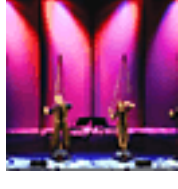

Kronos asks what music looks like

- [Steven Winn, Chronicle Arts and Culture Critic](#)

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Some of those people, of course, are sound asleep or contentedly napping. Others find it's the only way to listen.

The issue of closed eyes at classical music concerts may remain a minor mystery to idle observers. But it does tease out a timeless question about the relationship of the senses and the way we apprehend an intrinsically nonrepresentational art form. What do we see, if anything, when we listen to music?

Last weekend's Visual Music concerts by the Kronos Quartet, presented by San Francisco Performances at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, took on the matter directly. In a 90-minute program that was part high postmodernist experimentation, part mixed-media showcase and part MTV for the string quartet crowd, works by Steve Reich, Terry Riley, Krzysztof Penderecki, Mark Grey, film composer Bernard Herrmann (as arranged by Stephen Prutsman) and others were accompanied by lush video, classic cartoon snippets (seemingly limited by a technical misfire on opening night), a projected musical score, color-saturated lighting and movable musical sculptures.

It was a strange and disquieting evening, at once fascinating and dull, visually resplendent and clunky.

The nervously quivering rods and slowly undulating cylinders of Catherine Owens' recurring videos played in hypnotic counterpoint to the misterioso clouds of metallic sound in Grey's "Bertoia I" and "Bertoia II" and to Sigus Rós' hauntingly lovely "Flugufrelsarinn (The Fly Freer)." In Scott Johnson's political work, "Three Movements From 'How It Happens,'" a miasmatic swarm of white light resolved into a quivering airplane as the recorded voice of crusading journalist I.F. Stone mused darkly on the history of holy wars. That was a visual gesture that seemed to rise from the music's subconscious, crystallize briefly and tellingly and then dissolve as the piece pressed on.

Conlon Nancarrow's "Boogie Woogie #3A," by contrast, was an exercise in prolonged tedium. With the players positioned behind a projection-screen scrim, Alexander V. Nichols' woozy video pastiche of musical instruments and the musicians themselves proved both distracting and solipsistic. There was something reductively literal about all those arty images of music-making while the music was under way. The performance of Penderecki's "Quartetto per archi" invoked another, centuries-old tradition of literally illustrated sound. As the Kronos players lined up and faced the screen with their backs to the audience, the projected score scrolled by in real performance time. Here was a contemporary version of "eye music," that 15th and 16th century practice of symbolically representing a musical idea of, say, crookedness or death or a lover's orbs by the look of the notes on the score itself. Penderecki's quavers and whirrs, crescendos and silences were there for all to see as they happened.

The notion of visual music is nothing new in Western music. Composers from Beethoven (the "Pastoral" Sixth Symphony) to Berlioz ("Symphonie Fantastique") to Debussy ("La Mer") and beyond have attempted to evoke some kind of inner visual imagery in the listener's mind. Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition" is the musical equivalent of a taped tour of a specific painting gallery.

While Liszt is generally credited for inventing explicitly programmatic music with his symphonic poems, music intended for visual spectacles is centuries old. Opera and dramatic oratorios are predicated on the practice. If film had been invented earlier, Monteverdi and Mozart might have won Oscars. Today's music therapists testify to the medium's healing power to generate positive and productive images. Well established as it is, music's relationship to the visual world has often been viewed skeptically and suspiciously. "It is seldom clear what is meant when it is said that music can represent things," notes Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians in its entry on "programme music."

In his "Introduction: The Happy Medium" to "The Joy of Music" (1959), composer, conductor and populist polymath Leonard Bernstein set out the still-prevailing agenda on the topic with his dismissal of "extramusical notions which have grown like parasites." Bernstein identified four levels of "meaning in music." They were the narrative-literary (Richard Strauss' "Till Eulenspiegel," Paul Dukas' "The Sorcerer's Apprentice"), the atmospheric-pictorial ("La Mer," "Pictures at an Exhibition"), the affective-reactive (triumph, pain, wistfulness, melancholy) and purely musical.

"Of these, the last is the only one worthy of musical analysis," Bernstein declared. While other associations might be "good to know (if the composer intended them)," he added, "arbitrary justifications" held no interest for him. Bernstein didn't mention it, but the reference to "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" suggests that he might have had the 1940 landmark film "Fantasia" in mind. That famous Disney animated setting of assorted pieces, with Mickey Mouse as Dukas' "Apprentice," probably has done more than anything to implant the popular idea of classical music as a kind of plush narrative film score. A good deal of music education and "appreciation," since then, may have been primarily aimed at cracking the code and letting us all in on the movie spooling away inside the composers' heads.

It's a hard notion to shake. The universal solvent of movies and television has primed us all to perceive music in associative, multi-sensory ways. Who knows how many subconscious tracks have been laid down in each of us by the thousands of hours we've spent soaking in music in front of a screen? Chord patterns, certain orchestrations, a particular kind of hurried percussion may all be catalogued in highly organized, idiosyncratic ways. This one's suspense. That's one Michelle Pfeiffer.

At the same time we are all amazingly nimble, adaptable listeners. All it takes is the right context and the right cues to reorient, wipe the slate and start afresh. A performance of "Super Vision" by the multimedia dance troupe Kunst-Stoff last week at ODC was a case in point. Even before the audience sat down, the piece unsettled conventional ways of listening.

Taking up their positions here and there in the lobby, the seven performers began chattering away -- about Walgreen's, the J-Church streetcar, don't-I-know-you -- with dazed expressions and no one but nervously displaced audience members to hear. It continued inside the theater, as a soundtrack of ambient, outdoor noise gradually crept in under the voices.

A lot of things happened after that. A man had a barely audible job interview on a burning couch. The dancers jogged, hopped, shed costumes emblazoned with body-part photographs and offered autobiographical vignettes in front of a mirror. The sound got deafening at one point, then foghorn far away later on. Someone sang a phrase of "Every Breath You Take" in dirge-time. The pleasure here was in the discord, the brash insistence that we listen without trying to match sounds to sense (or even an audience), music to a clearly discernible meaning.

"The Saddest Music in the World," Guy Maddin's stylized new film about a Depression-era contest for the ultimate in musical gloom, is delectably subversive in another sense. Whether it's the entry from Canada (a weepy "Red Maple Leaves"), Cameroon (urgent drums) or America (a vulgar production number of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot"), Maddin's scratchy sound and nervous black-and-white camera work keep fragmenting the music and shattering its conventional sorrow into ironic little fragments.

With its odd and particular rhetoric of sight and sound, "Saddest Music" refuses to gratify our conditioned tastes for a film score. When a character takes a first disastrous drink after years of abstaining, Maddin lays on the throbbing, tragic music with such a heavy trowel we're torn. His distorted quotation of a standard film score technique makes us hear it with freshly offended ears.

Music's ability to move, amuse, infuriate and inspire is a complex matter. Somehow, whether it's as murky as a half-remembered dream or as sharply etched as a Disney cartoon, our visual apparatus must play some role in the sensory overtones it sets off. We're listening, consciously or not, with eyes wide shut.

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The Kronos Quartet used mixed media to show music's role as a provocateur of the senses.



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