

Inspired by Kandinsky

By [STUART ISACOFF](#)

In January 1911, the painters Vasily Kandinsky, Franz Marc and Gabriele Münter attended a Munich concert where they encountered the music of Arnold Schoenberg for the first time. Kandinsky was amazed by what he heard: The tones, freed from traditional rules of consonance and dissonance, seemed to seek their own independent destinies, evoking in sound the abstract compositional world the painter had been striving toward. Soon after, Kandinsky excitedly wrote to the composer: "In your works, you have realized what I . . . have so greatly longed for."

The concert inspired Kandinsky to create a dramatic painting, "Impression III (Concert)." Like so much of his work, its images lie somewhere between representation and abstraction—but it doesn't take much imagination to recognize the outlines of an audience, and of a great black piano planted in the center of the canvas. Kandinsky's influential treatise of around the same time, "Concerning the Spiritual in Art," announced the importance of music to his concepts. "Color is the keyboard, the eye is the hammer," he wrote. "The soul is the piano with its many strings." He was determined to enlist Schoenberg (who also painted) in his efforts, and the two soon became friends.

Painter Vasily Kandinsky.



Kandinsky was not alone in his pursuit of artistic intersections. At the turn of the 20th century, poets, painters and musicians in cultural centers around the world were conspiring together to create new art forms. In Paris, the composer Claude Debussy, the symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, and the painter Edgar Degas, among others, searched for correspondences between sound, color and fragrance to forge a language "liberated from convention" (the phrase was Baudelaire's). *In Russia, the composer Alexander Scriabin fell under the sway of*

his country's symbolists and, fueled by a mystical fervor, produced pieces that blended music, light, poetry and movement. The result, according to the poet Konstantin Balmont, was like "the singing of a falling moon. Starlight in music. A flame's movement. A burst of sunlight. The cry of soul to soul."

But in Munich, the circle rolled up their sleeves and joined together in a common enterprise. Kandinsky, Marc, Schoenberg and several other like-minded artists created an almanac called *The Blue Rider*—filled with essays, music and art—and launched exhibitions under the same title with works that trumpeted inner vision (and primitive impulse) over mechanical "calculation."

It was an exciting time, and at Columbia University's Miller Theatre this week the *Blue Rider* era is being revived in a spellbinding program of music, projected images and movement, conceived and directed by pianist Sarah Rothenberg. The event (which had its debut on Wednesday and will be repeated on Friday) is a co-production with the Guggenheim, where "*Kandinsky*," a retrospective of the artist's work, has just opened.

Ms. Rothenberg, a prolific and creative thinker, has worked with the Guggenheim before, most recently pairing music to a photo exhibit on modernity in Central Europe, and she had been involved in the Jewish Museum's 2003 presentation of "*Kandinsky, Schoenberg and The Blue Rider*." When she learned that the Guggenheim was at work on a Kandinsky project, she proposed a companion concert. "But I thought we would use the small performance space at the Guggenheim," she explains. "Then, in April, I learned that we would be at the Miller, and that's when the idea of dance came in, which we paired with Schoenberg's *Second String Quartet*, played by the Brentano String Quartet." It was this piece, performed as an accompaniment to words by poet Stefan George, that most attracted Kandinsky's attention.



Composer Arnold Schoenberg.

Dance is not the only unusual element. An equally important feature of the presentation is what Ms. Rothenberg calls "visual partners"—lighting and projected imagery acting in intimate relationship to the music. She created a special stage set based on the first sketch Kandinsky did in preparation for "Impression III." There is a vortex of walls, and a sloping false ceiling that gives the impression of a triangle—"a central form" for Kandinsky, says the pianist. "The projections appear on those surfaces," relates Ms. Rothenberg, "and grow out of images from Kandinsky's prints and paintings, tracing his move from landscapes to abstract works."

The musical side of the program surveys the immense diversity of material created in the period, including pieces by Schoenberg, mystical composer Thomas de Hartmann (who contributed an essay to *The Blue Rider* on "Anarchy in Music"), Scriabin, Russian experimentalist Arthur Lourié, and Schoenberg's students, Anton Webern and Alban Berg.

At a rehearsal Sunday evening, technicians working behind an array of screens programmed lights and images as Ms. Rothenberg, at the piano, accompanied soprano Susan Narucki in Schoenberg's early song, "Erwartung" (Expectation). The text, by Richard Dehmel, describes a man, beckoned by "a pale woman's hand," standing by a sea-green pond and red villa, where, "under the dead oak, the moon shines." The dark-hued piano tones rang out, a beautiful, sorrowful song began to convey the haunting tale, and a thin, horizontal white line stretched across the set. As the story unfolded, the walls turned a deep red and the line gave birth to a circle, then turned wavy, transforming into the rippling surface of a sea-green pond. By the end of the song, the circle had grown and risen to become a bright moon in a black sky. Even in a technical run-through, the performance and the effect of those simple geometric shapes were altogether stunning.

"You know," Ms. Rothenberg said, "this is just the opening. The evening builds." I can't wait to experience it whole.

The Blue Rider In Performance

Miller Theatre, Columbia University
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- Mr. Isacoff is on the faculty of the Purchase College Conservatory of Music, and the author of "Temperament: How Music Became a Battleground for the Great Minds of Western Civilization" (Knopf/Vintage).

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