

Palestra 1

Seduced by Another's Art. A discussion on the power of transference in Roberto Sierra's *Kandinsky*.

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Abstract

Roberto Sierra is one of the foremost composers of Puerto Rico and a very important Latino voice in American music. Yet, a comprehensive study of his life and impressive catalogue is still lacking in musicological literature. The present discussion is an extension of a topic covered in an original paper I started in 2014, highlighting the impact of visual media in Sierra's life and music. In this essay, which I intend to include in my upcoming biography of the composer, I also seek to further a vast body of existing scholarly material on Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944) and his own fascination with music. Here, however, I refer mostly to Roberto Sierra's piano quartet, *Kandinsky*, formally commissioned by the U.S. Library of Congress on 16 July 2002, and premiered as part of its 2003–04 Season of Concerts. At the crossing of these two mediums, visual and musical, both Sierra and Kandinsky were (not unjustifiably) captivated by the transformational power of manifesting elements of an akin artform into another. Set several decades apart, both artists embraced distinct artforms for very different reasons and outcomes. While Kandinsky aimed at constructing visual bridges to the spiritual realm, Sierra's pluralistic perspective tended towards a more individual, inner satisfaction through aesthetic play. In my discussion, I hope to provide greater insight into the way Sierra articulates his place in the constellation of artistic figures and phenomena that preceded him.

Keywords: *Kandinsky*, *Aesthetic Play*, *Music Philosophy*, *Latin American musicology*.

Introduction

Kandinsky (2003) was commissioned by the US Library of Congress for its 2003–04 Season of Concerts, and underwritten by the McKim Fund, created in 1970 by violinist Mrs. W. Duncan McKim, to promote violin music.¹ The eleven-movement work for piano quartet (violin, viola, cello, and piano), fashioned with conceptually rich instrumental colors and technical intricacy, makes use of an ensemble, yet containing at least one stand-alone movement (12–15 minutes in duration) highlighting violin and piano.² The work was premiered on 13 February 2004 with the Díaz String Trio, also featuring pianist Luz Manríquez, at the Coolidge Auditorium, Washington D.C.³

Sierra's selected title, *Kandinsky*, announces the underlying inspirational thrust for the work. Based on eleven works by German–Russian painter, Vasily Kandinsky, Sierra composed eleven corresponding movements as follows:

- Movement 1. Lyrisches (Lyrical, 1911): violin, piano
- Movement 2. Improvisation 19 (1911): violin, cello, piano
- Movement 3. Bild mit Schwarzem Bogen (Picture with a Black Arc, 1912): viola
- Movement 4. Improvisation 26 (1912): violin, viola, cello
- Movement 5. Kleine Freuden (Small Pleasures, 1913): violin, viola, cello, piano
- Movement 6. Schwarze Striche I (Black Strokes I, 1913): violin, piano
- Movement 7. Weisser Strich (White Stroke, 1920): violin, viola, cello
- Movement 8. Kleine Welten III (Small Worlds III, 1922): cello, piano
- Movement 9. Komposition VIII (Composition VIII, 1923): viola, cello
- Movement 10. Launisches (Capricious, 1930): violin, piano
- Movement 11. Buntes Ensemble (Colorful Ensemble, 1938): violin, viola, cello, piano

¹ *Library of Congress. An Illustrated Guide*, s.v. “Foundations for Music” accessed July 15, 2015, <http://www.loc.gov/rr/perform/guide/fndmus.html>

² Commissioning Agreement Between the Library of Congress and Roberto Sierra, The Library of Congress, 16 July 2002. The commission totaled US \$15,000 with the Library of Congress providing a high quality CD recording of the premiere for the composer's personal use.

³ *Concerts for the Library of Congress 2003–2004*, s.v. “February 2004,” accessed July 15, 2015, <http://www.loc.gov/rr/perform/concert/0304-04sched.html>.

Covering the spectra of instrumental combinations for the given ensemble, Sierra took to task the showcasing of unique timbral qualities of each instrument through solo compositions, duets, trios, and the entire ensemble. The instrumental diversity enhances aural interest through the respite of specific stringed voices when taken in the context of the entire work. The overall effect is a large exhibit of instrumental colors, dynamics and shapes. Sierra obviously selected paintings from Kandinsky's oeuvre organized in chronological fashion, which the composer (likely unconsciously) sought to maintain. As Kandinsky's art "progressed" toward greater abstraction, it is possible that the visual input stemming from the paintings might have affected Sierra's compositions with an increasing degree of intricacy and detail. Something to be further examined. Sierra and Kandinsky were taken by the transport of neighboring arts, both keenly aware of intersecting components (constitutive categories) underlying music and visual arts.

Kandinsky's Theory of Spiritual Aesthetics

As outlined by numerous scholars, V. Kandinsky, most important creator of abstract painting, left to posterity, alongside his works, substantial writings on art (e.g., *Point and Line to Plane*, *The Spiritual in Art*, etc.), notes on interactions with artistic peers, and a well-developed theory of aesthetics based on musical principles. In his search for greater abstraction (the non-objective), Kandinsky derived much observable data from musical thought: "Kandinsky conceived of music as an emancipated art, which furthermore had the quality of time-extension and was most effective in inspiring spiritual emotion."⁴ It helped that this "emancipated art" already walked in large steps towards abstraction, especially in the works of a contemporary, composer Arnold Schönberg (1874–1951). Kandinsky wrote the latter on 18 January 1911 and the two artists met eight months later on 14 September, leading to a rich intellectual exchange lasting until 1914, their thoughts followed in public writings sometimes in echoing fashion.⁵

⁴ Peter Selz, "The Aesthetic Theories of Wassily Kandinsky and Their Relationship to the Origin of Non-Objective Painting", *The Art Bulletin* 39, no. 2 (1957): 127–136, 133.

⁵ Klaus Kropfinger, "Latent Structural Power versus the Dissolution of Artistic Material and Schönberg", in *Schönberg and Kandinsky. An Historical Encounter*, ed. Konrad Boehmer (The Netherlands: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997): 9.

Kandinsky not only understood the importance of Schönberg's place in music—much earlier than did the rest of the artistic world— but, through their interactions, developed a belief that musical sounds possessed innate abstract qualities which he aspired to capture in his own works.⁶ Musical ideas and the sensorial quality of music “resonated” with him in exceptional ways. Kandinsky believed abstraction (dissonance) in music to be particularly powerful in inducing emotional and physical states leading up to a consequent spiritual awakening. This power of spiritual transcendence would be exceptionally suitable for an upcoming “epoch of great spirituality,” which Kandinsky, based on mixed theosophical affiliations, was certain would soon arrive.⁷ As pointed out in earlier scholarship, “Kandinsky turns away from the representation of visible objects in his attempt to penetrate beneath the epidermis of [material] appearances to the ultimate or ‘inner reality’.”⁸ The artistic move in the direction of distance from a material, recognizable object could be one of distortion (as say in Dalí's hyper-real/surreal experiments) or, via another extreme pole, by reducing the object to its elemental (geometric) lines and forms. According to Kandinsky, “In both cases we arrive at the spiritual content itself.”⁹

In exploring different aspects of music, attempting to internalize and express the picture's “inner sound”, Kandinsky developed three visual categories paralleling those in music: Impressions, Improvisations and Compositions. By Impressions, he meant works motivated by stimuli from an external nature. Improvisations name works inspired by “impressions of an internal nature”; and, the principal title, Compositions, represented large-scale works of “symphonic construction,” developed over an extended period of time.¹⁰ Under the latter,

⁶ “It also demonstrates in Kandinsky a readiness to grasp and perceive the pivotal importance of the music of Schönberg, who at this time and for decades to come would struggle for acceptance. Last but not least, the painter's letter stands as an ‘essay’ in reception theory insofar as it points to the importance of an artist's readiness for aesthetic and intellectual communication and exchange.” Klaus Kropfinger, *Ibid.*, 10. See also: “Kandinsky's scrutiny of artistic material is demonstrated by his reflections on the qualities of pictorial material in comparison with those of musical material. Musicians used sounds and combinations of sounds in ways that painting up to that time could only dream of.” *Ibid.*, 15.

⁷ Peter Selz, “The Aesthetic Theories of Wassily Kandinsky”, 130.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹⁰ “Compositions. The Creation of a New Spiritual Realm”, *Kandinsky Compositions*, The Museum of Modern Art (New York, NY, 1995).

Kandinsky painted ten monumental works between 1910 and 1939 considered the most important in his oeuvre.

As someone endowed with synesthetic abilities,¹¹ Kandinsky had reasons to feel deeply invested in a system of synthesis of the arts that could mutually reinforce each other, and refine the soul complex of individuals. Kandinsky's awareness of the affinity between the arts led him to found in 1920 the Institute of Art Culture in Moscow, for the "development and study of the arts and sciences", later transferring its principles to the Bauhaus in Weimar, Germany.¹²

In studying artistic affinities, Russian theorist Bulat M. Galejev listed several possible audio-visual synesthesias: dynamics of sound versus gestures in painting; melodic development versus dynamics of plastics; motion and tempo versus transformation in visual images; timbre versus coloring; musical registers versus changes in size and lightness; and, changes of mode versus lightness.¹³

In his writing, *The Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky advances a system of colors in association with musical instruments. For instance, he correlates blue, a heavenly color, with instrumental hues: "Light blue is like the sound of the flute, while dark blue has the sound of the cello."¹⁴ Yellow related to the sound of a canary and brass horn, and so on. Yet, as noted by composer Michael Poast in his discussion of visual color notation, such associative systems are relative to the individual artist.¹⁵ For Poast, "colors and shapes symbolize harmony, counterpoint, musical line, tempos and so forth."¹⁶ In this sense, a work of art acts much like a case of diffuse reflection via a glass reflecting frame, where the re-

¹¹ "The production of a sense impression relating to one sense or part of the body by stimulation of another sense or part of the body." *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v., "Synesthesia", accessed August 17, 2015, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com.proxy.library.cornell.edu/definition/english/synaesthesia?q=synesthesia>.

¹² Peter Selz, "The Aesthetic Theories of Wassily Kandinsky", 135.

¹³ Bulat M. Galejev, "Kandinsky and Schönberg: The Problem of Internal Counterpoint", in *Schönberg and Kandinsky. An Historical Encounter*, 89.

¹⁴ Peter Selz, "The Aesthetic Theories of Wassily Kandinsky", 133.

¹⁵ "Within the context of colors and their musical equivalents, it is impossible to establish a one-color/one-note chart for the performers. Color is relative." Michael Poast, "Color Music: Visual Color Notation for Musical Expression", *Leonardo* 33, no. 3 (2000): 215–221.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 216.

flected image is always slanted by the viewer's frame of mind. Indeed, in terms of inspirational power, Kandinsky's works aroused in Roberto Sierra ideas unique to the composer's interpretation of the visual components set before him.

Roberto Sierra's *Kandinsky* and Aesthetic Play

As noted in an earlier paper, "The Impact of Audiovisual Culture in Roberto Sierra's Sch.", the composer had experimented with painting from early life. Indeed, Sierra still carries out sketch drawings of himself and relatives off and on. He had known of Kandinsky's paintings since childhood, and held a special fondness for the artist's abstract style.¹⁷ Sierra acknowledges a sense of keenness for Kandinsky's works: "I had always wanted to do a work on Kandinsky and thought of this [Library of Congress] commission as the ideal venue."¹⁸ Considering the timbral possibilities inherent to a quartet and the potential for development in terms of forms and colors that Kandinsky's works may prompt, it is not at all surprising that the Library of Congress' arts commission appeared as an ideal opportunity for a visual-musical exploration.

In his long-standing enchantment with Kandinsky's oeuvre, certain aspects of the artist's life and works resonated more strongly with the composer. For example, Sierra explains that Kandinsky's interest for music "connects with things [he did] in music or [his] interpretation of things [he did] in music translated to painting."¹⁹ The special feeling of identification (empathy) permeates in

¹⁷ "I have known Kandinsky's paintings since very early on. I saw paintings by Kandinsky in museums in Europe. I was always fascinated by the sense of color, form and movement. Also another interesting thing to me, another painter inspired by music like Klee, but I like Kandinsky more than Klee, more of my personality, he's inspired by music. So the titles, like Improvisation, there inference there is something performative that relates to music, I mean, you can improvise on anything but we know by virtue of his work that a lot of his paintings have very close titles that alluded to music, we know that he's talking there probably about music improvisation. And I think he draws from musical forms as well. So in a way I wanted to interpret his interpretation of music." Roberto Sierra, in interview with the author, February 11, 2015.

¹⁸ Roberto Sierra, email to the author, July 12, 2015.

¹⁹ Roberto Sierra, in conversation with the author, February 11, 2015.

a significant way Sierra's desire to connect his ideas with those of Kandinsky. This power of suggestion then "triggers" emotive responses on the composer, in particular when it comes to the "technicalities" expressed by Kandinsky.²⁰ The observation of intricacy is quite accurate, especially when it comes to Kandinsky's Compositions' "almost mural-like scale, their deliberate, premeditated process of creation, and an overt *transference of value* from subject matter to pure painting."²¹ Kandinsky would work several sketches (sometimes dozens) in order to distill the imagery down to its essential qualities (shape and color = "inner sound").²² Hence, for Kandinsky, the power of transference of the innate qualities of material objects into multi-layered planes of abstraction was, in following Schönberg's model of "emancipation of dissonance," the power to break artistic and psychological conventions, endowing the work with sacredness in its ultimate, most "harmonious" form. "Compositions bring together the spiritual, the musical and the visual, and follow a cycle of evolving out of the old order to a new one."²³

In defying Kandinsky's notion of spirituality, Sierra acknowledges that his responses to the selected paintings were purely materialistic.²⁴ He interpreted Kandinsky's ideas in distinct ways. For example, in "Lyrisches" (Movement 1), Sierra sees the image of a horse's head and abstracted streamlined body, mounted by a horseman (in green) denoting a forward, sprinting movement. Sierra translates this sprinting energy by creating a warped piano contour in similar motion—swift rise and fall—separated by punctuated rests (see mm. 1–2). This is contrasted by an upper violin melody, at first more agile and virtuosic and then moving towards a melismatic passage more lyrical in character, giving rise to the title of the piece (mm. 5–9). The idea of contrast plays as much a part of Kandinsky's technical ability to see opposites as Sierra's.

²⁰ Roberto Sierra, in conversation with the author, February 11, 2015.

²¹ "Compositions. The Creation of a New Spiritual Realm", 12.

²² Kandinsky considers every detail of compositions to its fullest visual, philosophical and "spiritual" consequences, stating that "a purely artistic form of such strength that it will be able to endow that work with an independent life and make it become a spiritual subject.' Such substitution, he felt, could only be arrived at through 'construction,' which is characteristic of compositional painting." Ibid.

²³ "Compositions. The Creation of a New Spiritual Realm", Ibid., 23.

²⁴ Roberto Sierra in conversation with the author, February 11, 2015.

Example 1. Sierra's *Kandinsky*, “Lyrishes” mm. 1–2

KANDINSKY
Lyrishes
(Lyrical)

Roberto Sierra
2003

Rápido, $\text{♩} = 116$

Violin *f*

Piano *mp* *f*

Throughout the piece Sierra creates varying textural changes, for example by reducing the piano to a single descending line (*subito*, mm. 23–24), somewhat mimicking the gravitational force of the heavy blue object at the bottom right edge of Kandinsky’s 1911 piece.

Example 2. Sierra's *Kandinsky*, “Lyrishes” mm. 23–24

Violin

Pno. *f subito*

*M. Ped. (middle pedal)

The second movement, Improvisation 19, provides further insight into the composer’s intricate visual navigations, starting with a dense, contrapuntal texture of violin, cello and piano in mm. 1–3, interrupted by a strong punctuating pattern in the violin at mm. 4 in *forte*. This “stepping out” of pattern and dynamics conceptually signifies a break with the preceding rhythmic idea, and even though fully written out in the score, in performance, would signal to a

listener an improvisatory passage, especially as the violin “returns” to a flowing melody in mm. 5 (see also mm. 19–22). The melody then continues on short wavy melodic streams (mm. 6–9) mirroring the zigzagging gesture of brush strokes occupying the large central blue area of Kandinsky’s painting. This is followed by a type of heterophonic flow of divergent instrumental lines (violin, cello and piano) moving at different speeds and eventually coalescing.²⁵

Example 3. Sierra’s *Kandinsky*, “Improvisation 19” mm. 1–9

4

Improvisation 19

Violin Moderato, $\text{♩} = 88$
sal pont.
pp cresc. *f* orig.

Violoncello *pp* *mf* *ff* *p* sal pont.

Piano *mp* *mf* *loco* *loco* *8va.*

Vln. *p* *pp*

Vcl. orig. *f* *pp*

Pno. *f* *p* *8va.*

²⁵ “There are moments where the viola shifts to lay against the cello, and starts to play again against the violin, etc.” Sierra: “They get out of sync, but eventually coalesce. These are rhythmic processes.” Roberto Sierra, in conversation with the author, February 11, 2015.

An interesting point of departure between Kandinsky and Sierra is the personal signification of cultural elements present in their respective works. Kandinsky's figurative elements included, for instance, a blue mountain which can be traced back to scenes in Murnau, Bavaria where he spent much of his time circa 1901. Russian landscapes also become a feature of his paintings, indeed propelling the re-awakening of his artistic instincts in 1916.²⁶ Despite geographical references, Kandinsky continues to strive for a universal quality in his art.

A few generations later, Roberto Sierra, a composer of Puerto Rican descent, informed by present-day musicological understandings familiar to him given his membership in academia, provides a much more personal perspective as to his own cultural signifiers. One of the most evident moments appears in "Launisches" (Movement 10), wherein Sierra interprets Kandinsky's large black and centrally located shape as a boat, with a curved bottom. He goes one step further to imagine the shape as a metrical gesture, translated as the Habanera rhythm. The aural effect is quite "visible" and impactful, and obviously deeply connected with Sierra's Latino background.²⁷ What this segment exemplifies is not only the contingency of culture in artistic output, but also that the transference of elements from one medium to another entails a new relationship between things, often a historical re-designing of power relations that may attract and reject recognized wisdom (i.e., "universality"), long pervasive in the vision of artists of the twentieth-century. In providing his own interpretation of Kandinsky, Sierra notes: "It's fine if people don't agree [with me]. I understand the phenomenon, and I know people view things or hear things differently."²⁸ Sierra's background as a Puerto Rican composer, trained in Europe and living for decades in the United States, gives him special insight into matters of multiculturalism.

²⁶ "Munich, Moscow, Bauhaus, Paris," *Kandinsky. Absolute. Abstract*, ed. Helmut Friedel, 118. (Munich: Prestel Publishers, 2009).

²⁷ "As I told you the one with the boat [Capricious], I saw the boat and saw a gesture and then I used this sort of habanera rhythm as a basic gesture in mimetic relationship to that motion... I mean, somebody else might see it differently but this was what was in my imagination at the time." Roberto Sierra, in conversation with the author February 11, 2015.

²⁸ Ibid.

Colorful Ensemble, the final movement of *Kandinsky*, caps Sierra's "musical display" with all four instruments joining in a harmonious (tonal) popularly-inspired classical version of the famous Cuban *son*, *El Manicero* (Peanut Vendor) by Albert Gómez. This movement presents varying gestural designs, opening with instruments playing in *tutti* at mm. 1–3, and setting off the rhythmic syncopation that follows on the piano. The melody of *El Manicero*, transformed of course, is placed on the violin at mm. 7–47. It is then taken over by the piano at mm. 39–45, the viola at mm. 48–55, and cello at mm. 56–62. The canon structure of the movement is often supported by the instrumental accompaniment (especially the piano), playing syncopated rhythms. In such manner, Sierra accentuates the idea of an "ensemble" by separately highlighting each of the instruments, while at the same time showcasing the popular character of the movement without breaking with rhythmic regularity. Between mm. 63–76, the strings play against the piano accompaniment, in polyphonic (two-voiced) syncopation, returning to the melodic structure at mm. 82–112.

Example 5. Sierra's *Kandinsky*, "Colorful Ensemble" mm. 1–12

Buntes Ensemble
(Colorful Ensemble) 31

Con sapor latino, $\text{♩} = 96$

Melody

Of this closing movement Sierra notes that he attempted to reflect the grainy texture of Kandinsky's work (1938) through the ostinato figures reminiscent of salsa music starting at mm. 4. At the center of the painting there's a constellation of circles, almost like stars in a microcosm, floating in a brown backdrop. These tiny circles are interrupted by larger images of biological forms, very typical of Kandinsky's late style (Paris, 1933). The entire central composition is enveloped by a larger fluid greenish splash, in turn layered on top of the beige background of the canvas. The overall effect of the picture is a four-layered composition which moves from the plain outside color into the extremely intricate busy center. Because of Kandinsky's title, *Colorful Ensemble*, Sierra intuits racial/human diversity and effectuated by instrumental colors, falling very close to the biological emphasis (microbe-like forms) proposed of the painter.²⁹

Overall, *Kandinsky* manifests the composer's vision of playfulness—moments of cheerfulness and lightheartedness—alternated with moments of introspective, lyrical soberness, evidenced by a range of gestural impulses (sprinting, flowing, forward-driving, descent), dynamic and timbral contrast, and varying musical shapes and forms. Sierra notes that the performativity of Kandinsky's works played a large role on his affinity for the painter. Yet, Sierra does not seek the level of aesthetic distance that so fascinated Kandinsky. Instead, Sierra explains, his music is driven by “a search for technique and an aesthetic preoccupation...I [Sierra] want them to be literal enough so you recognize the object but I also *transform* them, I also *play* with them.”³⁰ For Sierra, the interplay of musical and visual factors was valuable not for the sake of (spiritual) abstrac-

²⁹ “I thought of race... I thought of race inevitably because I've been here [in the United States] long enough. And I don't mean by any stretch of the imagination that this was in Kandinsky's mind. It was in my mind. *Colorful Ensemble*, ensemble of color.” Roberto Sierra, in conversation with the author, February 11, 2015. See also: “Kandinsky's late oeuvre of the Paris years from 1933 is outstandingly represented with work such as *Blue World* of 1934, *Capricious Forms* of 1937 and *Various Parts* of 1940. They feature partly microbe-like, organic structures, a microcosm of floating elements, vivid and yet non-objective at the same time, that seem to bring alive Kandinsky's counterproposal for ‘natural laws’ in the form of laws of ‘concrete art’ as a separate universe of equal status.” *Kandinsky. Absolute. Abstract*, 8.

³⁰ Roberto Sierra, in conversation with the author, February 11, 2015.

tion but filled the purpose of aesthetic play. At this level, the “re-musicalization” (music → painting → music) of Kandinsky’s paintings have much insight to offer in terms of the power of transference in subverting or transforming an object (work of art) deemed complete, sacred and immutable, into a living, performing art.

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The US. Library of Congress Archives