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Louis Andriessen's 'De Stijl' and Rendering Mondrian Musical

ABSTRACT

The movement 'De Stijl' from Louis Andriessen's oratorio *De Materie* brings the arts of music and painting into particularly close contact, as the movement adapts the colors and dimensions of Piet Mondrian's 1927 *Composition with Red, Yellow, and Blue (ii)* for musical use. This paper reads this act of translation not just as an ingenious large-scale compositional constraint, but also as a testbed for general theories by Adorno and Langer about the relationship between music and painting and, by attending to the details of the painting's 'musicalization', reveals how the movement participates in Andriessen's broader fascination with the nature of time.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper uses theories about the general relationship of music and painting to examine Louis Andriessen's 'De Stijl', a piece that brings the two arts together in a particularly intimate way and whose intricacies have received minimal critical attention.[1] 'De Stijl' is the third section of Andriessen's four-part oratorio *De Materie* on the theme of the polarity between spirit and matter. In 'De Stijl' this is explored in the figure of Piet Mondrian via the juxtaposition of two texts. The first is an excerpt from a treatise by M. H. J. Schoenmaekers, entitled *Principles of Visual Mathematics*, that was a central text in Mondrian's aesthetics. The second is a reminiscence on Mondrian's fondness for going dancing; Andriessen has spoken about his fascination with Mondrian's combination of innate sobriety with a 'peculiar love for wildness' (Andriessen 2002, 225). The spirit/matter polarity is also captured, in broad-brush terms, in the piece's juxtaposition of popular idioms, such as a funk bassline and boogie-woogie piano textures, with both more high-brow musical topics such as the chorale and the passacaglia and with the learned canonic procedures to which the popular-idiom material is subjected (Everett 2006, 130–31).

What makes this piece a particularly intriguing locus in the relationship between painting and music is not just that Mondrian is its subject, but that its structure uses as a point of departure a specific painting by Mondrian, his *Composition with Red, Yellow, and Blue (ii)* from 1927. The painting is used in two ways. First and more loosely, just as there are five colors in the painting (red, yellow, blue, the black lines, and the various shades of gray), the piece uses five musical 'colors', defined as the combination of instrumental grouping and characteristic material. Andriessen has said that the trumpets and voices are red, saxophones yellow, trombones blue, the funk ground bass black, and grey the 'surprise' element in the piece (the boogie-woogie piano interlude that comes in toward the middle of the work), but also that the relationships between colors and instruments should be taken with 'a substantial pinch of salt' (Andriessen 2002, 226).

More significantly, the painting is used to generate the structural rhythm of the piece. Andriessen measures the painting and turns its dimensions into durations, at the ratio of one square centimeter to one quarter note at 90 beats per minute. Andriessen's sketches show how he takes the quadrilaterals and arranges them as if reading from left to right and top to bottom; the painting is 2,400 square centimeters; the various quadrilaterals comprise 2,190 of those, and the remaining space at the end is that taken up by the black of the lines (Trochimczyk 2002, 281–84). In this way, the painting sets the order and pacing of events in the piece. Andriessen's sketches also show the next stage in this process, in which dimensions-cum-durations are altered somewhat and the black space at the end has been trimmed off, but the red, yellow, and blue quadrilaterals are still distinct and map to zones of activity. Yellow maps now to the boogie-woogie piano interlude that sets the text about dancing, the blue square is the extended chorale that closes the piece in a manner reminiscent of Stravinsky's *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*, and red is not one instrumental color, but rather the opening combination of funk-bass ground bass, saxophones, and trumpets/voices.

Andriessen himself has said contradictory things about this process, which range from claiming that he painted his own Mondrian in music to saying that he was not trying to translate the painting and that the piece relates to the painting only as an anamorphosis (Trochimczyk 2002, 70; Andriessen 2002, 227–28). The goal of this paper is not to interrogate these statements or test the faithfulness of Andriessen's adaptation — composers have the right to say and write whatever they like! — but rather to see how the piece can be read as a special case that concretely instantiates certain theories about the relationship between music and painting.

2. ADORNO AND TEMPORALIZING SPACE

To consider the relationship between the two arts, I will start with Adorno's essay 'On Some Relationships between Music and Painting' (1995). Here, Adorno presents music and painting as inverses of each other: music is time tending toward the spatial, while painting is space tending toward time. Music must use time to move beyond time, that is to say, forge temporal relationships that enable it to resist the slipperiness which future melts into present and present into past and instead create structure and hew an object in time.[2] And successful

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[1] Everett 2006 highlights some broad stylistic features and situates the movement within Andriessen's 1980s turn toward the metaphysical in art and in his politics more broadly (129–35); the only other literature on the piece consists of general commentary from Andriessen (Andriessen 2002, 214–29; Trochimcyzk 2002, 70, 155–56 and 281–84).

[2] 'If time is the medium that, as flowing, seems to resist every reification, nevertheless music's temporality is the very aspect through which it actually congeals into something that survives independently — an ob-

paintings are 'sedimented time' — a dynamized space of coiled temporal energy.

Crucially, these two arts can only move their particular medium toward transcendence in the other by being resolutely themselves. Music must focus on the musical; Adorno holds that music which tries to treat time as space, by composing in blocks or aiming for some sort of syncretism between arts (and here Adorno takes aim at his traditional punching bags of Wagner, Debussy, and Stravinsky) fails in that it forgets all of the musical devices that make musical structure-in-time possible, e.g. line, polyphony, or transition (67–68). Instead, when music and painting can converge is when they abandon themselves to their own respective impulses, and shed any attempts at mimesis and any imagined status as the expression of an individual subject.[3] It is in this way that music and painting can become pure expression and therefore reminiscent of a pre-lapsarian state when art and man and nature were one (78).

Adorno's ideas are of course particular, but they are also part of a venerable modernist tradition wherein to talk about one art in terms of the principles of another is to showcase the initial art's proximity to some core values of Art writ large. One sees this in how Braque's discusses his paintings in terms of music so as to convey the sense that they participate in a timeless, quasi-natural code, or in Satie's claim that French music's escape route from *Wagnérisme* lay in the transposition (in Mallarmé's sense) of the aesthetics of French painting (Dayan 2016, 86–87 and 36). And Adorno's ideas about abstraction as a path to the expression of the universal resonate with Mondrian's own aesthetics; Mondrian frequently made reference to music as an example of an art in which equilibrium, as in painting, could lead to that direct expression of the universal (Mondrian 1971, 140–41).

Within this understanding of the relationship between music and painting, 'De Stijl' can capture the essence of the Mondrian painting only by manifesting musical relationships. And while Andriessen's precompositional sketches do show material arranged as spatial blocks, that structure is musicalized in 'De Stijl'; whereas the painting features elements that are all distinct and pull in different directions (each of the primary colors appears only once, placed at the edge of an otherwise monochrome canvas), the score contains a rich network of specifically temporal processes such as transformation, resolution and synthesis that reveal themselves upon close analysis of the composition. Most simply, the piece recombines its musical colors after the opening 'exposition' of 605 quarter notes (see Figure 1, which contrasts the idealized layout of material suggested by the painting's dimensions with the actual succession of musical material in the piece). This can be pitch material initially associated with one timbre reappearing in another timbre; the most striking occurrence of this is when the boogie-woogie figures, otherwise confined to the upright-piano interlude, erupt in the entire ensemble at mm. 533–44. Re-

combination can also be the motives of two of the initial musical colors combined into a new alloy, e.g. the bass guitar's melody set in the harmonic environment of the saxophone world in mm. 520–29. These moments of synthesis are numerous (see Figure 1b), and necessarily temporal.
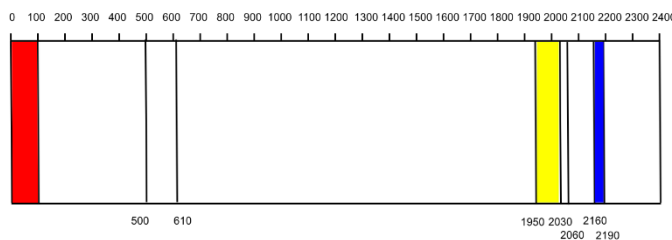

Fig. 1a. Direct conversion of the painting's quadrilaterals into musical durations.
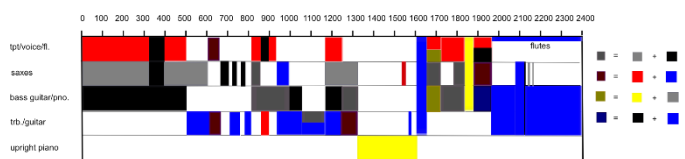

Fig. 1b. Transcription of the piece's succession of blocks of musical material.

The most significant temporal process in the work, though, is its arc toward the chord F–B♭–C–E, which Andriessen calls the '1–2–3–4' chord and which features in all four movements of *De Materie* (Everett 2006, 120). In 'De Stijl', it only appears in its original form as the very last chord of the 25 minute piece, the telos for the entire movement. Motion toward this chord is launched in miniature in the movement's opening, which presents smooth downward stepwise motion into a half-step-too-high transposition of the chord (Figure 2; the first chord is the stinger at the end of the piece's opening unison motto, and the rest are the cadence chords at the important stopping points in the aesthetic-treatise text: m. 48 'the perfect straight line is *the* perfect line', m. 54 'Why?', m. 63 'Likewise its ray, the perfect eternal ray, is perfection of the first order', m. 74 'The perfect eternal ray is also 'the' perfect ray', and m. 91 'For it is only as a *ray* a perfection of the first order'); we both learn to expect the chord as an arrival point, and hope to get the correct transposition (established at such during the oratorio's previous two movements) at some point in the future.
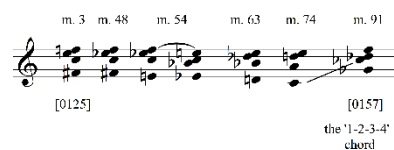

Fig. 2. Expositional approach to a T1 version of the '1–2–3–4' chord.

After this descent, from a [0125] tetrachord to a [0157] tetrachord voiced as the '1–2–3–4' chord, the piece presents four distinct four-chord progressions (Figure 3): the progression that introduces text about the aesthetic ideal of the cross-figure; the first chords of the trombone 'color', which adopt the melody of the cross-figure progression and also incorporate its chords as subsets of its own chords (excepting of the final [0257] tetrachord); a progression whose upper voice is an [025] trichord and which repeats several times whenever it appears; and a progression which features the B–A–C–H motive in both bass and soprano. These progressions, which all already have

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ject, a thing, so to speak... Those pictures seem the most successful in which what is absolutely simultaneous seems like a passage of time that is holding its breath; this, not least, is what distinguishes it from sculpture' (66–67).

[3] 'For nonobjective painting, like atonal music that abandons itself to its impulse, has an affinity with pure expression; independent not only of its relation as a signifier to something that is meant to be expressed, but also of its kindred relation to an expressive subject that is identical with itself' (72).

links to the initial descent shown in Figure 2, combine with the elements of that descent to produce the evolving harmonic language of the piece, i.e. those chords beyond those static/cyclic progressions which (re)establish the musical colors.

Fig. 3. Motivic four-chord progressions in 'De Stijl'.

Ex. 1a. Measures 203–208: modified cross-figure melody arriving at an [0257] tetrachord.

Ex. 1b. Measures 228–233: modification of Fig. 4a's melody and an inner-voice B–A–C–H motive.

A full detailing of the work's harmonic transformations is beyond the space constraints of this forum; examples from the beginning and end of the process will serve as demonstration here. Example 1 shows how these motivic progressions start to combine and transform immediately after their presentation: in mm. 203–208 (Example 1a), the cross-figure progression's melodic intervals are reshuffled but the resulting progression arrives at the same final chord; in mm. 228–32 (Example 1b) the melody from the progression in Example 1a is chromaticized in combination with the B–A–C–H motive. In the piece's last section, the 'blue' chorale, the chordal materials combine into their biggest agglomerations yet before being carefully pruned down to produce the '1–2–3–4' chord. When the 'blue' section begins at m. 571, the chord progression features the [025]-melody above hexachords that are supersets of earlier significant tetrachords. This progresses, through an upward ascent of a seventh that echoes the moment of human-divine unity from the oratorio's previous movement 'Hadewijch', into a chord that embeds a '1–2–3–4' chord into the G-dominant chord that has been the tonic of the work's funk ground-bass/'black lines' — the final endpoint is revealed, cast in amber in the middle of a chord spanning the ensemble's entire range. It is only after several minutes of a repeating progression whose melody combines chromatic descent with an [025] trichord that the '1–2–3–4' chord is revealed, in its pure form, by the arrival of the B–A–C–H motive as the top voice (Example 2). This completes a piece-spanning process of goal-directed transformation, one that musicalizes the painting in an Adornian sense; Andriessen does not just fill the painting's quadrilaterals with distinct colors, but injects a web of temporal structure that cuts across the painting's spatial arrangement.

Ex. 2. Final repeating progression resolved to '1–2–3–4' chord by B–A–C–H motive.

3. LANGER AND SPATIALIZING TIME

An arrangement distinct from Adorno's conception of the relationship between painting, music, space, and time is found in Langer's aesthetic philosophy as laid out in her monograph *Feeling and Form* (a working-out of her earlier *Philosophy in a New Key*). Langer does not believe, as Adorno does, that music and painting must separate into their own media in order to converge towards some pure core of abstract expression. Rather, she posits that each art can accommodate the other as a secondary illusion (Reichling 1995, 41). Langer understands space as a multi-sensory experience, involving not only sight, but also sensations generated by motion through that space and impressions of touch, temperature, and sound (Langer 1953, 72). A painting renders that multisensory experience purely visual; the primary illusion is the artwork itself, an object hewn out of purely visual data, and the secondary illusions are the fleeting impressions of other senses possible within that illusion — texture, weight, power, movement, etc. Music, conversely, must take our rich experience of time — which can involve aroused senses of motion, memory, and, centrally for Langer, the life of feeling — and capture it all in sound.

A piece of music about a painting, then, must present sonically both the primary and secondary illusions of a painting — both its visual imagery and the senses of motion, time, etc. evoked by those visuals. And the senses of time and motion present in visual engagement with a painting are not necessarily linear and continuous; the eye can roam over the painting however it wants, flitting here and there, revisiting locations, viewing things with different levels of attention and zoom, etc. A musical piece that wished to capture that aspect of painting would necessarily feature a multivalent temporal experience beyond the mere trudge of future into present into past — and it is precisely the virtual nature of musical time, the fact that music's primary illusion is temporal, that makes this secondary illusion possible (Langer 1953, 108).

Jonathan Kramer, following both Langer and Thomas Clifton in this idea, has discussed how musical time is amenable to postmodern sensitivity to fragmentation, discontinuity, nonlinearity, and so on (Kramer 1996; see also Neytcheva 2001). This experience of time, in which time is not one uninterrupted current, but instead contains many whorls and eddies, is available in 'De Stijl'. For one, the piece contains many instances of play with reshuffled beginning-, middle-, and end-gestures. [4] Example 3a shows the original funk

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[4] Kramer distinguishes between an absolute earlier-simultaneous-later sequence of time and the gestural time of past-present-future; postmod-

ground-bass with the opening motives in red and the closing ones in blue; Example 3b shows how the statement of the ground bass in the baritone saxophones at m. 219 begins with the original version's ending gestures (which clashes with the percussion's use of the head motive), continues with its opening gestures, and ends with new material so as to dispel the notion that this is simply an out-of-phase rotation through the same sequence of material. The text of the work evinces a similar disconnect between gestural time and absolute time. The only repeated lines of text in the movement appear after the boogie-woogie interlude. There, the last line-and-a-half previous to the interlude are repeated; the text resumes in the middle of the line, as if the interlude happened out of time, the reminiscence of Mondrian's dancing happening in some frozen instant.

Ex. 3a. The funk ground-bass of 'De Stijl'.

Another hallmark of postmodern time is the misalignment of previously linked parameters (Kramer 1996, 24), a large example of which is present in 'De Stijl' when, after the boogie-woogie interlude, the music timbrally and texturally recapitulates but only tonally recapitulates much later. But perhaps the most provocative aspect of the piece from a temporal standpoint is that, in a certain sense, all of its musical topics can be read as versions the same musical object. Not only are the funk bass, saxophone material, and initial voice material all based on the same hexachord (G–B–C–D–F–F♯ or transpositions thereof, as noted in Everett 2006, 131–32), but the same is true of the cross-figure motive, the initial trombone chorale, and the boogie-woogie vamp. In a sense, this feature turns the hexachord into a multidimensional object, viewed over and over from different angles; Andriessen has spoken about how musical tempo can evoke distance (fast notes being closer, slower notes farther away; Andriessen 2002, 229), and so the different tempi with which the various musical colors unfurl the source hexachord act as different levels of zoom on the same musical object.[5] This mode of musical contemplation is an experience of *present time* that runs counter to the *progressive time* of the transformational processes discussed earlier in this paper.[6]

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ern musical experience can use the illusory nature of musical time to disassociate the two sequences (Neytcheva 2001, 101–103).

[5] This effect is perhaps akin to that of Robert Wilson's initial staging of 'De Stijl', described as tableau of fixed but breathing objects (Everett 2006, 114–17).

[6] Neytcheva 2001 discusses a similar effect of a timeless present in Andriessen's opera *Writing to Vermeer* (104–108).

Ex. 3b. Reshuffled beginning and end gestures in the ground bass statement at m. 219.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper has aimed to demonstrate how 'De Stijl', by bringing painting and music into a particularly tight relationship, can embody general theories about the two arts' relationship from the philosophies of Adorno and Langer. The competing conceptions of the two authors can coexist, and indeed the interpretation presented here is a tiered one: in moving from the Mondrian to the Andriessen, first the space of the painting is infused with temporality, and then those temporal relationships are given some of the free-wheeling, postmodern possibilities available in space. The richness of this construction also demonstrates how 'De Stijl' — a piece about Mondrian and aesthetics within an oratorio about spirit and matter — participates in Andriessen's broader fascination with time as explored in pieces such as *De Tijd* and *De Snelheid*.

KEYWORDS

Louis Andriessen, Musical Time, Structure

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