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Review of Analogías musicales: Kandinsky y sus contemporáneos

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EXHIBITIONS

MADRID

Analogías musicales: Kandinsky y sus contemporáneos (Musical analogies: Kandinsky and his contemporaries). Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza and Fundación Caja Madrid (Madrid, 11 February to 25 May 2003). — Catalogue by Javier ARNALDO (curating and essay); with prefaces by Tomàs LLORENS (chief curator at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza); Pilar del CASTILLO (Minister of Education, Culture, and Sport); and Miguel Blesa de la PARRA (Director of the Fundación Caja Madrid). (Madrid: Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza & Fundación Caja Madrid, 2003), 413 p. ISBN 84-88474-95-4. Includes reproductions of all 228 exhibits, supplementary illustrations, facsimiles, bibliography, and index. In Spanish, with introductory essay translated into English.

It is hard to believe that curators and scholars still find something to say about the relationship between music and art of the twentieth century. Still, in recent years there has been a relentless boom of exhibitions, scholarly studies, and books dedicated to this topic.¹ This interest, to be sure, is due, in part, to the prestige that modernist art commands among wealthy collectors and institutions, but also to its immense popularity among the general public. Less popular in appeal, though equally revered among the happy few, is modernist music. When both manifestations — art and music — are brought together in a major, international exhibition the result is optimal: while audiences flock to see the art, underappreciated modernist composers are able to reach new audiences — the perfect symbiosis, it would seem. *Analogías musicales: Kandinsky y sus contemporáneos* is an admirable interdisciplinary formula since it promotes music taking advantage of well-known art, but it fails to present any new perspective on a thoroughly explored corner of the art history world. Geared more to the average viewer (as it should be, one presumes) than to the inquisitive mind or the scholar, it is, nevertheless, a delightful, occasionally brilliant, show to see.

Taking Kandinsky as the pivotal figure of modernism, the show presented 251 artworks (paintings, drawings, sketches, books, posters, costume and set designs, sundry objects, and even musical instruments) illustrating the relationship between music and art from 1908 to 1925. More specifically, it investigated the direct, palpable influence of music on the ideology — its creation and establishment — of modernist art. As is well known, one of modernism's main impulses was the tendency to avoid referentiality. In its search for a language based on signifiers without direct referents, modernism — especially abstract painting, but also non-narrative literature and atonal music — also borrowed from unconventional sources such as children's doodles and Arabic geometrical patterns. They all represented and conveyed something, but they neither replicated nor imitated its shapes. Scholars have often traced the genealogy of these ground-breaking efforts as they concern music and art: G.E. Lessing's *Laocoön* posed the idea of the

separation between the arts; as a reaction, Ph.O. Runge and Wagner advocated the *Gesamtkunstwerk* integrating all arts in one; Scriabin and others theorized about synaesthetics or the correspondence of color and sound, in particular, and all arts, in general; finally, Kandinsky, in his influential *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, considered music to be the model of all arts because its alleged non-referentiality. All art, he mused, should aspire to the condition of music — meaninglessness.

As an illustration of this paradigm shift (from prosaic *reference* to playful *referencelessness*), the show presented 48 artists, including Léon Bakst, Mikolajus Konstantinas Čiurlionis, El Lissitzky, Alexandra Exter, Alexej von Jawlensky, Wassily Kandinsky (represented with a massive corpus of 34 paintings), Paul Klee, František Kupka, Kazimir Malevič, a few marginal figures from the point of view of the visual arts, such as Vaslav Nijinsky, and some major composers, who also happened to be painters, including Schoenberg and Scriabin. The show was assembled in two main locations in the central district of Madrid, making it easy for the viewer to wander from one site to the next. The first part, including five sections, was located at the Casa de las Alhajas. It presented artists from Eastern Europe and explored general themes under rubrics such as "Music in space" about music and dance, and "Symphonic cosmology" which includes the intriguing works of Čiurlionis, Scriabin, and Kupka. The second part, at the august Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, included eight sections and covered abstract art in the West. In the section entitled "Nocturn", for example, visitors were able to view renditions of the standard theme of visual transcriptions of personal moods and impressions, whereas "Pictorial polyphony" presented Kandinsky's and Klee's celebrated visual equivalencies of the concepts of counterpoint and fugue.

A series of seven concerts (wisely curated by Xavier Güell, an independent musician and promoter of Barcelona, and Christian Meyer of the Arnold Schönberg Institute) were tied in with the exhibition and provided a survey of the repertoire associated with these visual artists. Next to the obvious choices (Berg, Zemlinsky, Schoenberg, Scriabin,

Čiurlionis) there were also performed lesser-known figures, though no less stimulating by any means, including the Mexican Julián Carrillo known for his microtonal experimental works and even the microtonal instruments he built. (The show also displayed two experimental violins, one built by Mihail Matjušin in 1912 and the other by Zaikovskij around 1917.) Although concerts and other educational programs are nowadays the norm for any self-respecting exhibition, in this show they seem to be even more relevant and indispensable. Just think of it: through music these concerts illustrated an exhibition about depicting music in the visual arts. It makes one's head spin, to say the least. I might be alone in this, but I would like to see a slightly different show about the relationship between music and art in the twentieth century. Ideally titled something like "Kandinsky's misunderstanding", it would stay away from the common assumption that music is asemantic and the widespread premise that words and images refer to something and produce unequivocal meaning. The fact that Kandinsky believed that all arts should aspire to music because of music's asemantic qualities has been established time and again. Now, perhaps, the time has come to think outside the box. Sure enough, a chord or a melody cannot depict a chair, a tree, a face, but verbal language and visual images are also oblique, vague, and, susceptible to numberless manipulations that render them often ambiguous and even

meaningless. Far from conveying meaning and thought, "language is actually employed to keep thought at bay", as the 2005 Nobel laureate Harold Pinter has said in his acceptance speech. Words and images, as a matter of fact, are constantly misread, misunderstood and intentionally manipulated, as your average deconstructionist would argue. They are, therefore, as ambiguous and vague as music is thought to be. Thus, although this show is a trophy of visual pleasures, the premise that motivates it is neither original nor challenging. Kandinsky's misunderstanding, his mistake really, still seems to hold sway over many curators and the institutions they work for. Not good enough, in my view.

ANTONI PIZÀ

¹ See, for example, Simon Shaw-Miller, *Visible Deeds of Music: Art and Music from Wagner to Cage* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002). Of course, the seminal contribution of the subject has been Karin von Maur's exhaustive exhibition catalogue *Vom Klang der Bilder: Die Musik in der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* (München: Prestel, 1985), and her more manageable book, *Vom Klang der Bilder = The Sound of Painting* (München: Prestel, 1999). To assess the vast amount of scholarship on the subject, I encourage readers to consult bibliographical databases such as *RILM Abstracts of Music Literature*.

TORROELLA DE MONTGRÍ

Sardana, una societat en dansa. Museum "Can Quintana" — Centre Cultural de la Mediterrània, Torroella de Montgrí, Girona (28 October 2004 — 26 June 2005). After July 2005 the exhibition will be shown at other venues in Catalonia.

Permanent collection at the Museum "Can Quintana", Torroella de Montgrí, Girona.

Tothom es dóna la mà i balla en rodona. Tota la plaça és plena de gent. És encisador. És humà.
(All people hold hands together and dance in round. The square is full of people. It is charming.
It is human.) Thomas Mann

Sardana, una societat en dansa (Sardana, a society through its dance) is a tribute to the sardana, the traditional dance of Catalonia, documenting its history, music, and cultural significance. It is the first special exhibition organized at the Museum "Can Quintana" in the city of Torroella de Montgrí (Girona, Spain), which is in many aspects complementing the museum's permanent collection also dedicated to this Catalan dance.

The exhibition includes five sections: (1) the origin and history of the sardana, (2) music and performers of the sardana, (3) significance of the sardana, (4) the sardana in Torroella de Montgrí, and (5) a proposal for the future preservation of sardana. A brief introduction relating the dance to its Mediterranean origins is followed by its nineteenth-century history, when a dance of l'Empordà became in-

fluenced by Italian opera. It was in 1850 when music of a sardana was played for the first time at the Gran Teatre del Liceu of Barcelona as a symbol of musical novelties and from there it quickly spread around Catalonia. At that time, the dance represented the sociability, community, and modernity among the people holding their hands together and dancing in a circle, following a ceremonious and rhythmic movement which made all people equal. This equality of dancers contributed to the development of the sardana as the national dance of Catalonia, particularly following the victory of the Catalan nationalists in the early-twentieth century elections.

The exhibition showed the evolution of the sardana from its earliest times, when it was performed by men only, to the present-day *associacions* or *colles sardanistes* (associa-