start recording or scoring now, from now on. I hope the piece is nice and long. See you sometime during the show, and good luck at the Oscars.

SHOPPING JAZZ

Shopping cart, cash register, and record player

Shopping cart being pushed in a circle, Charlie Parker records being played at 16/33 rpm, Miles Davis 33s played at 45 rpm, alternating every five minutes, cash register ringing every minute for eight hours. (Maybe load cart with bricks. Cart and register might be amplified.)

COFFEE JAZZ

Shaker made from coffee beans in paper cup with plastic lid, blenders and frothers and steaming sounds, rattles of crockery... Bob Marley’s Babylon by Bus and Miles Davis’ Kind of Blue to be played simultaneously... wind blowing across the coffee lid sippy hole like a distant call.

MMVI

COLOR THEORY
(COURSE INTRODUCTION)

What is your favorite color?
Do not answer.

Color is a reflection of light from molecules, a specific wavelength of energy, often expressed as a wavy or wiggly line, much magnified relative to the actual size of the wave, but, nevertheless, an accurate rendition of a physical vibration. (And we may well say that everything we perceive as color is a reflection, as from a mirror, and that without the energy of light striking the surface and bouncing into our vision, there would be no color at all, or, at most, a very, very dull one.)

Sound waves are expressed in exactly the same way, although they are larger—middle C on a piano is a little longer than a meter, green is about 600 nanometers, something like five million times smaller. (Don’t do the math.)

So, what’s your favorite note?
(This is simply to point out that a “favorite” color is nonsense, as silly as having a favorite angle or curve. These things have meaning only in some context, in their relationship to other things. A favorite combination begins to make sense. Pick a chord, any chord...)

Forget that information.

Consider the rainbow, whether it be a natural phenomenon, a pleasant surprise out of the clear “blue” sky, (flying colors, if you will,) or man-made, light which has been thrown into, then escaped from, prism, dressed in stripes.

The colors of the rainbow, the visible spectrum, it is termed, are generally called red, orange, yellow, green, indigo, and violet. These are quite useful and should be committed to memory.

You may well ask about those two famous pretenders, black and white. First off, there is no such thing as “black.” It is an idea, a common way to describe a very dark shade of some color, and smacks of observational if not intellectual lassitude.
The question of white is a stickier wicket. There are those who hold that “pure” light is white, that it is the sum of the components of the visible spectrum, and yet no pure white has ever been observed in Nature. Perhaps some modified, mutant, super-light has been synthesized in some dim laboratory of theoretical optics, but we are speaking of the natural world. (The Sun, you say? Ha— blink, and think again.) Indeed, the idea of “white” sounds suspiciously religious or philosophical, a symbolic trope, with “black” its evil twin.

(It must be conceded, however, that these spacious constructs have gained wide popular currency, and, whether we like it or not, there will be situations where we must use them. Let us strive, in speaking, to accent them as if in quotation marks.)

As a matter of general interest, it is worth noting a few historical and etymological details: The word “color,” in English, or “colour,” in England, derives from the Old French “couleur,” which itself derives from “color” in the Latin, which is the oldest language in the world. The exact meaning has remained unchanged over countless thousands of years, which is an indication to archaeologists, paleo-socio-linguistics, and paint mixers, that the colors themselves have remained consistent over that time.

“Red” is the heaviest color, which is why it is found at the bottom of the rainbow, and it is also the oldest. Traces have been found at the earliest sites of any kind ever discovered.

“Orange” is considered to be the most delicious of all the colors, and the juiciest. (Note that chocolate is not properly a color, only a flavor.)

“Yellow” is related to “gel,” and may have been the inspiration for the name of the gelatin dessert “Jell-O.” Some scholars have suggested that, being the brightest and most cheerful color, it is simply a variant of “Hello.”

“Green” is the same word as “grow,” “grain,” and “groin,” and for that reason was banned by the Roman Catholic Church during much of the Middle Ages.

“Indigo” actually means “Indian,” and it is used because early Europeans believed that the natives of the Americas and the Indian subcontinent were blue and lived in the sky.

“Violet” was the name of a very, very, small bowed string instrument popular during the Renaissance, usually stained purple.

The above will suffice as a theoretical base to work from, but we will now turn to practical matters, and, for all practical purposes, there are only three colors: red, yellow, and blue, not necessarily in that order. If you have a set of paints, remove those three and throw the others away immediately. They will only confuse you.

(And this may be as good a place as any to address the proper, environmentally sound disposal of waste paint of any type. Open the container so that the toxic, possibly explosive, fumes may be harmlessly dissipated into space. At that point, simply let the paint dry. A good place for tubes or jars or smaller cans to dry is a public highway; larger cans may be used for humorous pranks atop partially-opened doors. There are various, and variant, local regulations concerning such things, so by all means consult those if you have any questions.)

Red, yellow, and blue: these are the primary colors. They may be mixed together to make every color you have ever seen, any color anyone will ever see, even colors that no one wants
to see. What is this on my shoe? Brown, you say? I do not know that word. I would call it a dark, deep, orange, although it does not smell like an orange.

Orange is one of the secondary colors, along with grape and lime. These are created by mixing two of the primary colors together. At this point you may experiment with your colors to find out which combinations produce them. Remember— at this point, two and only two. Which is to say, one with only one other. We must master the basics, build a foundation, before we can continue. You may use a brush, or your fingers, or your shirttail to mix them, but mix them thoroughly. Swirls we will discuss later.

We should now have six colors. Now, take your orange and hold it next to the green. This creates a strong visual impact. The same is true of yellow and purple. These are called “complementary colors.” (We might expect them to be called contrastementary, but they are not, for various and convoluted historical reasons. It was thought that they made a “set,” whereas, to the modern eye, they are mismatched. Tastes change.) The effect is physiologically complex, but the mechanism is simple enough— it is caused by the magnetic fields generated by the colors themselves. (Red, incidentally, has the strongest magnetic field of all, which is why magnets are red and rainbows are curved down rather than up.)

Traditionally, these colors have been carefully arranged in a very specific order, on what is called a “color wheel,” to be used as a pretty decoration.

We may now move to the final color group, which is the tertiary, so named because they were first used during that epoch of artistic history, and they were a major breakthrough. This is the name given to any three colors, mixed in any proportion, and they are, classically, named after their proportions, e.g. orangey orangey yellow green, or purplish red red red red red red blue, although there are myriad “common” names such as mauve, turquoise, and baby-shit green. Some artists prefer to use fractions or percentages to avoid problems with mixing awkward adjectives, as well.

This will get you started. Next time, we will discuss tint, hue, and intensity, and begin to look at the history and theory of color psychology. For this, the readings are Isaac Newton’s “Op-ticks” and Goethe’s “Theory of Color,” (which may be read in the vernacular.) You should also listen again to the Jimi Hendrix album “Are You Experienced?” and the Culture Club single “Karma Chameleon.”

Also, and finally, we will be pairing up for the dissection, which will proceed when we receive the eyeballs.