

THE ART OF MUSIC PERFORMANCE:  
THE IMPORTANCE OF IMAGE  
WITHIN MUSIC

by

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ABSTRACT

Our society has become increasingly obsessed with image. The importance of visual elements within our culture has seeped into all areas of life, including music. This paper serves to explore the relationship between image and sound. Visual elements are inherent within all music and I explore the usage of image within both pop music and art music. The visual effects in pop music are rooted within the traditions of seventeenth century opera. The pop music industry is now a thriving business, due to the visual techniques incorporated into live concerts, music videos etc. On the other hand, art music is not experiencing the same amount of success as pop music. Could the reason be that art musicians fail to embrace the natural relationship between image and sound? I further expound upon this question and prove that not only does the general public care about image within music, but so do professional art musicians. This raises the question of why classical musicians choose to stay “stuck in the past” instead of moving forward, choosing to evolve alongside the current culture.

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## INTRODUCTION

“Don’t judge a book by its cover.” How often we have heard this old adage—guiding us to look past the exterior and focus on the intrinsic values buried beneath the surface. However wonderful this piece of advice is, it is both idealistic and naïve. In our culture today, there is an overwhelming amount of importance placed on image. We select a political candidate based on a friendly smile, we remodel a home until it looks like it belongs in a magazine and we add filters to pictures in order to be seen in the best light possible. Vision is a sense that we are born with, making it a natural phenomenon that most people take for granted. Although we have five senses total, vision is clearly nurtured the most from a young age. For instance, adults make silly faces at a newborn in order to gain a positive reaction; a six-month old baby is given brightly colored blocks to play with and a toddler is constantly asked to recognize and identify everyday objects and people. Of course the other senses are developed as well because all five are necessary for survival. Whether it is right or wrong, our world predominantly revolves around what can be seen. Our visual culture obviously seeps into all areas of life; however, it has infiltrated an area that most people would think to be immune from anything visual: music.

(NOTE: Music is a generic term that includes a wide range of styles genres. For the purpose of this paper, I’d like to focus on pop music and art music. Both of these styles can be further broken down into subcategories; however, I will focus on the styles as a whole unless otherwise noted.)

All music is inherently visual; however, the visual aspect presents itself in various ways according to the specific genre of music. (Shaw-Miller xii) Most people won’t

argue that pop music contains a strong visual element. Live concerts, music videos and stage effects are just a few of the many visual elements that draw consumers towards the pop music industry. Artists such as Katy Perry, Taylor Swift and Beyoncé don't disguise the predominant presence of image within their music; instead, they highlight these elements, sensationalizing the music experience. These artists rely heavily on image to promote their music and it has become an essential element of the pop music industry. In contrast, art music desperately holds onto a supposed tradition "that classical music is an art of sound where anything that might distract from the music is silenced; image is not important, dress is uniform, not individualistic...theatricality and spectacle are not allowed to take precedence over 'musical' values." (Shaw-Miller xiii) What many advocates of art music don't realize is that although they may try to remove any visual aspect, music is inherently visual and therefore it is thoroughly impossible to remove image from the art music experience. Instead of embracing the reality of visual elements in music (like pop musicians), art musicians try to camouflage the image behind the music.

Over the years, it's clear to see that pop music has kept pace with the increasing visual demands of the consumer. The industry is one that is constantly developing, changing and encouraging features in order to meet the demands of the audience and form a booming industry. However, art music has not kept pace with the visual culture phenomenon. Visually, very little has changed over the years in classical music concerts. The same works are played by the same instruments and in the same settings. Of course, musically speaking much has changed as far as composition styles, performance practice, musical expression etc., which is why classical music continues to be a relevant art form

that both musicians and non-musicians enjoy. However, could the visual elements in art music be better developed in order to maintain relevancy and support in an ever-increasing visual society?

### HISTORY OF IMAGE IN POP MUSIC

Although most of society wouldn't think to compare Lady Gaga to seventeenth century opera, it's interesting to consider the musical and performance traditions that link the two together. In many respects, opera was quite ahead of its time; incorporating a variety of visual elements into a musical performance set the stage for the eventual development of musicals, Broadway shows, and pop music concerts and music videos. Who would've guessed that the foundational idea of combining visual elements and music would originate in the seventeenth century and become of the utmost importance in the twenty-first century?

Opera was a wildly successful art form throughout seventeenth century Europe. (Lewis 20) Patrons traveled for days in order to see the best performers and productions. Composers would scribble by candlelight, trying to produce an opera that would eclipse any other musical work at the time. From the very beginning, opera embraced and nurtured the visual elements that were inherent to the art. This is an important realization when discussing music and image existing in tandem. In general, the majority of works sung by vocalists contain lyrics and when lyrics are present, there is a clear set of actions and emotions that are to be displayed by the vocalist. From an early stage in training, vocalists are taught to embrace their character on stage, exploring the full mental, physical and spiritual range of emotions. This method of character development is

employed by all levels of vocalists, from beginners to those who have an outstanding professional career. When it comes to opera, singers had greater resources available to them in order to develop their character. The dramatic opera storylines yielded endless opportunities for actors and actresses to engage in grand gestures, make theatrical faces, don elaborate costumes and bathe in a variety of lighting and stage effects.

Of course over the years, opera has evolved into a modern practice. Multicolored stage lights have replaced soft candlelight, scene changes have become increasingly sophisticated and special effects leave little to the imagination of the audience. (Parker 440) However, the visual elements in opera were never meant to take precedence over the music; rather, the music was to be enhanced by what could be seen on stage. Dialogue was meant to give emotional context to the libretti, costumes were designed to draw the listener into the story and concert halls were made to be magnificent in order to reflect the beauty of the music within. In a similar fashion, pop music has employed a variety of visual effects to accompany the music. However, this industry began to incorporate image into music not necessarily to highlight the actual music within, but to capitalize on the widespread surge of visual technology.

With the exponential rise of technology over the past few decades, media has become extremely accessible to the general public. Radios are virtually extinct and CD sales have plummeted; however, YouTube, Spotify, Pandora and other streaming services have become the predominant means of viewing or listening to media. As expected, while music has continued to become more accessible, the expectations of consumers have risen as well. (The reasons behind this phenomenon could be explained by a variety of cultural factors, which are beyond the scope of this paper.) Pop music artists have been

pressured relentlessly to be original, otherwise, they might not succeed in the music industry. Developing music styles over an artist's career creates an evolving storyline that makes many musicians stand out from the rest. This is evident especially in art musicians like Beethoven, who had three distinct compositional periods throughout his lifetime. However, unlike art musicians, pop artists rarely have a thriving reputation for more than ten years. As a result, artists have a short window to capture the attention from the public and establish a sense of individuality. The desire and drive to be different has led artists to consider any means that might make them stand out. One such avenue that many pop musicians have explored is presenting their music with a stronger emphasis on the visual elements. The two most common examples of this are the music video and live concert.

What makes a music video different from a video recording of a musical performance? Visual recordings of musical numbers are still available from periods as early as the 1920s. (Mundy 35) However, Oxford defines the term music video, as “a videotaped performance of a recorded popular song, usually accompanied by dancing and visual images interpreting the lyrics.” According to this generic definition, the advent of the music video came about in the 1980s. The importance of visual elements in the videos continued to rise throughout the 1980s and 1990s as new developments in filming technology and special effects allowed artists to have more artistic freedom. (Mundy 233) Streaming services are the predominant means of watching or listening to music. In the words of Diane Railton and Paul Watson, “sound and image are now frequently welded together in the very acts of purchase and consumption.” (143) This spike in music video views and sales has opened the door for many artists. Pop musicians are now expected to release music videos that contain a variety of engaging visual elements. Artists frequently

dance in their videos, wearing eccentric costumes and unique makeup. Special effects and lighting are two elements that largely influence the character of a music video. Bright, flashing lights grab the attention of the viewer and consumers stare in awe as their favorite pop artists perform unimaginable feats through the glass computer screen.

Pop music enthusiasts often flock to live concerts of popular artists. Regular tour schedules, music festivals and special cause concerts keep the live music scene quite active in the majority of the United States. As is the case with music videos, live concerts have become increasingly focused on visual elements. For example, a headliner concert at Woodstock in 1969 consisted of a bare-bones stage, equipped with microphones and amps for the band and spotlights to be used at night. (Daley 53) In contrast, the 2015 Super Bowl Halftime Show featured several popular artists in live concert and the spectacle included multi-colored flashing spotlights, smoke, moving stages, background dancers, quick wardrobe changes, fireworks and much more. It's easy to see how the importance of the visual element in popular music has escalated over the years, leading to a surge in the music video and live concert industry.

Pop music is a prime example of a type of music industry that has successfully kept up with the overwhelming surge in visual importance in our culture. Whether one considers the actual music behind the visual imagery good or bad isn't necessarily the point; rather, that the pop music industry recognized a growing trend in the general public and used it to sell their music. This tactic has taken the pop music industry from being influential to indispensable in modern culture.

## INSTRUMENTAL ART MUSIC

Although it's easy to recognize the visual elements apparent within opera and pop music, it's much harder to see the link between image and sound when it comes to instrumental art music. As mentioned previously, singers are expected to embrace the visual side of their art. Gestures, facial expressions, movement and appearance are just a few of the visual areas that contribute to the overall sense of a character. This methodology of character development is taught at all levels of training within the vocal field; it is an essential part of opera and even pop music to a certain degree. However, these visual elements very rarely make their way into the world of instrumental music. In a way, the absence of visual character elements makes sense in the instrumental world. Programmatic music is a term applied to music that inherently revolves around a character or storyline (Program Music); however, if lyrics aren't present within the programmatic instrumental music, how are musicians supposed to embrace that character? Absolute music is a term that refers to music written purely for the beauty of sound, with no specific character/storyline in mind. (Absolute Music) Absolute music is even more difficult to highlight visual elements and imagery than programmatic music. What can instrumentalists do to convey the meaning behind music that does not have an inherent storyline? On another note, instrumentalists are typically confined to a set position that prevents them from moving around and making physical gestures. Does this mean that instrumental music is essentially a non-visual art form?

Many classical music purists will suggest that the term 'music' should only apply to music that exists without lyrics. (Shaw-Miller xii) They think of instrumental art music as the purest genre of music, one that eliminates the "unnatural" visual elements that have

crept their way into pop music. Because if lyrics don't exist, then character development isn't an issue, which means that visual effects are unnecessary. Proponents of this definition of 'music' essentially consider instrumental music as a pure, uncorrupted body of sound. However, they ignore the obvious truth that all music is inherently visual. Instrumentalists must make a physical gesture to produce sound. This movement can range from a bulging of the cheeks to a sweeping gesture of both arms, but a visual representation of this movement will always be apparent to the audience. During a symphony orchestra concert, the musicians move together as an intricate wave of sound, led by a conductor who leads strictly by motion. These inherent visual representations of sound are necessary among instrumentalists. But there are other visual elements associated with instrumental art music that are rooted within the early history of the symphony.

In the mid-seventeenth century, the city of Mannheim was musically under a microscope, garnering the attention from musicians and non-musicians from all over the world. Johann Stamitz, a Czech composer and successful violinist, was writing new and innovative works, putting Mannheim and the court orchestra on the map. People came from far and wide to see the Mannheim orchestra and hear the music of the court composers. The level of attention received by the musicians effectively raised the standards for both the composers and orchestra members alike. The Mannheim court orchestra became a well-oiled machine that had a reputation extending far beyond the realms of Southern Germany. Audiences were marveled by how the bows moved in the same direction and how all of the orchestra members were proficient enough to have a solo career. The musical leadership was widely acknowledged and as Dr. Charles Burney

accurately described, the orchestra was “an army of generals.” All of these attributes were rooted within visual gestures and provided the orchestra with a diligence that couldn’t be matched by any other orchestra across the globe. (Will 317; Lawson 167) Ultimately, this created an extraordinary visual and aural concert experience that garnered international attention.

Despite the historical roots of image and sound coexisting together from the early stages of the modern symphony, some people still maintain that image has nothing to do with instrumental art music. Many professional musicians (whether consciously or not) consider themselves to have a higher mindset than the general public—they are able to mentally separate image from sound in order to appreciate the pureness of music—to understand the unseen beauty within. However, a study recently conducted by the University College in London made many professional musicians quite uncomfortable as the results showed how they weren’t so different than the general public in valuing image over sound.

In 2012, researchers conducted a study entitled “Sight Over Sound in the Judgment of Music Performance.” Researchers collected videos of the top three finalists in each of ten prestigious international classical music competitions. The videos were then shown to 1,164 participants (both experts and novices in the field of music) in a series of stages that asked the participants to choose the winners from a variety of viewing options. Researchers then compared the choices of the participants to the actual results of the competitions.

The first few stages of the experiments were performed on participants that identified themselves as novices in the field of music. In the first experiment, researchers

determined that participants relied heavily on sound to influence their decision on choosing the winners from the music competitions. Going into the second experiment, it was noted that 83.3% of novice participants considered sound as the most important factor in judging the competition finalists. Participants were then presented with the top three finalists of all ten music competitions in both audio-only and video-only format. At random odds, novice participants had a 33.3% chance of choosing the correct winner. The experiment results showed that when presented with sound-only recordings, participants correctly identified the winners 25.5% of the time (below the percentage of chance). However, when presented with video-only recordings, participants correctly identified the winners 52.5% of the time (significantly above the percentage of chance.) In a repeat experiment, participants were additionally given recordings that contained both video and sound. Novice participants correctly identified the winners only 35.4% of the time, no better than chance.

The experiments were then repeated on a pool of participants that qualified as experts within the field of music. Going into the experiments, 96.3% of participants identified sound as the most important factor in judging the music competition finalists. When presented with audio-only versus video-only clips, expert participants correctly identified the winners 20.5% and 46.6% of the time, respectively. Note that novices chose the correct winner (25.5%) more often than the experts (20.5%) when presented with audio-only clips; however, both groups performed significantly below the odds of chance. When researchers repeated the experiment and added video recordings with sound, experts correctly identified the winners 29.5% of the time, a percentage that equivocates to no better than chance. (Tsay 14580-14585)

So what does this study prove? The obvious results of the experiments seem to be that both novices and expert musicians value sight over sound. Participants were more likely to choose the same winners as the actual juries (consisting of professional, esteemed musicians) that originally selected the competition winners. In a statement of the research report, Chia-Jung Tsay states, “this finding suggests that visual cues are indeed persuasive and sway judges away from recognizing the best performance that they themselves have, by consensus, defined as dependent on sound. Professional judgment appears to be made with little conscious awareness that visual cues factor so heavily into preferences and decisions.” So contrary to popular belief, image obviously does matter to both musicians and non-musicians in instrumental art music.

#### CHANGING THE PRESENT AND LOOKING TOWARDS THE FUTURE

If our culture gravitates toward the natural relationship between image and sound, why are so many musicians opposed to embracing the visual elements within music? After all, the study conducted by University College of London shows that image is just as important to musicians and non-musicians alike. The main concern is that the music will suffer at the hands of an overwhelming visual display. (Shaw-Miller xiii) This is a valid concern—after all, many consider pop culture music weak and underdeveloped, taking a backseat to the more important visual representation. This occurrence could most certainly make its way into the world of art music; however, musicians have become extremely paranoid and have prevented any progress in the relationship of image and sound. Now, whether one supports the increasing importance of visual representation in music doesn't really matter. The phenomenon is occurring and professional art musicians

really only have two choices: to proceed in the effort to remove image from sound or to embrace the natural element and innovate new ways to incorporate visual elements within art music, else risk becoming obsolete in the developing image-centered culture.

Although classical music is an essential fine art, it is important to realize that it will never be a pure, untouched art form. Music is an allegory of life and can transcend time and space in order to reach all people. However, perfection can never be achieved and music is no exception. The art has been tainted by lackluster performances, poor compositions and many more unfortunate events. All musicians have contributed wrong notes, incomplete ideas and poor stage performance to the overall reputation of art music. Beethoven symphonies have been performed in the shabbiest of halls and Bach's cello suites have endured a multitude of stylistic misinterpretations. Art music has not received the perfect treatment or ultimate beauty it deserves; however, in a way that's what makes it such a relevant art form—it mirrors the imperfection that exists within life.

Music is constantly developing and adapting to the needs of society. Over the years, music has been performed in religious services, festivals, outdoors, military ceremonies, funerals, private homes, royal courts and grand halls. The actual content of music ranges the full spectrum of human emotion. Works have been written in response to love, grief, joy, adoration, jealousy, memory, respect, longing and revolution. As a representation of the human life, music must encompass all of these areas in order to accurately depict the world around us. So as society continues to place greater importance on visual elements, music must keep pace with the developing culture. But as musicians, we are hesitant to widen the door that would open new ideas on image in music. If we

refuse to travel in the same direction of the general public, we risk losing relevancy and support in our current culture.

Of course there is a fine line between keeping pace with societal developments and losing sight of what art music is truly about and where we've come from. Groups such as The Piano Guys and Trans-Siberian Orchestra incorporate classical music in a pop music setting, creating a fusion that has garnered millions of followers and fans. Of course these groups perform a good amount of pop music as well; however, their approach allows the audience to experience classical music in a way that entertains them, often without realizing that the electric guitars on stage are playing the same Beethoven symphony that you would hear at a classical orchestra concert.

Although changing the view of art music isn't exactly ideal for musicians, it provides a perfect bridge in order to educate the audience. Musicians often take for granted the fact that they are trained in the art of listening. A two-hour symphony concert is typical and provides musicians with an educational and entertaining opportunity because they understand what's happening within the music. The music novice doesn't have this benefit and is often looked down upon due to the lack of understanding. However, it's the responsibility of musicians to help educate individuals and teach them how to appreciate music; otherwise, how is the general public supposed to know? Incorporating image within music may not be the typical musician's forte, but by introducing art music with these "training wheels," musicians offer an opportunity to draw the audience in before showing them how to enjoy the true classics of Mozart, Brahms, Prokofiev etc. The timeline for this transformation could take place over many

years and the possible methods are endless. But musicians must be willing to create new approaches in order to engage with their audience, both aurally and visually.

### CONCLUSION

Art music is an essential part of almost every culture. It is a representation of the world around us and can be understood by all people. However, if art music is to remain relevant, it must rise to the occasion and address the increasing importance of image in our society. Pop music has set the standard for the relationship between sight and sound; it serves as an example to art musicians on how to better display the inherent visual nature within music and establish a better connection with the audience. After all, art music is rooted within visual traditions and musicians themselves often value image over sound. (Tsay 14583)

Our vision is often considered to be the most important human sense. It is nurtured from infancy and affects our judgment, perceptions and decisions about every day life. We are often told to “look within” and not be obsessed with outer beauty. However, right or wrong, we let vision rule our lives. And even as the importance of image seeps into the musical world, threatening to draw attention away from the actual music, we must remember what music is truly about: striving to engage and expose people to experience the world and find meaning within.

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