

Chapter 2

Wassily Kandinsky: Music as A Means of Spiritual Expression

*The world sounds. It is a cosmos of spiritually active beings.
Even dead matter is living spirit.*

*Wassily Kandinsky, c.1910
Der Blaue Reiter Almanach*

Introduction

Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) was a Russian-born artist who lived in Central Europe, in Germany in particular, where he reached his apogee both in painting and in writing on art. Considered to be the founder of abstract art, it is Kandinsky who is mentioned exclusively in discussions of early abstract painting, especially regarding those paintings that bear a correspondence with music. This chapter will examine how musical principles affected Kandinsky's abstract painting and served as a means for him to emulate the spiritual power of music in painting.

Kandinsky was involved with music in a variety of ways. One connection with music came as a result of a close friendship with the composer Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951), whose music reinforced Kandinsky's belief in abstraction and encouraged him to make this belief a reality. The relationship between abstraction and musical ideas is affirmed in many of Kandinsky's paintings, such as *Impression III* of 1911 and *Composition VIII* of 1923. These two paintings are part of Kandinsky's main series: *Impressions and Compositions*. They also mark two key phases of Kandinsky's abstract painting, his early experiments and his mature work. Therefore an examination of these two images provides a great deal of insight into the impact of

music on Kandinsky's abstract creations and how this relationship developed over time.

Kandinsky's theories of art also play an important role in this discussion, perhaps more so than the theories of other artists would be relevant to an examination of their art. Kandinsky kept written accounts of his artistic development throughout his life. Moreover, special associations existed between his theories and his works of art. While Kandinsky's *Improvisations* series demonstrates his theories presented in the text *On the Spiritual in Art* by representing his subjective impressions, his *Compositions* aim to reform, to build up reality by using its essential elements, and are connected with *Point, Line and Plane*. Nevertheless, all his works are governed by 'inner necessity', or the spirit. For Kandinsky, whether used to create figurative representation or abstract expression, 'All methods are sacred if they are internally necessary. All methods are sins if they are not justified by internal necessity.'

New World Vision and New Way for Painting: Musical Abstraction

Kandinsky believed that each period of time should have an art that is 'specific to it', and is never repeated or reborn. This belief led him to search for a new language and new format for art. In the innovative climate of the first two decades of the twentieth century, the highly significant scientific discovery of the disintegration of the atom powerfully changed Kandinsky's conception of the visible world and its substance. For Kandinsky, traditional knowledge had been destroyed by advanced science. He now believed that what the eyes see are mere illusions joined together only by chance. Kandinsky once explained that he felt as if the thickest walls were suddenly

collapsing and that stone would melt in mid-air – everything became invisible.

As a result of revelations about the atom, the traditional view of the universe was radically altered and revealed an invisible, mysterious world beneath the visible world. When the knowledge obtained by direct and detailed observation could not offer the whole truth of reality, Kandinsky questioned the physical appearance of substances by penetrating into the realm of the unknown. His distrust of conventional knowledge urged him to search for new values and meanings to life. Fascinated by explorations of the unknown fields of the cosmos and the unseen worlds of passion and thought, Kandinsky began to produce his work in a manner which was never imitative.

Subsequently, events served to dramatically change Kandinsky's artistic beliefs and led him to abstract art. Kandinsky encountered Claude Monet's impressionist series of paintings, *Haystacks*, when they were exhibited in Moscow during the 1890s. Kandinsky's impression of this exhibition was highly favourable, explaining that Monet's 'painting took on a fairy-tale power and splendour'. This experience confirmed and strengthened Kandinsky's conviction that recognisable objects are not necessary elements to an appreciable painting.

This belief is also evidenced in his description of his experience of one of his own paintings, which had given him different impressions when he viewed it under different conditions. He expressed his view that the image was 'indescribably beautiful' and was 'pervaded by an inner glow' in the hour when dusk drew in. Kandinsky related, however, that its beauty was lost in daylight due to the clearly recognisable objects in the picture. Kandinsky therefore came to the conclusion that

'objects harmed [his] pictures' and embarked on the path to abstract art, which enabled him to probe 'what holds the world together at its innermost core' and the secret of 'the spiritual in art'. Kandinsky sought to obtain 'the spiritual in art' by reducing representational figures to abstract forms so that these essential elements were able to 'reveal the inner sound of the painting'. This means Kandinsky aimed to convey the spiritual meaning of painting in a musical way.

Kandinsky's music-painting analogy was largely based on the correspondence between colour and musical sound. Basing his theories on Paul Cezanne's belief that 'colour is the place where our mind and the universe meet,' Kandinsky extended this principle to all forms of sensory perception, in the spirit of synaesthesia. The belief that colour has its own tonal quality led Kandinsky to remove his pictorial motifs from the objective context and devote himself to a more radical study of colour-music correspondences. In order to release the intrinsic power of colour, Kandinsky treated it as musical note, and selected his colour according to an analogy with musical harmony. Kandinsky set out to exploit the sound range of an instrumental color, the 'inner sound' of colour, which he believed to have the profound effect of a deepened emotional response.

Kandinsky discovered the effects of sound and colour in terms of their physical and psychological effects. Based on such emotional effects, Kandinsky frequently associated specific colours to specific musical instruments in his paintings. According to Kandinsky, the inner sound of yellow suggests the sound of a trumpet or fanfare. Orange produces a warm alto voice or the viola, red stands for the tuba or kettledrum, violet functions as the bassoon, green is the violin, and his favorite colour blue was

associated with the instrument Kandinsky himself played, the cello. Accordingly, Kandinsky used such associations to invoke the invisible forces which form and inform the emotional world, saturating his canvas with vibrant patterns and power. However, Kandinsky also noted that ‘the correspondence between colour and musical tones is of course only relative. Just as a violin can produce very different tones, so ... can yellow in its various shades be expressed by the sounds of different instruments’.

The theory of synaesthesia was another important factor which simulated Kandinsky’s fascination with his experiments of musical painting. Kandinsky was deeply attuned to synaesthetic experiences, including how visual impressions can evoke the sounds of music, and how these sounds in turn affect spectators’ visual impressions. Kandinsky was convinced that he could reflect the ‘vibrations of the soul’ in the same way that musicians based their compositions on the vibration of the sound. Fascinated by Wagner’s synaesthesia, Kandinsky engaged himself with theater projects of so-called ‘abstract opera’, such as *Der Gelber Klang (Yellow Sonority)* and *Klange (Sonorities)*. These synaesthesia projects laid an important foundation for Kandinsky’s future ventures in making synthetic art based on the interchangeability of seeing and hearing – his musical abstract painting.

On the Spirit in Art

Kandinsky’s incorporation of music in his abstract work and his search for its spiritual significance were carried out simultaneously. Through his use of line, colour and form, Kandinsky was trying to express the musical side of world; its inner sound, rhythm and the feeling it evoked. Both music and abstraction were used to reveal ‘the

necessary' which lies beneath the appearance of its external reality, just as 'the necessary' of a person's heart is contained in his or her accidental existence.

Kandinsky first introduced the importance of the spirit in arts and his provocative thesis that 'The greatest mistake one can make is to believe that Art is the reproduction of nature' during his participation in the New Association of Artists Munich (NKVM). These ideas were the touchstone of all of Kandinsky's artistic experiments in the exploration of the musical side of abstract painting. As the head of the NKVM, Kandinsky designed a membership card, in which the *Blue Rider*, a key figure in Kandinsky's iconography appears as a conqueror of the material and non-spiritual. Kandinsky also wrote the program for this new organisation when it was founded in 1909. 'Our point of departure,' Kandinsky asserted, was 'the thought of the artist, and of the 'impressions [the artists] receive from the external world'. In order to obtain the artistic synthesis, a new combination of the complementary 'external objectivity' and 'internal subjectivity' which were interacted and united by spirit, Kandinsky continued his accentuation on abstraction by saying that all forms which were selected for expressing inner experiences should be freed from the incidental. This announcement served as the aesthetic principles for the members of the organisation and anticipated the birth of his fundamental theory on the essence of art – the spirit.