A Musical Approach to Painting

Traditional Practice Report

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Introduction:

The relationship between music and painting has been discussed by various artists (Gauguin, Van Gogh, Munch, Kandinsky, Corot) art theorists, musicians (Wagner), musicologists, philosophers (Nietzsche, Goethe) and writers (Baudelaire, Stephane Mallarme, Charles Blanc). Both colour and sound are essentially, and qualitatively, vibrations, and therefore, have the ability to have direct, uninterruptable correspondence and resonance with human emotions and evoke the purest of emotive responses and expressions. There is no doubt that “Musical sound acts directly on the soul and finds an echo there because...music is innate in man”\(^1\) and as Delacroix said “Everyone knows that yellow, orange, and red suggest ideas of joy and plenty”.\(^2\)

Thus, sound and colour are both powerful mediums employed in artistic/creative endeavours to express and evoke emotions, create sensations and moods. And both music and painting have a symbiosis wherein they compliment and reinforce each other in creating a powerful emotive effect: many painters and musicians, both in the East and West have collaborated, exchanged and borrowed ideas from each other’s art to enhance their own art practice and creativity.

Kandinsky, while discussing form and colour, continuously draws analogies with music:

...form is the outward expression of this inner meaning. To use...the metaphor of the piano-the artist is the hand which, by playing on this or that key (i.e., form), affects the human soul in this or that way.\(^3\)

...red, as is seen by the mind and not by the eye, exercises at once...an...impression on the soul, and produces spiritual harmony...An analogous case is the sound of a trumpet which one hears when the word “trumpet” is pronounced. This sound is audible to the soul, without the distinctive character of a trumpet heard...\(^4\)

While drawing a parallel between the character and effect of sound and colour, Charles Blanc states that “the more intense the color...the more... [to] shade it upon itself, to render it more intense and lessen its dryness and monotony, to produce...that vibration without which a color is as unsupportable to our eyes

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\(^1\) Wassily Kandinsky, Concerning The Spiritual In Art, 1977, p. 27  
\(^2\) Cited in Ibid., p.27  
\(^3\) Ibid., p.29  
\(^4\) Ibid., p. 28
as under the same conditions a sound would be to our ears.” Blanc extensively uses musical metaphors in his discussion about painting and colour declaring “…Delacroix’s greatest strength as a painter the ‘orchestration of colors’ and…that…[he] employs the effect of whites and blacks variously as contrast, a grace note, and a rest.”

Van Gogh had a musical approach to painting and music influenced his ideas about art. In his letters to his brother Theo he refers to music as the artistic ideal for his own art:

> Painting...promises to become more subtle—more like music...and above all it promises color...; ...in a painting I want to say something comforting, as music is comforting. I want to paint men and women with that something of the eternal...which we seek to convey by the actual radiance and vibration of our coloring.

Van Gogh’s conception of colour was musical for which he used the term “symphonic color” that “…is carefully calculated in realization...[and] its harmony and completeness yield an outer simplicity...[and it] is characterized by wholeness, freedom from the passive imitation of nature, and potent expressivity.”

In the sub continent, an example of the symbiotic amalgamation of music and painting are the sixteenth century Raga Mala paintings (Figs. 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4). The Raga Mala paintings were executed using colours and imagery inspired by Ragas i.e. musical modes of the Indian musical system: “Raga literally means ‘melody – mould’. The word is derived from the root ‘Ranj’ meaning ‘to color or tinge with emotion’ ”. Each Raga has a mood, a season and a particular time of the day assigned to it in terms of its overall emotive effect. The Raga Mala paintings were an attempt to capture the lyricism and abstraction of music and the mood, emotive essence of each Raga through colour and pictorial imagery. The paintings were thus visual forms of the musical modes whereby painting and music as art forms came together to create visual melodies.

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6 Cited in Ibid., p. 180
7 Cited in Ibid., p. 178.
8 Ibid., p. 184.
9 Rashmi Arvind Condra, Ragamala Paintings & Rajput Art of India (18th c.), ANISTORITON: Art History Volume 8, March 2004, Section O041.
Synaesthesia, i.e. the ability of sound to evoke images of colour/visual imagery and the ability of colour to evoke auditory musical sensations is a phenomenon that was actively debated and established as early as the late nineteenth century. Subsequently, many works of art in Western painting were painted with a musical approach, interpreted musically and implied with music, for example, Van Gogh’s sunflower series, (188-1889) (Fig. 1.5), and *Harvest at La Crau*, (1888) (Fig. 1.6), Munch’s *The Scream*, (1893) (Fig. 1.7), and Corot’s *The Concert*, (1844) (Fig. 1.8).

My inclination towards a musical approach to painting derives from my personal involvement with music and my cultural heritage of a highly developed musical tradition in which musical sound was considered an abstract, non-physical phenomenon with a direct, causal relationship with human emotions. And it is this abstraction, non-materiality and directness of music that I hold as artistic ideals for my practice in painting. Music, in the subcontinent, has been the original, primary language of emotive communication and a specific formative factor in our cultural and emotional identity as a people:

> The antiquity of Indian...musical theory was well known to the ancient world. According to Strabo...the Greeks considered that music “from the triple point of view of melody, rhythm and instruments” came to them originally from...Asia. Further, “the poets...claim that the origin of music is almost entirely Asiatic. Thus...speaking of the lyre, will say: the strings of the cithara of Asia resound.”...“This is because they are...the greatest lovers of music...”

Musical sound here was not a thing *per se* with fixed, objective parameters compared to Greek music. It was subjective i.e. it had subjective value for emotions: it conveyed a non-verbal emotive message giving rise to a dynamic aesthetic experience. It was more than merely an auditory phenomenon causing auditory sensations due to frequencies/vibrations—it was based on the inner, spiritual world and encompassed the entire gamut of human emotive, perceptual and sensual experiences. There is extensive terminology in Indian music wherein all the *svaras, srutis, ragas*, and *rasas* were given names according

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11 The ancient Greek concept of musical sound is based upon elegant mathematical divisions/proportions between frequencies. Greek mathematicians such as Pythagoras, Aristoxenus, Boethius, and others arrived at this concept of musical sound.
to their specific emotive effects. In short, sound was considered as a ‘whole’ with subjective value and not merely in terms of its physical properties:

Musical speculation in the West has generally... focus [sed] upon the formal and quantitative aspects of music...[In] early Indian musical thought...the idea of musical sound was a cultural achievement—rooted in the phonetic observations of the early language scholars...molded...into a distinctive concept of vocal tone whose properties were then extended to encompass all the sounds of music.12

Musical sound was symbolically referred to as Nada, i.e. “intelligible sound...[which conveys] ideas, emotions”.13 Hence, it was termed Sruti, “that which is heard”...and is to be”...found more by instinct and by demonstration than by calculation...”.15 Sruti is a compound of all the components that make up a sound and has subjective, emotive value: sound as a whole in its smallest details and variations. Thus, musical sounds formed a non-verbal, emotive language fund for emotive communication:

…musical experience in ancient India—music as heard, as taught in face-to-face instruction, as learned, and as remembered—had accustomed practitioners to live in a world of subtle microtonal shadings which to them were more familiar, more tangible, and more real than...written knowledge.16

The ancient classification of sound into ahata and anahata was also based on the subjective value of sound. Ahata meant ‘struck’ sound that the human ear physically registers in terms of waves; anahata meant ‘unstruck’ sound or inaudible sound which is not heard but felt:

In Indian musical theory...there are two kinds of sound, one a vibration of ether, the other a vibration of air. The vibration of ether...is not caused by a physical shock...It is therefore called anahata, “unstruck”. The other...is an impermanent vibration of air...It is audible and...produced by a shock. It is...called ahata or “struck.”...“Struck sound is said to give pleasure, ‘unstruck’ sound leads to Liberation.” (Narada Purana).17

Anhad Naada: Naada is sound—here, musical sound that is not heard by the physical ear. Often used to refer to music felt within (compare with the English unheard).18

12 Lewis Rowell, Music and Musical Thought in Early India, 1992, pp. 308-312.
14 Ibid., p.22.
16 Ibid., pp. 148-149.
17 Alain Daneilou, The Ragas of Northern Indian Music, 1980, p. 21
Rasa is another important concept in Indian music referring to the overall aesthetic experience of an elaborate identification and grouping of musical sounds based on their individual subjective value. Thus, in Indian music, musical sound was considered to have the potential to communicate with the subjective world where the most intangible, subtle, yet, extremely powerful mental and emotional experiences occur and the ultimate experience of rasa lead to enriching the emotions.

I am, therefore, looking at music in relation to painting primarily in terms of emotive communication. In my practice I intend to incorporate the lyricism, the abstraction, the directness of emotive effect, and the rhythm, the symphony, the melody of music. I strive to deemphasize the imitative, the narrative, the material and emphasize on narrative ambiguity and non representational subject matter.

My Traditional Practice in vocal music with Ustad Sanwal Hassan lasted for three months. In my training I focussed on vocal production of sound in terms of its colour or expression/meaning in relation to its effect on emotions. I prepared two vocal pieces, Main Nai Jaana Kherayan de Naal, a Punjabi folk song in Raga Khammaj, originally sung by Tufail Niazi, and a Rajasthani folk song, Phool Banaro, since Ustad Sanwal is originally from Rajasthan.

Case Study:

Ustad Sanwal Hassan, my Ustad for traditional practice in singing, belongs to the Gwalior Gharana of music and his ancestry is from Rajasthan. Singing has traditionally been pursued as a profession in his family since his great grandfather, carried on by his grandfather, father and now Ustad Sanwal Hassan himself. His great grandfather, Ustad Chaman Khan was affiliated with All India Radio and participated in various music conferences before partition. During that time his grandfather, Ustad Laal Khan, also started receiving training in music. During a music conference Ustad Chaman Khan came across Pandit Narayan Rao Viyas and, impressed with his magical voice and skill, he immediately gave his son, Ustad Laal Khan, in his shagirdi i.e. discipleship. After partition Ustad Chaman Khan and Ustad Laal Khan came to Pakistan and settled in Dera Ismail Khan. Here, both the maestros would be invited to perform at
private gatherings at the houses of rich industrialists of the country. They were also affiliated with Radio Pakistan, Dera Ismail Khan. When Ustad Chaman Khan passed away, Ustad Laal Khan’s son Ustad Nawab Khan (Ustad Sanwal Hassan’s father) started performing alongside his father.

When Ustad Sanwal turned eight, his father, Ustad Nawab Khan, started his formal training in music, and as he recounts, his training started with *Raga Nat Bhairav* His grandfather, Ustad Laal Khan, familiarised him with and trained him in various *ragas* such as *Gaud Malhar, Khammaj, Jai JaiWanti, Shonkara, Raagesari, Naag Sura Wali, Ras Ranjani, Maand*, as well as the genres of *kaafi, thumri* and *khayal* and traditional Rajasthani music. After several years of rigorous training, he was allowed to perform alongside his father. Ustad Sanwal then came to Lahore and placed himself under the guidance and *shagirdi* of prominent singer Ustad Nazar Hussain.

To date Ustad Sanwal Hassan has sung from the platform of Pakistan National Council of the Arts (PNCA) and has performed with world renowned *Kathak* dancer/choreographer, Nahid Siddiqui, in Pakistan as well as internationally. He is currently working as music composer and singer at *Sachal* Studio, and involved with productions at the Radio Centre and Lahore Arts Council.
Fig. 1.1 Asavari Ragini, Raga Mala, 1610

Fig. 1.2 Bhairavi Ragini, Raga Mala, 1610

Fig. 1.3 Raga Poorvi, Raga Mala, 17th century

Fig. 1.4 Todi Ragini, Raga Mala, Bundi, Rajasthan, 1591
Fig. 1.5 Vincent Van Gogh, *Sunflower Series*, Oil on Canvas, 1888-1889

Fig. 1.6 Vincent Van Gogh, *Harvest at La Crau*, Oil on Canvas, 1888.
Fig. 1.7 Edvard Munch, *The Scream*, Oil, tempera, pastel & crayon on cardboard, 1893

Fig. 1.8 Corot, *The Concert*, Oil on Canvas, 1857
Bibliography:


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