

PAINTING THE MUSIC

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February 2002 (updated to October 2016)

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A Brief
History
of Visual
Music



Vladimir Tamari *Mozart's Magic Flute Performed in the Ramallah Hills* (1984) gouache and gold on paper ~53x72cm

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I Introduction

In *Pictures at an Exhibition* (1874), the composer Mussorgsky paid tribute to the works of his late friend the painter Victor Hartmann, describing each painting in terms of music. Rachmaninov's tone poem *The Isle of the Dead* (1909) was directly inspired by a painting of the same name by Böcklin. Similarly, Menotti's opera "Amahl and the Night Visitors" was inspired by Bosch's painting "The Adoration of the Magi". [1] I have done almost the exact opposite: this is an account of my experience as a painter, with the world of music, particularly of a series of 'musical paintings' I made while listening and responding to the music of various composers. Over the years I made more than 75 large watercolors and one in oils not counting scores of smaller works not mentioned here. In the appendix, 'A Brief History of Visual Music' I speculate about an intriguing art form that, after centuries of slow gestation, is at last coming into its own: the combining of color forms moving with music, a "visual music". And now, quoting Matisse: " I ask of those who will have the patience to read these notes the indulgence usually granted to the writings of painters." [2]

Time, "nature's way of preventing everything from happening at once," [3] is an essential element in the performance and enjoyment of music. On the other hand the dimension of time is unimportant in traditional painting. An artist may take hours, weeks or years to finish a painting, the colors and shapes accumulating in no particular temporal order. But the eyes see the finished artwork in a single glance. From edge to edge, corner-to-corner, the picture is perceived in a moment, complete, silent and still. Oriental artists attempted

to introduce the element of time in painting by using the picture scroll: The painting is revealed slowly as the scroll is unrolled. Coming to think of it, as a child in Palestine, that is how I enjoyed the crude images in *Sunduq-El-Ajab* (Wonder Box- a peep show). We paid our piaster, sat on the makeshift bench and glued our eyes to the lenses of the box as the operator chanted while he scrolled a sheet of paper inside. Upon it were pasted some prints of mythic heroes and other wonders, some cut out from magazines.

For many years now I have been painting one large watercolor every month. But in September of 1999 I decided to paint while listening to Brahms' music, and since December of that year, I have been painting many of these picture while listening to the music of different composers. This has been a wonderful experience for me: the music has helped to shape each painting according to how the composer's works inspired me. In addition, making the systematic effort to listen to the masterpieces of the greatest of mostly Western musicians and doing some reading [4],[5] about their lives and music has had its own rewards.

II My experience with music, and early experiments

I have always enjoyed listening to and making music. As a child in Palestine, I enjoyed hearing French songs sung by my mother, who had learned them at her school in Jerusalem. At my own school run by American Quakers I had a few violin lessons from our music teacher, Delbert Reynolds, and later from Romano, the Italian violinist who played with the dance band at Hotel Audeh. I taught myself how to play the harmonica and spent long happy hours lounging on the northern veranda of our home watching the summer clouds go by while I played popular tunes. Singing Handel's *Messiah* with the school choir was a wonderful experience, especially when the renowned choral conductor Robert Shaw, who was visiting the Holy Land, led us in a stirring performance of the *Hallelujah Chorus*. My sister Tania was also a choir member and later she became a talented soprano soloist pioneering in performing Arabic songs composed in the Western classical style. My own interest in music was later reflected in an article I wrote for a Palestinian literary journal on Israeli music, but it dealt only with the aggressiveness of the rhythms we heard on the radio at that time.[6] Apart from this there was the ever-present festival of Arabic songs blared from taxi radios and café speakers. At home there was a handful of classical music 78 and LP records, including the family favourite, a scratchy rendition of Donizetti's *Una furtiva lagrima* sung by Beniamino Gigli and sets of *Carmen* and *Madame Butterfly* records in nice cotton fabric boxes. My father had bought these from a small shop in Jerusalem kept by the father of my close friend Ibrahim Souss. Ibrahim later became a talented concert pianist. Once in Ramallah I enjoyed speaking a few words introducing him and my sister Tania to a small audience to hear her singing, accompanied by the piano. I also designed the invitation tickets.

Later while studying and living in Lebanon and during a year each spent in London and the US, I started discovering the riches of Western music- Bach, Beethoven, Mozart and all the rest. I also played at making my own music- once on an old piano thrown outdoors during a children's summer camp job, in New York State. The missing keys and loose strings added an atonal modern flavor to the strange music I played. When I lived near the sea in Japan, I took a piece of hollow bamboo and fashioned it into a rough *shakahachi* flute, which I played on the beach. During the more recent years I have spent many noisy and (for me) emotionally rich hours improvising alone on the piano or the pipe organ at a church near my home in Tokyo. Music continues to enrich my life through the career of my daughter Mariam, a gifted opera singer. For relaxation, I whistle a deafening medley of classical tunes while zooming around on my bicycle.

All this was by the way. My only enduring passion in the arts was the visual world of drawing and painting. In my twenties I used to paint while listening to records of classical music. I never planned a painting, but applied the colors and forms spontaneously as the spirit moved me, painting rapidly and without thinking. I noticed that in my attempts at abstract painting, each stage of the painting, as it developed, was interesting in itself. In the end, however, only the final version remained. One evening I continued adding colors, working through the night, until I ended up with a completely black painting by dawn! I became interested in artwork that developed in time, like music. I researched some early 20th. c. experiments in kinetic art and was impressed by musical animation (such as portions of Walt Disney's film *Fantasia* [7]). I sent a letter entitled 'Visual Music' to a British journal about this possibility[8] With the help of my friend the Palestinian cinematographer Hani Jawhariyyeh, I made a short 8mm. film of panels of color that change according to a passage from one of Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos*. Ibrahim Souss, by then studying piano, had sent me the score from Paris. In the film, the synchronization of the color changes with the musical score was far from perfect, but it realized my basic intentions in a simple way.

Later I designed, but never actually built, an electrical circuit activated by seven keys that automatically switch on various combinations of three color spotlights (Blue, Green

and Red) focused on one spot, so that any desired primary or secondary color (and white) can be played like notes, projected onto a screen. In 1964 I invented and spent many years developing the 3DD, an instrument for making three dimensional drawings[9], and my experiments to combine painting with music where ended for a time. In 1968, however, I was in Beirut working as a film technician for UNRWA (The UN agency concerned with Palestinian refugees), and independently made a short 16-mm documentary movie entitled *Al-Quds* [10](Arab Jerusalem), following its loss in the 1967 war. Ibrahim Souss composed and played a musical score for the film, and for the short disturbing episode about the war I copied his music onto several tapes, and ran them on several tracks simultaneously. This cacophony accompanied a rapidly edited sequence of shots and scratches on film.

III Drawing while listening to music

Apart from these experiments, I recall making four different drawings in traditional media, each while listening to a particular musical work. In London as an art student in the early 1960's I busied myself throughout a concert by the London Symphony Orchestra, drawing a continuous line in ink, depicting the orchestra while it performed a Tchaikovsky symphony or piano concerto. Later I used ashes having different hues from a fireplace rubbed onto paper with my finger (the only available materials at the moment) while listening to Schubert's *Ninth Symphony*. More recently I made a pencil drawing of Gary Carr the double bass player during his concert in Tokyo. In 1984 I made a pencil drawing, working on it continuously as I listened to an entire opera on records. Later I enlarged the drawing into a gouache and gold foil painting entitled "*Mozart's Magic Flute performed in the Ramallah Hills*" [11].

IV Cycle of monthly paintings devoted to different composers.

BRAHMS



September 1999 Autumn is one of my favorite seasons, and I always felt that the generous emotions in the music of Brahms, expressed in deep surging harmonies with rich textures, suited that season perfectly. I decided to listen to Brahms' music exclusively while painting my usual monthly watercolor. And not to paint unless I was listening to Brahms music! So I borrowed as many Brahms CDs as possible from several public libraries in my area and started listening and painting. I believe the music encouraged me to compose the painting in a sweeping panoramic vista of overlapping waves. The pure melodic lines of the *Violin Concerto* might have encouraged the blue and purple lines seen in the upper part of the painting. The experience was so refreshing for me that I wished to repeat this *modus operandi* with a different composer later on.

BEETHOVEN (1)

November 1999. This painting was loosely based on a small watercolor sketch made while listening to Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*. However, in this one case only, I did not listen to music while actually making this larger version of the sketch. I used a drip-dry method of adding puddles of usually dilute watercolor on the stretched paper on a panel laid flat. A puddle would often take all day to dry, but a pleasing darker ring of color was left at the edge of the paler shapes. Overlapping colors inlaid with gold foil give the painting a rather 'embroidered' and quirky look, unlike Beethoven's seamless and highly polished music. Nevertheless the composition of the painting is strong, sure and dynamic.

MOZART (1)

December 1999. Mozart's music is perfectly balanced: delicate, sophisticated,

inventive, and highly decorative, yet deeply moving. It should have inspired me to give this painting a more refined finish than it actually has. My excuses are that every December I usually get homesick and depressed, especially before Christmas. In addition this year, the constant hype about Y2K and the Millennium was distracting. All this is reflected in some overworked passages in the painting. Luckily, I was using very heavy Fabriano paper from Italy, which allowed deletions and painting over, without muddying the image. Mozart's music finally 'saved' both this painting and me: the general effect is complex, joyous and lively.

BACH



January 2000. The start of the new Millennium. A new beginning. New Year's in Japan is an especially delightful time. People are relaxed, dressed in colorful kimonos, enjoying an extended yearly holiday. Bach's music, strong, full of faith, grace and power, demanded simple strong shapes in the painting. The cross theme in the center is an obvious reference to Bach's as well as my own Christian background, but I did not intend this to be a "religious" picture.

DEBUSSY



February 2000. The music of Debussy is transparent, spontaneous and fluid, and all of these qualities are also the hallmarks of watercolor itself, as a painting medium. I found that Debussy's oeuvre contained music that expressed profound emotions, not only the delicate 'impressions' he is famous for. All this might explain the success of this painting. The swelling bluish movement in the painting might be attributed to the emotional sweep of a piece like *La Mer* (The Sea). Debussy's opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* (recommended to me by Mariam, who is a perceptive critic of my work) is full of literary allusions to light and shadow, and this inspired the subtle tonality in the painting, accented by iridescent gold and silver paint. Other passages in the painting reflect the playful and inventive Debussy in piano pieces like *Children's Corner*.

VIVALDI



March 2000. Vivaldi - Venice - the Italian Renaissance - the invention of perspective. These associations dictated the white outline grid-lines of reverse perspective where the vanishing point is in the foreground[12]. I drew these lines with masking solution, which was erased when the painting was finished. The vanishing point in turn suggested its opposite: the tiny point that gave birth of the expanding universe at the Big Bang. The web-like lines around this point were printed using the masking solution applied through a silk-screen, and are from an illustration found in one of my physics papers[13].

Other elements in the painting are the Arabic text "Ma Sha' Allah" ('What God Wills', an expression of wonder), a galaxy, the Earth, and an irregular dodecahedron. The violets were painted from ones given to me by my wife Kyoko, after I complained to her that I have often read (most recently in Proust) about the fragrance of violets, without ever actually seeing or smelling one! All these references, as well as the dahlia and the portrait (copied from a pencil sketch made in a public study room), are not particularly related to Vivaldi. But his vibrant music seems to come from a celestial city, accessible to us all, and inviting us in to celebrate all good things.

MAHLER



April 2000. The explosive joy often encountered in Mahler's music, and always climaxed by clashing cymbals decided the composition of this painting. To start, I faced the pure white of the textured Arches French paper, listened to Mahler's second *Resurrection* symphony (as advised by Mariam) and applied the gold foil and the expansive blue form dominating the painting. The inverted triangle of the composition resembles that of the "Vivaldi painting" as if it was a variation on a theme. Again the music helped me paint this picture, while all around Tokyo cherry blossoms bloomed. I listened to all of Mahler's symphonies, and was specially affected by a first hearing of *Das Lied von Erde* (The Song of the Earth) with its somber haunting passages. Is there a somber haunting passage in the painting?

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REFERENCES FOR THIS SECTION

[1] A version of Böcklin's painting is kept at N.Y. Metropolitan Museum of Art www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/110000116

Menotti saw Bosch's painting "The Adoration of the Magi" at the Met: www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/110000157

[2] Matisse, Henri. *Jazz*. p. XV. George Braziller, Inc. N.Y. 1985, originally published by Editions Verve, Paris 1947.

[3] Anonymous graffiti quoted by Wheeler, J. A., in *At Home in the Universe*. (AIP/ Springer, NY, 1989)

[4] Cross, M. & Ewen, D. *The Milton Cross New Encyclopedia of The Great Composers and Their Music* Doubleday (NY 1969)

[5] Gammond, P., *Classical Composers* (Tiger Books Intl. London, 1994)

[6] Tamari, V. "Al-Musiqa Al-Israiliyyah" ["Israeli Music"] *Al-Ufuq Al-Jadid* ('New Horizon', Arab Jerusalem, late 1950's or early 1960's in Arabic)

[7] This merger of animated storytelling and music was made in 1940 with the collaboration of the renowned conductor Leopold Stokowski. Earlier in the thirties, when sound had just become possible in the cinema, Disney produced a number of short animated films entitled "Silly Symphonies" where, for example, skeleton figures dance to Grieg's music.

[8] Tamari, V. letter to the editor, entitled 'Visual Music', published in *Encounter*, p.? UK 196?

[9] Tamari, V. *Influences and Motivations in the Work of a Palestinian Artist/Inventor*. Leonardo Vol.24, No.1 1991 pp.7-14 (Pergamon, Oxford). online on this present site

[10] *Al-Quds* 18-minutes, black-and-white, 16-mm sound film. Edited by V. Tamari at Baalbeck Studios, Beirut, Lebanon. 1968. Produced and distributed by the Fifth of June Society, Beirut.

[11] A black-and-white photograph of this painting is on p. 11 of ref. 8

[12] The concept originates in a humorous cartoon I drew at the time, entitled "The Discovery of the Vanishing Point" published in *PinUp*, then edited by my daughter Mona Tamari at the School of Architecture, MIT, Boston, Spring 2000.

[13] V. Tamari "The Unified Dipole Field", Nov. 1993, (unpublished paper).

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