

The affinities between music and the visual arts are strong. We musicians speak of melodic *lines*, harmonic *colour*, pitch *space*. When non-musicians describe their experience of listening to music they often express themselves in visual terms. Many musical works of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to judge by their titles, invite such imagistic responses. And numerous twentieth-century composers employed elements of symmetry, Golden-section proportions, and other properties perfectly at home in spatial art – if more difficult to perceive in a temporal one.

Yet exact analogies between visual art and music are uncertain. For musicians, musical experience is often sound-specific: a Mozart sonata communicates abstract aural *gestures* – if anything, more akin to dance – rather than visual images. When composers have let visual art inspire their works, their approaches to musical translation have been inconsistent. In *Pictures at an Exhibition*, Mussorgsky mimics in sound the subjects of Viktor Hartmann's paintings. Liszt's *Sposalizio*, conversely, evokes what he perceived as the deeper “poetry and the philosophy” of Raphael's *Betrothal of the Virgin*, rather than its surface visual appearance. The strongest musical-visual bonds may lie in abstraction. Kandinsky gradually abandoned representation, adopting musical titles for his works, partly under the influence of Arnold Schoenberg's music (while Schoenberg's own amateur paintings also skirted abstraction). Though it is often felt that Kandinsky's visual abstraction and Schoenberg's musical atonality are not just contemporaneous but analogues of each other, however, it is not easy to pinpoint technically whether the analogy is truly justified. However intuitively we feel the affinities, our experiences of tones moving in time and visual elements positioned in space are also markedly different.

It may be the challenges of allying music and art as much as the affinities between them that attracted artist Dan Steeves and composer Kevin Morse to collaborate on *The Space Between*. The result, certainly, is a jointly and richly conceived pair of works in which the interplay and the independence of their two arts are nicely balanced. The centre of this balance deliberately shifts in the works' dual presentation: at the March 24 concert by the

Tesla String Quartet in Brunton Auditorium and in the current exhibition/installation at the Owens Art Gallery.

The nature of this project, and the project's success, both stem from initial decisions that Steeves and Morse made to guide their collaboration. Aside from determining their works' overall shape – a cycle of twelve intaglio prints matched by a twelve-movement work for string quartet – and an attention to each other's artistic language, Steeves and Morse agreed that their works would not attempt merely to mimic or translate each other. Each would retain a separate identity and integrity; each would be enriched, rather than determined, in meaning by the other.

As the collaboration unfolded, it was Dan Steeves' prints which were first completed. This presented Kevin Morse with the opportunity – and the challenge – of reacting to the prints in his composition. Morse's principal decisions here were two. The first, necessitated by music's temporal nature, was to create his own ordering of the twelve prints (one to which Steeves agreed), to serve as the basis for a corresponding movement sequence in his quartet. The second was not to adopt the titles of these now ordered prints for his music. Instead, he mapped out his quartet as a cycle of short movements grounded in established musical genres: prelude, passacaglia, march, waltz, nocturne, canon, and so on. This has been a not-uncommon procedure for composers since the early twentieth century (Berg's opera *Wozzeck* is a famous example), and it yields some clear benefits. For the composer it supplies useful limiting and shaping parameters, opening the opportunity – and, again, the challenge – of setting something new alongside established conventions. For the listener it helps by guiding expectations, providing elements of recognition amid the unfamiliarity of a new experience.

If, apart from their number, Morse's quartet movements are not overtly dependent on Steeves' prints, what actually allies them? My sense is that the affinities music and art share here are ones of artistic language.

Dan Steeves' prints present, at first glance, commonplace images of everyday life; no exotic figures or remarkable events immediately arrest our attention. As we glance at the prints' titles, however – themselves everyday phrases whose new context demands that we look again – we begin to perceive deeper layers. We notice their shared motifs: the powerful, raking diagonals, but also the other off-kilter lines; the stairways leading to unseen spaces; the figures looking away from us; the eccentric presence of nuns distracted by cell phones or eating ice-cream cones, of a man perched precariously on an outdoor step-stool, of a dog in the median of an escalator. This combination of the quotidian, the enigmatic, and the strikingly visualized keeps us searching through what we initially thought were familiar scenes.

Kevin Morse's music does not try to reproduce this combination, but it does offer something of a musical analogue to it. Like the surface subjects of Steeves' prints, Morse's genre movements are familiar, or at least accessible in nature. Most of us will recognize the rhythmic idioms of a march or a waltz, and we may expect to hear the imitation in a canon, the repetitive bass line in a passacaglia, the gentle lyricism of a nocturne. All these are present in Morse's string quartet. Moreover, many aspects of the musical language here are reassuring for those who might like reassurance. The music is broadly tonal, with perceptible key centres. Its movements end with clear tonal harmonies – indeed C, allowing the cello to play its rich lowest tone, is the quartet's predominant tonal centre. The brevity of the movements makes moderate demands on our sustained attention. And several unifying motives – held tones, some animated by slides, short rhythmic patterns in *staccato* or *pizzicato* tones, quick arpeggios – create reminiscences across movements, flashes of familiarity for the listener.

This is not, however, blandly or simplistically popular music; equally as many elements challenge us, invite more attentive listening. Those familiar genres are usually disturbed by passages or gestures that question their familiarity. The March, for example, begins martially enough, but its rhythmic and tonal focus are soon led astray, and it has to recover its equilibrium. A similar problem besets the Waltz (marked “off-kilter” in the score), whose

gestures avoid the traditional triple-metre dance patterns – even before a measure of quadruple meter throws its rhythm further out of balance. The Chant supports a modal violin melody with an appropriately medieval-sounding pedal-tone – but this pedal begins to deviate until it becomes a tonally diffuse harmony in fifths, before retreating to a conventional final chord.

More broadly the quartet’s pitch language fuses its many tonal elements with others that add enrichment or contrast. The cello’s repeated theme in the Passacaglia is a ready example. It blends tones proper to the key of C major with those from the alien whole-tone scale. During the first five of its six repetitions, the other instruments do little to clarify its tonal orientation; many of their brief gestures also borrow pitches from the whole-tone scale. During the final cello statement, however, the other instruments resolve themselves so that the music’s C major allegiance gradually comes into focus. Such careful blending and confrontation of materials pervade all of the quartet’s movements, and the music’s tonal clarity waxes and wanes. Even in the passages of maximum transparency – the endings of movements, for example – this transparency is only sometimes generated by traditional harmonies; it is nearly as often the product of other, crystalline sonorities usually grounded in those low cello tones.

At the quartet’s March 24 premiere, Kevin Morse’s music was the forward partner of this collaboration; Dan Steeves’ prints were shown, as planned, in the order dictated by the quartet composition and in video projection. In the Owens Art Gallery exhibition, the situation is reversed: now the prints can be seen in their original form and in the different spatial arrangement chosen by the artist, and Morse’s music plays the supporting role. The composer’s response has been to rework the quartet material into a sound installation, a process that has led him to alter the music’s fabric. Though the movements retain their original order, only fragments of these movements are now presented. Morse has reacted to the rearrangement of the prints by spatially channelling these fragments through eight speakers, often distributing each movement’s material (at least initially) to a speaker close to its original “print-mate”. Aside from the imaginative spatial migration to which this process

subjects the sounds, Morse has enriched the music in two telling ways: he has tended to select those passages whose tonal focus is clear, and he has multi-tracked some of the material in these passages. As a result, the installation's music is both more tonally grounded and at times richer in texture than the original quartet. The fragments of the Waltz (for tonality) and the Chant and the second Canon (for beautifully enhanced texture) come especially to mind as examples.

In balancing the independent and interdependent aspects of *The Space Between* project, Steeves and Morse have also undoubtedly been aware that the meaning of their works doesn't end with their work on them. Especially when faced with art crossing media boundaries, we exercise the "beholder's share" in our interpretation: we make our own connections between the images and the sounds. My favourite example is Steeves' print *Announcing my eventual departure*, with its central couple on the subway platform, and Morse's corresponding Nocturne. For me, the shimmering, gentle loveliness of the music reflects and deepens the intimacy of the print. Into what seems to reveal a private moment in a public space, the music encourages me to read a background story. I trust that, far from minding such inevitable beholders' readings, Dan Steeves and Kevin Morse encourage them.

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