

Atonal Canvas: When Kandinsky met Schoenberg

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In 1911, after hearing Schoenberg's *String Quartet No. 2*, Op. 10, and the Three Piano Pieces, Op. 11, Wassily Kandinsky began corresponding with Arnold Schoenberg, which continued until 1936. In his first letter to Schoenberg, he expressed his hopes of knowing Schoenberg, as well as his thoughts on Schoenberg's music. He wrote, "the independent life of the individual voices in your compositions is exactly what I am trying to find in my paintings."¹ Kandinsky and Schoenberg spent time together in 1911 and 1914 in order to share their ideas on music and painting, viewing themselves as "partners of the same intellectual and creative rank."² At the same time, they both participated in the Blue Rider movement (*Der Blaue Reiter*) from 1911 to 1914. This paper will examine the relationship between Kandinsky's abstract paintings and Schoenberg's atonal compositions – how these different art forms interrelate and influence each other and thus how music and the visual arts in general can share the same aesthetics.

Atonal music is hard to memorize and play, because there is no pattern and tonal center. Listeners cannot predict what the next note is or what instrument is going to play, since it can be played by any instrument on any pitch. Abstract art is the visual counterpart of atonal music. After hearing Schoenberg's music, Kandinsky realized that "he had essentially been attempting to do the same thing in his paintings, by rejecting the traditional systems of pictorial composition and emphasizing instead harmonies of colors and form, devoid of obvious representational associations."³ In his abstract paintings, especially during the Blue Rider Period, Kandinsky dispensed with recognizable "imagery" from the external world. As he mentioned in his book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*: "On the average man, only impressions caused by familiar objects will be superficial."⁴ Therefore he abandoned identifiable shapes and employed pure form and color to express what he referred to as the "inner necessity", or spiritual in art.

In order to show the similarities and differences in their works, this paper will compare two pairs of works by Schoenberg and Kandinsky that represent two different stages of the artists' careers: (1) Schoenberg's *Five Pieces for Orchestra*, Op. 16 (1909) and Kandinsky's *Composition VI* (1913); and (2) Schoenberg's *Suite for Piano*, Op. 25,

¹ Hahl-Koch, Jelena. *Arnold Schoenberg, Wassily Kandinsky—Letters, Pictures and Documents*. Translated by Crawford, John. Faber and Faber, 1984, p. 21.

² *Ibid.*, p. 137.

³ Dabrowski, Magdalena. *Schoenberg, Kandinsky, and the Blue Rider*. The Jewish Museum, New York, 2003, p. 82.

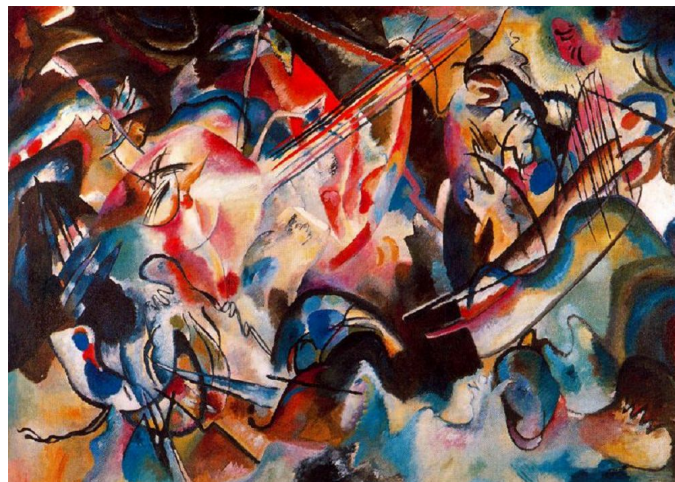
⁴ Kandinsky, Wassily. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Translated by Michael T. H. Sadler. Kessinger Publishing, 1947, p. 43.

(1923-25) and Kandinsky's *Composition VIII* (1923). In the 1920s, Schoenberg found that chromaticism had reached its saturation, and atonality did not provide enough means in composition, so he invented twelve-tone music. At roughly the same time, Kandinsky changed his painting style to stricter geometric forms. So the second comparison is after Kandinsky and Schoenberg changed their compositional and pictorial styles.

Schoenberg's *Five Pieces for Orchestra*, Op. 16, which was composed in 1909, is chromatically rich and loosely atonal. Although it predates Kandinsky's *Composition VI* (1913), which was one of his first abstract paintings, it is nevertheless similar to it in that it expresses lots of musical "lights and darks."

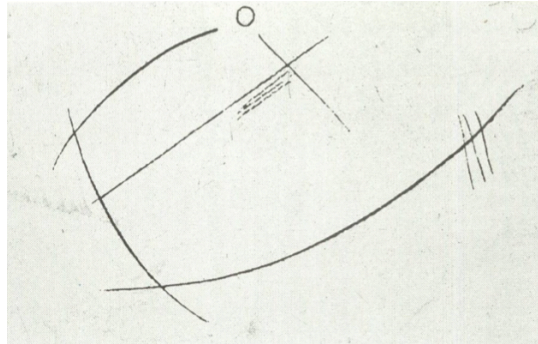
I.

Schoenberg's *Five Pieces for Orchestra*, Op. 16, (1909)



Kandinsky's *Composition VI* (1913)

First impression on their works is they are both imbalanced: music prose in Schoenberg's five pieces for orchestra is asymmetrical because there are no identifiable musical phrases and periods. Lines in this work by Kandinsky are similarly angular and asymmetrical, and this outline shows the proportions of this painting are uneven.



Outline of *Composition VI*, 1913

Five Pieces for Orchestra has a large quantity of dissonance, and it is also very chromatic. Kandinsky also applied plenty of dissonances in his *Compositions VI* by using numerous contrasts – “curved and straight lines, bright and muted colors, extremes of light and dark, areas of thinner and thicker paint, lines and areas of color seeming to move in different directions.”⁵ Other than dissonance, another common characteristic that can be identified in these two works is that they all have unresolved tensions: *Five Pieces for Orchestra* is intense in terms of dynamic and tone language; and *Composition VI* is intense and agitated because of the use of contrasting colors and the strong visual dynamics of virtual movement and spatial depth.

Schoenberg and Kandinsky took their works to new levels of abstraction. Schoenberg used the atonal technique to avoid a traditional tonal center, while Kandinsky used amorphous forms in his painting to avoid any recognizable connection to the natural world. Both of their works don't show much of regular sense of pulse: “Schoenberg has a systematic means of deemphasizing the first beat of measures by using a rest, tying a note over the measure, or writing lines with melodic contours or phrasing that extended over the bar line.”⁶ In Kandinsky's painting, the curves, lines and colors are very fluid and there is just one obvious pulse in this painting, which is the white spot on the middle of the right side. This pulse resembles the very last note of a musical piece.

In *Five Pieces for Orchestra*, Schoenberg used woodwinds, brass, percussion and strings. This recalls Kandinsky's use of color in *Composition VI* to represent different musical instruments: As Kandinsky talked about the connection between music and color, quoted in Shannon Annis' article: “yellow ‘affects us like the shrill sound of a trumpet being played louder and louder’; light blue ‘resembles the flute’, dark blue the ‘cello, darker still the wonderful sound of a double bass’; and both black and white are

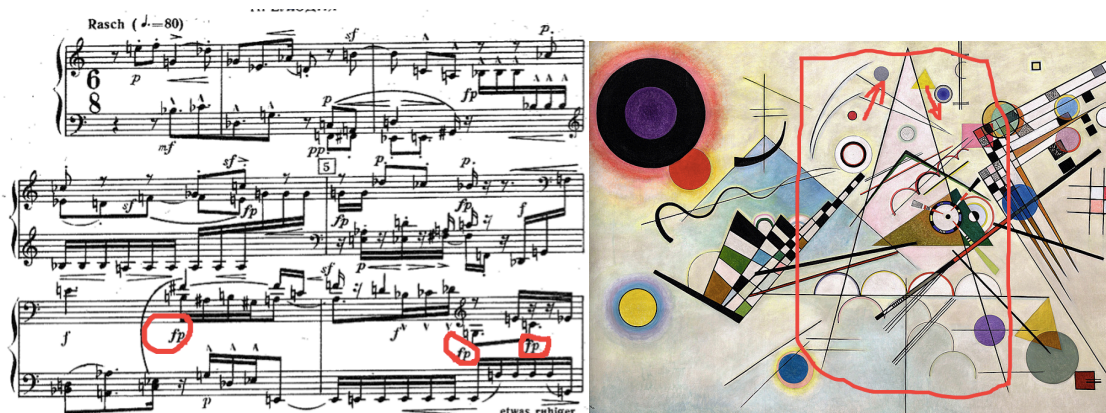
⁵ Annis, Shannon M. (2008) “Kandinsky's dissonance and a Schoenbergian view of *Composition VI*.” Graduate Theses and Dissertation. University of South Florida, p. 43

⁶ Adams, Courtney S. “Artistic Parallels between Arnold Schoenberg's Music and Painting (1908-1912).” *College Music Symposium*, Vol. 35 (1995). Published by College Music Society, pp. 5-21

compared to musical pauses”⁷ (Kandinsky 1946). So *Composition VI* subtly reflects the instrumentations in *Five Pieces for Orchestra*.

The third piece is called *Farben* (colors). Schoenberg employed Klangfarbenmelodie (sound-color melody) technique by splitting the melody line between several instruments, rather than focusing on one instrument. Transitions among different instruments create changes from one color to another. In Kandinsky’s painting, he didn’t emphasize any single color; rather, he used different colors evenly, resulting in the picture having an “all-over” effect, which is similar to klangfarbenmelodie technique.

Next comparison will be analyzed is Schoenberg’s *Suite for Piano*, Op. 25 and Kandinsky’s *Composition VIII*:



Schoenberg’s *Suite for Piano*, Op. 25, (1923-25)

Kandinsky’s *Composition VIII* (1923)

Schoenberg’s *Suite for Piano*, Op. 25, (1923-25) is more staccato and angular than his *Five Pieces for Orchestra*. It therefore matches up well with Kandinsky’s later geometric style in *Composition VIII* (1923). In 1922, after seven years of exposure to the works of the Russian avant-garde painter Kazimir Malevich, Kandinsky incorporated a geometric style in his paintings. In *Composition VIII* he used straight lines and circles. Comparing painting and music, Kandinsky wrote, “musical notation is nothing more than various combinations of points and lines.”⁸ Schoenberg employed the twelve-tone technique in his *Suite for Piano*, which means he avoided repeating the same tone twice until all the other notes occurred at least once. Similarly, Kandinsky avoided repetition in his painting as well: although he used several circles and lines, the color of the circles and the directions of the lines are all different from each other. Thus there is a connection between Schoenberg’s non-repetition of tones and Kandinsky’s varied use of colors and forms.

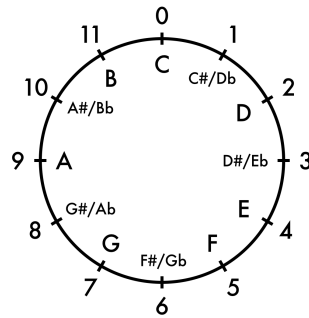
Composition VIII mainly contains three basic shapes: 1) straight line 2) circle/half circle, 3) wave. At the same time, *Suite for piano* contains a twelve-tone row also in three basic shapes of four notes each E–F–G–D, G–E–A–D, and B–C–A–B. Kandinsky loved

⁷ Annis, Shannon M. “Kandinsky’s dissonance and a Schoenbergian view of *Composition VI*.” Graduate Theses and Dissertation. University of South Florida. (2008), p.27

⁸ Kandinsky, Wassily. *Point and Line to Plane*. Dover Publications. New York, 1979, p. 99.

to use circle than other forms, as James Leggio mentioned, “the circle is the key shape in his geometric abstractions of the Bauhaus period”⁹

Comparing circle to twelve-tone music, twelve-tone also has circular motion: twelve numbers represent 12 tones respectively and they are related only to one another. Circle seems to be balanced, but it remains unresolved by changing tension from one note to another, this is the same in twelve-tone music, which has no resolution of the dissonance.



12-tones diagram

Another similarity between these two works by Schoenberg and Kandinsky that strikes the attentive listener/viewer is found in the sixth measure of the *Suite for Piano*, where the dynamic changes from strong to soft (f-p) in one note (see reproduced musical score), and in *Composition VIII*, where there are some triangle-like shapes on the upper center part of the painting, creating a dramatic effect (see reproduced painting). When the line goes up from the bottom to the top, it suddenly drops down back to the bottom like a roller coaster.

Both works show new harmonic possibilities: Schoenberg challenged traditional style by using 20th century twelve-tone technique in Baroque suite form. In Kandinsky’s painting, he made an uncommon combination of color and form. As Kandinsky said in his *Concerning the spiritual in Art*: “Generally speaking, sharp colors are well suited to sharp forms (e.g., yellow in the triangle), and soft, deep colors by round forms (e.g., blue in the circle).”¹⁰ However, we see Kandinsky combined sharp color in a round form to create a non-traditional impression.

Works by Schoenberg and Kandinsky are representations of expressionism, which focus on internal phenomenon, i.e., emotion. During the time of Nazis’ control, their works were banned and were considered as “degenerate art” because Nazis just wanted people to obey them rather than expressing individuality and thinking independently. So Schoenberg and Kandinsky’s works provided audiences space to develop their inner feelings.

Schoenberg and Kandinsky not only tried to invoke audiences’ emotion from their own discipline, i.e., music and art, but also from each other’s disciplines: Schoenberg was not only a composer but also a painter, and Kandinsky exhibited Schoenberg’s paintings in the Blue Rider exhibition of 1911. Schoenberg’s self-portraits account for one-quarter of all his total paintings. Figures 1 and 2 are both examples of his self-portraiture.

⁹ Leggio, J. (2002). *Kandinsky, Schoenberg, and the Music of the Spheres. Music and Modern Art* (J. Leggio, Ed.). New York: Routledge. P.110

¹⁰ Kandinsky, Wassily. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Translated by Michael T. H. Sadler. Kessinger Publishing, 1947. P.47

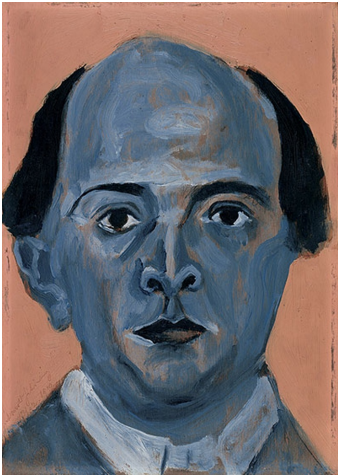


fig.1 *Blue Self-Portrait*, 1910

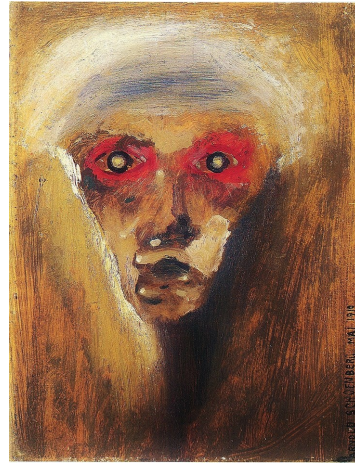


fig.2 *Red Gaze*, 1910

In *Red Gaze*, Schoenberg used color red to represent emotion and strength, brown to represent seriousness, whereas white to represent intellect. Both these paintings share similar style with his monodrama *Erwartung*, for example: they both convey same kind of emotion, psychology and dark feeling.

Kandinsky received music training when he was a child. It is not surprising therefore that he would later use musical terms as the titles for his paintings, such as “Impression,” “Improvisation,” and “Composition”. These titles clearly evidence that the inspirations for his paintings came from music. He often connected music and art together, once writing, “Colour is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand which plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations in the soul”.¹¹ In his famous book *Klänge* (Sounds) from 1913, which is considered a “musical album”, Kandinsky wrote sound poetry (words used nonsensically for their musical sound alone) accompanied by visual images, thereby “breaking down the walls between the arts.”

The foregoing examination of the relationship between Schoenberg and Kandinsky – their friendship, their mutual influences upon each other’s art forms, and thus the similarities between their works at different stages of their respective careers – illustrates how different modes of artistic expression, in this case music and painting, interrelate and influence each other, as well as how a single painter/musician can apply interdisciplinarity in their own works. It is therefore hoped that this paper will illustrate how different modes of artistic expression, can display parallel artistic responses to an aesthetic moment.

¹¹ Kandinsky, Wassily. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Translated by Michael T. H. Sadler. Kessinger Publishing, 1947, p. 45

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