

Turner and Music

When I launched the old Turner Society in 1975, our first event was a lecture by Jack Lindsay on this topic (printed in *Turner Society News*). At that time the topic was quite a popular one, But since then Turner pundits have seen Turner as a literary painter on whom music had little effect. Perhaps this is because the Turner writers have little interest in music, though this was not true of Eric Shanes. But he got carried away by his enthusiasm for Decoding Turner, sometimes fruitfully, but often arousing derision.

Ann Lapraik Livermore 1914-2010

Ann was a musician and writer about musicians, becoming chatelaine of Turner's villa at Twickenham which she and her husband Harold acquired in 1947. She also "acquired" Turner's Verse Book from Hilda Finberg, to whose husband it had presumably been lent by the Mallord Turner family, which later demanded it back. She became a pioneer student of Turner's poetry and music. (Harod Livermore, *Scenes from a Spanish Life c.1930* (2002).

In an article in 1957 she set out Turner's involvement with music.

1. Music notations set out in his sketchbooks of 1801 and 1808. This was from the period when Turner was with Sarah Danby, c.1800-13, widow of the musician John Danby, and when Turner set about learning to play a musical instrument.
2. Depictions of music playing in his works, occurring perhaps more frequently than in those by contemporary artists.
3. Turner's early poem "The Loves of Painting and Music" describing their fusion.
4. Turner's study of the structures of verse composition and of music. Thus Raphael was praised as a master of composition because of his sense of harmony (as related by Mrs Mary Lloyd in her *Sunny Memories*).

Jack Lindsay produced more evidence and that is summarised in the entry on Music in the Oxford Companion to J.M.W. Turner (2001) by Khatchick I Pilikian (1939-2019).

Two early connections were family ones. His young cousin Thomas Price Turner, to whom he sent a few of his drawings when he thought of taking up painting, and who was a member of the choir of Exeter Cathedral, had his own band which toured Devon, and sang in the choir at the Handel anniversary festival at Westminster Abbey, Turner noting his presence in the programme. Meanwhile the mother of Turner's two daughters was married first to the musician John Danby. To celebrate that I organised a concert (recorded) at the English Speaking Union.

The influence of music on Turner's painting.

There had long been an association between the two among theorists such as Roger de Piles. This centred on colour and music and harmony in both arts. It was particularly prevalent at Venice and exhibited by the connection between the painterly style of Titian and co and the music performed there. In 1795 Schiller wrote, "The plastic arts, at their most perfect, must become music and move us by the immediacy of their sensuous presence." There followed Novalis' idea of synaesthesia, Wagner's of *Gesamtkunstwerk* or 'total art form', the dictum

that “architecture is frozen music” which originated in Germany and was diffused to the rest of Europe by Mme de Staël, culminating in Walter Pater’s “all art aspires to the condition of music”. “Nowadays such ideas are unfashionable with art historians as with musicologists, but they are of great significance for an understanding of Romanticism” (Hugh Honour, *Romanticism*, 1979, chap.3).

I have suggested, in an article published in *The Jackdaw*, that Turner’s *Palestrina - Composition* painted in Rome in 1828 was in part a tribute to Palestrina the composer - the title immediately suggesting that to people of that time and place in view of the 1826 Palestrina anniversary and the revival of his work by the son-in-law of Sarah Danby at the Bavarian Chapel off Golden Square, the only London Catholic chapel remaining today from that time and then noted for its music (as Dr Bennet Zon has described in the *Catholic Ancestor*). The painting was intended to be a pair to the Claude at Petworth, the composition of which it follows, but totally disrupts the classical system of planes and logic by a Rubensian baroque style which was a foundation of Turner’s later work. The painting was acquired for a large sum by Elhanan Bicknell and given by a later owner to the National Gallery, which stupidly shipped it off to the Tate.

Turner thus approached Pater’s idea of all art aspiring to the condition of music, his art increasingly removed from realism and leading successors to abstraction. Following the Rubenistes, and abandoning the Poussinistes, Turner transitioned from Classicism to Romanticism.

Francis Claudon (still today a professor at Paris-Est) edited the *Encyclopedia of Romanticism (1980/1986)*, writing the section on music himself. He has studied the connection of literature with the arts and particularly music in the period which includes Turner. “Romanticism, while not abandoning it [classical metre], blurred and softened it with a more flowing line.” Palestrina’s music flows. Among Romantics who extolled Palestrina were Wackenroder (1773-98), Hoffmann (1776-1822) and Hugo (1802-85).

With which Composers can one associate Turner?

Mendelssohn immediately comes to mind – both composer and painter having visited Fingal’s Cave, and Turner’s painting so expressive of the music and the aforementioned tendencies. Mendelssohn drew and painted and was friends with the Callcotts, Turner’s followers.

Edward Lockspeiser (1973) makes the comparison with Wagner and Debussy (*La Mer*).

Among Turner’s contemporaries was their forerunner Carl Maria von Weber. He was educated in drawing and painting as well as music. “Weber personifies the complete artist of whom the Romantic era dreamed.” He said “he was seeking certain combinations of timbre that should correspond to the colour effects used by painters to convey the light transitions between dawn, morning, afternoon and evening.” Just as Turner was a virtuoso in the handling of paint, Weber was in orchestration. He died before his 40th birthday in London. The impression this made was shown by his burial entry. (I was going through the Catholic registers in my study of John Danby). Amid all the obscure Irish his stands out in huge bold Gothic letters. The good ladies transcribing the entries, who had never heard of him, were astonished. Carlos Kleiber made his name conducting his *Der Freischütz*. Kleiber’s style of

almost dancing when conducting Strauss waltzes could indicate visually what the music was like even if one could not hear it.

Ann Livermore, a sensitive if nervous musician, once made a comparison with Schubert. She had a particular interest in Spanish music.

Turner's young friend the Revd William Towler Kingsley (1815-1916) thought that the most comparable composition with late Turner was Beethoven's 9th symphony. As he was deaf, he was perhaps not a good judge. Probably he meant that they were alike in the scale of their innovation. Both moved from a Classical style to a Romantic one. William Thompson, who improbably claimed he was descended from Turner and succeeded me as Secretary of the Old Turner Society, had previously been Secretary of the Junior Beethoven Society, which broke up amid dissension. He said he could see no similarity between Beethoven and Turner. I feel the same. They proceeded on parallel but different paths.

Some critics and artists do not see any connection between music and art. Likewise Andrew Wilton cannot see the connection, obvious to others, between Turner and Shelley, the subject of the first event of The Independent Turner Society, a lecture at the Courtauld Institute of Art by Sir Drummond Bone. Like the Danby concert that was not entirely successful, as Bone regarded the usual parallels as too obvious for his very academic lecture (first published in *The Ruskin Newsletter* edited by Olive Forbes-Madden).

Some artists loved both arts, and one can surely see the influence of music on the late landscapes of Gainsborough, which also are "compositions" rather than depictions of a particular scene. Gainsborough was buried beside the grandfather of Turner's lifelong friend Revd Henry Scott Trimmer. He wrote about how one part of a tune led to another – the idea of flow, connection, the Whole found in late Turner (also philosophically in the books by Dr August Wiedmann, one of which Victor Pasmore reviewed for us). Another painter who influenced Turner, mainly for his treatment of colour, was Watteau, who was a lover of music. An exhibition was held at Bozar, Brussels, in 2013 by William Christie (Les Arts Florissants) on that aspect of his art with performances of the music of his time and of a concert held at the mansion of Watteau's patron, Pierre Crozat. I have the CD. But many have seen the most revealing parallel with a later musician, Mozart, as others have in Turner's case when comparing him with Debussy.

Turner and Today's Composers

A number of people today have composed works which are inspired by Turner or as a tribute to him. Among them is Tim Whitehead, who, with the help of Tate, produced a CD "Colour Beginnings", pieces he composed extempore in front of Turner's colour beginning watercolours for tenor & soprano saxophones, piano, drums, bass guitar and double bass. Tim gave out copies of the CD when he attended one of our celebrations of Turner's birthday. Another who attended such an event was a brother of K I Pilikian, Hovhannes (1940-2018).

Other living composers have composed works inspired by Turner.

A musician Ivan Moseley planned a book on this subject. "... my interest was what we can discover about the music Turner is actually likely to have heard, rather than fanciful associations between graphic and sonic art" (Ivan Moseley Spring 2015, p,9)

Some Quotes

“The lugging in objects whether agreeable to the whole or not is a sign of the least Genius of anything... One part of a Picture ought to be like the first part of a Tune; that you can guess what follows, and that makes the second part of the Tune ...” (Thomas Gainsborough to William Jackson, musician and artist of Exeter. 1768).

Fuseli, lecture, 1801.

“The coincidence and analogy of music and colours, together with the harmony of the latter, have been recently investigated by Mr. Newman of Soho Square, who promises speedily to amuse the world with his new theory” (*Literary Gazette*, 8 February 1817, p.47).

“I noticed that Mr. Neat, in speaking of the music of Handel and Beethoven, made use of the words *outline* and *colour*. Thus, the arts borrow terms from each other. So painters speak of tune and harmony.” (Samuel Rogers, 31 July 1836?, C.R.Leslie, *Autobiographical Recollections*, I, p.155).

“... even allowing the composition to be something (its only merit), still of the finest composition of Handel’s only played entirely *out of tune* what would it be.” (Sir George Beaumont, on a painting by John Martin, John Constable to Archdeacon Fisher, 1 April 1821, JCC VI, p.66). “Northcote accuses Turner of imitating Martin – Turner regards this as a joke” (ibid., p.116).

D.R.Hay (1798-1866, House-painter and decorator to The Queen), *The Laws of Harmonious Colouring, adapted to Interior Decorations, &c. ...*, 5th ed., 1844, chap.2, “On the Analogy between Colour and Sound”.

Turner’s Cologne described in musical terms (*Literary Gazette*, 13 May 1826).

“Cassel ... The point of view looking through the Gate on reaching the top of the Hill and turning round, is quite a picture and would have formed an admirable subject for Claude or even our own excellent artist Turner.” (*A Mozart Pilgrimage, Being the Travel Diaries of Vincent & Mary Novello in the year 1829*, ed. Rosemary Hughes (1975), p.4. Novello evidently liked great masters of colour – Rubens, Titian, Guido Reni and Turner (p.6).

Chantrey “thought that colour and effect were predominant characteristics of British art.” (George Jones, Chantrey, p.194). This was a common view at the time.

“It is said, and with some degree of truth, that the British school of art is too decidedly Flemish; and its decline is predicted, from the neglect of the more elevated and classic choice of subjects. The latter part of this assertion we are not inclined to admit, and are perfectly content to see the fine qualities of Rubens, Vandyke, Rembrandt &c in the practice of our artists.” (Review of the exhibition of the Society of British Artists, *The Literary Gazette*, 19 March 1834, p.226).

Turner’s Fighting Temeraire “which,, I am sure, when the art of translating colours into music or poetry shall be discovered, will be found to be a magnificent national ode or piece of music.” (W.M.Thackeray, in *Fraser’s Magazine*, June 1839; Holt, p.361).

“The sittings were ideal for deep talks on art with our long-missed son – a comparison between music and painting, as Moscheles constantly loved to make.” (Emile F. Smidak,

Isaak Ignaz Moscheles, 1989, p.203). I. Moscheles (1794-1870), recorded by his wife Charlotte, on his portrait being painted by his son Felix. Moscheles, pianist, composer and conductor, a leading promoter of Beethoven, lived in London 1825-46. "When Jubal strung the corded shell", (lost letter from Turner to Moscheles at Leipzig, 1848, with a sketch of a shell). They might have met at Hullmandel's *Conversazioni* (Gage, 1980, p.271 and no.314). The son (1833-1917, an English painter, advocate of Esperanto) was named after Felix Mendelssohn, who was part of the Callcott circle at Kensington Gravel Pits, as was Muzio Clementi, under whom Ignaz studied – blue plaque Kensington Church St). Felix attended St Thomas School at Leipzig – from 1846? That was when Mrs Booth's son went to Leipzig to study with help from Turner.

"! ... shall be delighted when I can have a chat on colour. You needn't ask me if I know this – or that – I don't know nothing. All I mean by a chord is a series of colours which at the distance intended by the artist for his picture blend into one rich & puzzling hue – as opposed to masses whether large or small of succession or juxtaposed colours – so discerned – which I call a colour melody. All fine colour is harmonized - as it seems to me – into the most complicated instrumentation – and melodized in distinct masses at the same time. I think without going into the [] of it this analogy will at all events make people in general understand something about colour, better than any other way of talking about it – but I should like immensely to know a thing or two about what you tell [?] me." (John Ruskin to Revd W.T. Kingsley, 8 February [1854?]).

"This art [painting] like music, is *higher than thought*; and both are superior to literature – in their vagueness." (Delacroix; H. Honour, p.50).

Romanticism p "intimacy, spirituality, colour, aspiration towards the infinite, expressed by every means available to the arts." (Baudelaire; Honour, p.55).

Sir Charles Holmes, Director of the National Gallery, compared Turner with Wagner and his watercolours with music (C.J. Holmes, 1936).

Literature

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