

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

Chapter Introduction

Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) was a Russian-born artist and active in Central Europe, in Germany in particular, where he reached his apogee both in painting and in art writing. Considered as a founder of abstract art, Kandinsky exclusively be mentioned in discussions of the early abstract painting, especially those bear 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, including a close friendship with the composer Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951), whose music reinforced Kandinsky's belief in abstraction and encouraged Kandinsky to make this belief in a reality. The relationship between abstraction and musical idea is affirmed in Kandinsky's paintings such as *Impression III* of 1911, and *Composition VIII* of 1923. These two paintings come from main series paintings of Kandinsky: *Impressions* and *Compositions*. They also mark two phases of Kandinsky's abstract painting: his early experiments and mature work, and therefore provide a trace of the impact of music had on Kandinsky's abstract creation and how this relationship developed over the time.

Kandinsky's theories of art also play an important role during the discussion for Kandinsky perhaps more than other artists, gave written accounts of his artistic development throughout his life. Moreover, there are special associations existed between his theories and works of art. While the series paintings of *improvisations* demonstrate his *On the Spiritual in Art* by representing Kandinsky's subjective impressions, the works of *compositions* aim to reform, to build up reality

by using its essential elements, participate with *Point, Line and Plane*. Nevertheless, they all governed by 'inner necessity', the spirit. For Kandinsky, whatever 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 'specific in it', never repeat past and never 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 scientific event of the disintegration of the atom powerfully changed Kandinsky's conceptions of the visible world and its substance. The traditional knowledge had been destroyed by advanced science: what the eyes see were mere illusions that joined together only by chance. Kandinsky once explained that he felt as if the thickest walls were suddenly collapsed and a stone had melted in midair—everything grew invisible.

As a result, the traditional view of the universe was radically altered and revealed an invisible mystery 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. The distrust of conventional knowledge urged he to search for new values and meanings to life. Fascinated by explorations of the unknown field of the cosmos and the unseen world of passion and thought, Kandinsky began to produce his work in a manner which was never imitative.

Two events dramatically changed Kandinsky's artistic belief and led him to abstraction.

Kandinsky encountered Claude Monet's impressionist paintings known as *Haystacks* when they were exhibited in Moscow some time during the 1890s. In which he saw 'Painting took on a fairy-tale power and splendour'. This experience confirmed and strengthened Kandinsky's conviction of that the recognizable objects are not necessary elements to an appreciable painting. The belief is also evidenced in his description of his experience of one of his own painting which had gave him

different impressions when he viewed it in different conditions: it was 'indescribably beautiful' and 'pervaded by an inner glow' in the hour when dusk draws in; however its beauty was lost in daylight due to the clearly recognizable objects in the picture. Kandinsky therefore came to the conclusion of 'objects harmed [his] pictures' and embarked on the path to abstraction, which enable him to probe 'what holds the world together at its innermost core' and the secret of 'the spiritual in art'. And the way Kandinsky found for himself to obtain 'the spiritual in art' was reducing representational figures to abstract forms so that these essential elements were able to 'reveal the inner sound of the painting'. That is conveying the spiritual meaning of painting in a musical way.

Kandinsky's music-painting analogy was largely based on correspondence between colour and musical sound. Grounding on Paul Cezanne's believes of 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 synesthesia. The belief of that colour has its own tone quality led Kandinsky to remove his pictorial motifs from the objective context and devoted 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 profound effects on deepened emotional response.

Kandinsky discovered the sound and colour effects in terms of 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 color blue, associated with the instrument Kandinsky himself played—cello. Accordingly, Kandinsky used such associations to invoke the invisible forces which form and inform the emotional world, saturating his canvas with vibratory patterns and vitalist 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 synesthetic experiences, both 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 the musician based their compositions on the vibration of the sound. Fascinated by Wagner's synaesthesia, Kandinsky engaged himself with theater projects so called 'abstract opera', such as *Der Gelber Klang (Yellow Sonority)* and *Klange (Sonorities)*. These synaesthesia projects lay an important foundation for Kandinsky's further venture in making synthetic art based on interchangeability of seeing and hearing--his musical abstract painting.

On the Spirit in Art

Kandinsky's incorporation of music in his abstract work and the searching for its spiritual significance went simultaneously. In his use of line, colour and form, Kandinsky was trying to express the musical side of world: its inner sound, rhythm and feeling it evoked. Both music and abstraction were used to reveal the necessary which lie beneath the appearance of its external reality, just as the necessary of man's heart was contained in his or her accidental exist.

Kandinsky first introduced the importance of 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 participant in the New Association of Artists Munich (NKVM). These ideas were touchstone of all Kandinsky's artistic experiments, such as exploring 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. (figure.1) Kandinsky also wrote the program for this new organization when it came to life in 1909. 'Our point of departure' Kandinsky asserted that, was 'the thought' of the artist, and of the 'impressions [the artists] receive[d] from the external world.' In order to obtain the artistic

synthesis: a new combination of the complementary of 'external objectivity' and 'internal subjectivity' which were interacted and united by spirit, Kandinsky continued his accentuation on abstraction by saying that all forms that were selected for expressing the inner experiences should be freed from incidental. This announcement severed as aesthetic principles for the members of the organization and anticipated the birth of his fundamental theory on the essence of art--the spirit.