

Wassily Kandinsky: Visual Music

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Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), a highly talented artist and genius, was so moved and captivated by music that it inspired him to become a painter and to change painting forever. Before World War I in Murnau, Germany, Kandinsky created abstract art, which later led to non-objective art. While in Germany, Kandinsky was part of the German Expressionist group, *Der Blaue Reiter*, translated as "The Blue Rider." Expressionism was an art form meant to cause the viewer to emote with the artwork, and this is precisely what Kandinsky sought to create with his paintings; namely, he wanted people to relate to his pieces and to be moved by them. During his time spent in Germany, Kandinsky was swept away by the rising of atonal music, which inspired him to create art reflective of this emotion. Music influenced Wassily Kandinsky in numerous ways and led him to pursue the adventure of creating paintings that were as abstract, spiritual, and emotionally powerful.

Although Kandinsky is considered a German Expressionist, he was not German; Kandinsky was born in Moscow, Russia. Even more surprising, Kandinsky was not always an artist. He first studied law, economics, and ethnography at the University of Moscow, where he later held an academic position. Because he came from a financially stable and open-minded family, he also was classically educated in areas such as philosophy, literacy, music, society, and art. He was certainly placed in the upper level of society. Despite being so successful and well-educated by the age of thirty, he left his lucrative academic job to become a painter. It was German composer Richard Wagner's opera *Lohengrin* that caused Kandinsky to devote his life to

art because it showed him that music has a strong emotional impact on its listeners. For Kandinsky, the performance evoked memories from his past, and he "saw all of the colors in [his] mind; they stood before [his] eyes."¹ After the performance, Kandinsky became ambitious and wanted to create with painting what Wagner could create with music.

Of course, Kandinsky also appreciated music because he was a cellist and violinist, but there was something more to his appreciation than just understanding of the concepts and rules of music. As his wife Nina Kandinsky once noted, Kandinsky had a specific musical sound and smell designated for each color, and he intensely loved colors. Kandinsky displayed the common characteristics of synesthesia, the condition where one sense stimulates another sense. According to journalists Amy Ione and Christopher Tyler, Kandinsky was "perhaps the best-known synesthete, no doubt because his paintings have a dynamic, musical feel to them."²

One of the greatest influences on Kandinsky's artistic career was Viennese composer Arnold Schoenberg, who became Kandinsky's long-time friend. Like Kandinsky, Schoenberg was exploring his artistic field of music by trying to produce a new type of emotionally captivating music. To do this, Schoenberg created atonal music with free chromaticism, non-harmonic tones and unresolved tones of dissonance, which completely destroyed traditional music. In his music, Schoenberg used what he called "developing variations," which were chromatic structures; the theme of the piece constantly changed, as he added polyphonic layers, or many different musical melodies at the same time, on top of each other.³ Schoenberg used all of these ideas in his *Second String Quartet Op. 10*. In 1911, Kandinsky attended the *Second String Quartet* performance in Munich. Immediately after the performance, Kandinsky

¹ Magdalena Dabrowski, *Kandinsky Compositions* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1995), 19.

² Amy Ione and Christopher Tyler, "Was Kandinsky a Synesthete?" *Journal of the History of the Neurosciences* 12, no. 2 (June 2003): 223.

³ Magdalena Dabrowski, *Kandinsky Compositions* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1995), 20.

completed two preliminary sketches based on the music that was played, and the next day, he created a full-size oil painting called *Impression III (Concert)*. Kandinsky was so amazed by Schoenberg's music that it inspired him to create a visual art that was just as abstract, emotional, and spiritual as Schoenberg's music.

Ironically, Kandinsky created his painting *Composition I* before ever hearing Schoenberg's music. Kandinsky strongly believed that music was the most abstract art form because it allowed the listener freedom to interpret the sounds into whatever he or she desired. He knew that painting could not provide such freedom for the viewer, and he wanted to create a "new symphonic construction" of painting that could be as abstract as music.⁴ To make his artwork comparable to music, he produced many paintings with musical ideas or terminology. He completed series of paintings that were categorized under three musical terms. First, his Impressions were paintings based on true impressions of "external nature" and linear forms. Improvisations were impressions of "internal nature," meaning that they represented the inner nature of one's character.⁵ Finally, Kandinsky's Compositions were his most ambitious paintings of the three categories and were based on his own internal expressions. As Kandinsky once said, "The very word *composition* called forth in me an inner vibration. Subsequently, I made it my own aim in life to paint a composition."⁶ He had two categories of Compositions: simple, or rather melodic compositions, and complex, also known as symphonic compositions, which were also based on musical terminology. Melodic compositions were considered simple compositions because they had an evidently simple form. In contrast, the symphonic compositions were thought to be complex because they were composed of many forms, but they still contained a main form. The complex compositions could be considered polyphonic, since several forms were

⁴ Ibid, 11.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Magdalena Dabrowski, *Kandinsky Compositions* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1995), 11.

contained in one composition; but, each visual form also could be viewed as a different rhythm, just as music has different rhythms, making a group of many forms into complex rhythms. Rhythm in art is related to rhythm in music because both consist of patterns that are meant to move the viewer or listener through the composition.

In 1909, when he was in his early forties, Kandinsky began painting Compositions, which were large, mural-sized paintings that were thoroughly planned with many sketches. His Composition showing the most musical influence, especially from Schoenberg's atonal music, was *Composition VII* (1913). Kandinsky created thirty sketches, consisting of drawings, watercolor paintings, and oil paintings, before he created his final oil painting of *Composition VII*. Each of the sketches may have had some relation to the final piece, but, overall, the final Composition looked drastically different from many of them. In relation to music, *Composition VII* was polyphonic, like Schoenberg's music; Kandinsky's painting contained more than one motif on the same canvas, or rather composition, just like polyphonic music has more than one motif played on top of the main motif. The painting also can be related to Schoenberg's use of unresolved dissonance, as there are colors and forms that appear to be unresolved with one another. Of course, "unresolved" is not a negative term; it simply means that the harmonics or visual elements do not conclude in the expected manner. Schoenberg's atonal music may be directly related to Kandinsky's abstract art because both broke with tradition in many related ways. In Kandinsky's first letter to Schoenberg, he stated, "the independent life of the individual voices in your compositions is exactly what I am trying to find in my paintings."⁷ This letter shows that he definitely was prompted by Schoenberg's music to create his paintings, such as *Composition VII*.

Not surprisingly, Kandinsky followed the idea of painting from the "cosmos," wherein he

⁷ James Leggio, *Music and Modern Art* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 98.

sought to capture the spirituality and power of the universe in music. Likewise, composers such as Gustav Mahler and Johann Strauss were writing music that required more instruments, which led to louder and more powerful sounds. Kandinsky was fascinated with the composers' musical agendas and was inspired to capture the power of the cosmos in his own spiritually and musically driven paintings. Kandinsky's own intrigue with astronomy also attracted him to the idea of the power of the cosmos. Kandinsky once stated of cosmic art, "Technically, every work of art comes into being in the same way as the cosmos-by means of catastrophes, which ultimately create out of the cacophony of the various instruments that symphony we call the music of the spheres."⁸

In Kandinsky's painting *Composition VII*, he clearly was inspired by cosmic harmonies to create "cosmic convulsions,"⁹ while combining musical and visual sensations. Kandinsky's painting *Several Circles* (1926) probably best relates to the idea of the musical spheres of the universe. The work depicts numerous overlapping circles of many different colors and sizes, which gives the piece a celestial overtone. The dark background resembles the infinity of the universe, and the circles appear to float in space, resembling the planets and stars. Kandinsky loved the circle because of its associated meanings and powers. In relation to music, the circle could range in dynamics from loud to soft; the circle also carried with it multiple tensions. The idea of causing tension in music was used in Schoenberg's musical compositions. In music, tension is created by dissonances of the intervals between two notes on a diatonic scale. Schoenberg's tensions were created repeatedly by his atonal music; in fact, in the last movement of Schoenberg's *Second String Quartet*, there is no key signature at all. The use of atonality was described as "weightlessness" because it freed the music from the typical tonality. The

⁸ Magdalena Dabrowski, *Kandinsky Compositions* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1995), 11.

⁹ James Leggio, *Music and Modern Art* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 101.

"weightless" music also inspired Kandinsky and influenced him to use the floating circles-or musical spheres-in his painting *Several Circles*.

Throughout the years, Kandinsky developed an idea for plotting out his artistic compositions. His theory was mapped out in his book *Point and Line to Plane*. Kandinsky would start with a blank canvas, which represented silence. He then would create his first mark as a single dot; the dot was known as the "primordial element of painting" or rather, in musical terms, the fundamental note. The dot then would extend into a line, representing the development of the "song"; in music, the basic, main line is known as the melody line. He sometimes even used the idea of twelve lines representing the twelve notes of the chromatic scale that was used in Schoenberg's music; there would be six vertical and six horizontal lines to represent each note. Kandinsky basically plotted out his paintings like a composer would plot out his musical compositions. He would divide the painting into grids and diagram his work, which he felt added dynamics to the painting. His explanation for the grid was that, in stringed instruments, the first half division of the string would sound the octave, and then the second half division would sound the fifth of the octave. The notes produced are a primitive form of harmonics, since they naturally display the concept of harmonic divisions. After arranging his grid, Kandinsky would divide it further by playing with the tensions of the lines, as musicians would play with tensions by using different dissonances of notes. As the line would get closer to the edge of the painting, the tension would increase. The maximum tension that the line could reach right before touching was known as the seventh; in music, the seventh degree is the seventh note of a scale, which has much tension. Once the line reached the edge of the composition, its tension would be released or, in musical terms, it would resolve to the tonic or octave of the scale.

In conclusion, Kandinsky was a remarkable painter who produced successful paintings

because of his synesthetic abilities. Since he was an amateur musician and an avid painter, Kandinsky was able to relate the two art forms in a beautiful and ingenious way. Because his methods and compositions were so precise and deliberate, he also executed masterful paintings. One can nearly "hear" the music in Kandinsky's work. The bright, vibrant colors and the polyphonic motifs create a symphony of music being played right before the viewers' eyes. There likely will never be another artist who will be able to capture music or compete with music's abstractness and power like Kandinsky. He truly was a genius who loved music, and his paintings display his passion for music, art, and, most importantly, color.

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Dr. Nero's Comments: *Heidi is in the unique position of being an artist and a musician. She brought both disciplines together in this highly informative and well-considered piece.*