

Colourful music

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My, is that ever a loud top you're wearing! Oh, sorry, that's your pyjamas. Well, did you come across some noisy pictures in today's papers? Are you listening to some colourful music as you read?

These mixed metaphors work well in our real world, where we happily confuse some bright colours with shrieking trumpets whether we are only seeing one or only hearing the other. Or where we easily imagine the noises associated with pictures of kids playing, car crashes, or soldiers at war. But this intertwining of the senses is also part of how we think, and for some people it's automatic and unavoidable.

In many ways the study of the brain is the next big frontier in understanding how we work, and the part of that science which fascinates me is the role of music in our thinking. No matter whether you believe that all humans have an innate sense for music built into their grey matter - as some scientists have said - you can't escape how pervasively music is allowed into our world.

One neurologist who has made a career from examining how our brains cope with our five senses is Oliver Sacks. One of his earlier books, *Awakenings*, became the Oscar-nominated film starring Robert De Niro, Robin Williams and others. At one point, it showed catatonic patients being roused from their frozen states by music. Sacks' latest book is *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain*. In 29 chapters it examines so many interesting aspects of this subject that I suspect you will see many more columns by me devoted to the ones I find most interesting.

One that really grabbed my attention so far is synaesthesia, the brain's own blending of the senses, especially as it relates to music. You see, for some people the idea of colourful music isn't just a metaphor; it's absolutely real. The sounds they hear stimulate not only the part of the brain that interprets music but also the part that generates colours. Although this phenomenon was known and studied in the 18th century, it was later dismissed and ignored until modern imaging techniques have revealed its validity. With these machines we can now witness simultaneous activity in both parts of the brain for people claiming to hear colours.

The most common version of this phenomenon relates each note through the entire audible range to a different tint. The choices of colour for each note are not the same for each person, but lighter shades predominate in the upper registers and darker ones for lower notes. No correlation has been found to those coloured keyboards and xylophones we give young kids to bang on, or any other colour coding used to teach music at an early age. Yet music-colour synaesthesia does seem stronger in children and tends to disappear with adolescence unless a serious study of music reinforces it, and that suggests a neurological function that has become increasingly latent or dormant over evolutionary time.

What a shame to lose such an enhancement to music. Beyond having a normal human reaction to the emotive power of music, and beyond knowing the name of every note they hear through perfect pitch, music-colour synaesthetes would see them pass as a kaleidoscope of colours. It would be your own personal version of *Fantasia* with every piece of music.

With this idea in mind, other films have been made fitting colour to music, and a colour organ was invented to add a visual dimension to music performances. The general failure of these and other, similar, ideas probably reflects what I feel is the most basic principle of art: we are each very attached to our own unique understanding of what we see and hear. We become bored when someone else's interpretation is forced upon us, especially when we get that same interpretation every time we hear that selected piece of music. Perhaps that is why Sacks reports that some adult music-colour synaesthetes working in the music field end up thinking of this ability as being "no big deal." It becomes just a part of their world.

Yet the most fascinating part of this phenomenon is the association of colours not just with single notes or chords but with entire keys. The keys of D major and Eb major sit as close as possible to each other, for example, yet most music written in the one key is worlds away in mood and effect from pieces written in the other. Although I don't see specific colours for these keys, I certainly hear them as being bright and dark respectively. What is the source of these audible differences is totally beyond me and everyone else I have read or talked to, but it would be interesting to hear what colours some composers saw for each.

The list of music-colour synaesthetes among famous composers might surprise you. Alexander Scriabin, despite his fantastically colourful music, doesn't make it, but the list does include Franz Liszt, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Olivier Messiaen and Duke Ellington. News of that last one should make us all stop and listen again to such

classics as Mood Indigo, Black and Tan Fantasy, and Black, Brown and Beige. They just might bring some much needed colour into this snow-white and pothole-black first day of March.

Happy listening!

Murray Charters is a freelance musician, writer and teacher in Brantford.

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