

# The Synesthesia chronicle:

## An interconnective exploration of my musical identity

### Reflection

- Culminating Experience Project: summary of project

My project consisted in composing and recording 5 songs, getting inspiration from non-musical pieces of art (poems and paintings), using my synesthesia.

Synesthesia is a neurological condition that creates links between sensorial pathways. For synesthetes -people who have synesthesia, regions of the brain that interpret different types of sensorial stimulations cross-activate involuntarily. For some of them, textures might have flavors, timbres might have shapes and letters might have colors associated to them. There are many different types of synesthesia and many well-known musicians have described having such internal experiences: Stevie Wonder, Franz Liszt and Duke Ellington are some of them. For some subjects, their condition is the normal way of seeing things. For some others it is a source of joy and creativity. Whereas for others it is the cause of a continuous internal noise and perceived as a burden. In more than 15% of the cases, synesthetes have autism, ADHD, dyslexia and/or severe migraines.

In my case, as far as I can remember, I have always had several types of synesthesia. The strongest one that I have connects music to colors: single pitches, intervals, and above all harmonies are associated to colors in my mind. Another type of strong connection that I make concerns music and words: certain series of words, or certain ideas correspond to music in my

mind (most of the time harmonies). As I started to learn music at 6 years old, I got discouraged by my piano teachers to explore those connections that they considered irrelevant, and I was told to concentrate on the theoretical aspect of music. I then stopped paying attention to my synesthesia during all my studies, until this year.

Starting this year at the BGJI, I was surprised by how different the approach to music was: our artistic director and teacher Danilo Perez was constantly referring to life situations in musical terms, and vice-versa. He had what he called an interconnective approach to music. I was reminded for the first time in my education that music can be deeply connected to the world as we experience it. For the first time in my education as well, I was encouraged to explore those connections, and to link them to music theory.

When I decided to delve into this project, I had several goals in mind:

- The first one was to raise awareness on synesthesia. There is no consensus on why synesthesia exists, neither on how many of us are born with it. Some experts believe that all babies are born with synesthesia. To the contrary, some believe that synesthesia is socially learned by a few. (Kadosh, R. C., Henik, A. and Walsh, V., 2009. Synaesthesia: learned or lost?) Regardless, approximately 4% of the adult population has it (*Simner, J. Mulvenna, C. Sagiv, N. Tsakanikos, E. Witherby, S.A. Fraser, C. Scott, K. Ward, J. Synaesthesia: the prevalence of atypical cross-modal experiences. Perception, 2006.*). I strongly believe that if children would not be discouraged to explore the connections their brain creates at an early age, more of us would keep/learn synesthesia, and this condition could be a great source of creativity.

- A second goal that I had in mind was to create bridges between different forms of arts. Like a great movie and a great film score can nurture each other, I believe that associating visual arts and words to music can make the music deeper, and closer to our experience of the world.
- My last and most important goal was to advocate for a more connected approach to music, that would allow theory and intuition to inform one another.

To address these goals, I decided to write four songs, getting inspiration from famous paintings and poems that I have a personal connection to:

- "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", 1923 by Robert Frost,
- "Ausencia", 1899, by Jorge Luis Borges,
- Van Gogh, Vincent. *The Starry Night*. 1889, oil on canvas, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- Monet, Claude. *Water Lilies*. 1919, Musee Marmottan Monet, Paris, France.

I then arranged these songs for an eight-piece band composed of: a percussion player, an (upright) bass player, two vocalists, a violinist, viola player and cellist, and myself on piano/keyboard.

- Process and results: how the project did and did not align with expectations

I was satisfied with the way my project went. I composed 5 songs using my synesthesia, and decided to only include my 4 favorite ones in order to have a more concise presentation of my project. I used my synesthesia in two different manners. For the two paintings, I used the main colors of the paintings to get corresponding harmonic progressions. For instance, the dark blue

of Van Gogh's painting was an A-9(b6). Once I got harmony using my synesthesia, I composed melodies over the progressions and arranged the songs. For the poems, the process was a little different, as my synesthesia is much more abstract with words. I meditated to the poems, and took out some specific words, or series of words that had clear musical translations to my mind (mostly harmonic, but also melodic and rhythmic at times). I then combined those small musical elements and expanded on some of them to create full songs. I arranged the songs for my band, recorded, and post-produced them in my home studio. I was mostly satisfied with the musical aspect of my project. But if I could to go through this process again, I would spend a little less time concentrating on the composition of the tunes, and more time on finding efficient ways to still use my synesthesia while performing the songs in studio.

Concerning the idea of promoting a different approach to music, the presentation of my project at the Berklee College of Music was a good start that I will follow up with.

During my presentation I could have explained in more details the connections that I make between the pieces of art and the music written. An important challenge was to find a concise, and yet creative way to present those. I could also have insisted on the idea that those connections are personal and exist in all of us to a certain extent. Musicians often refer to music in visual terms for instance. The main difference that synesthesia makes, is that for synesthetes, those connections are neurological. They are involuntary, automatic and consistent (the color of a note, for instance, always remains the same), whereas for non-synesthetes, those connections are mental. Regardless, I believe that they deserve to be explored in each one of us.

When I apply that vision to my teaching practice in the future, these will be challenges to keep in mind.

- Next Steps: if the project were to continue, what would the next phase entail?

-The next phase of this project will be to get those songs professionally mixed and mastered, before releasing it as an EP.

-I aim to present my project in more details in schools, Conservatories, and at medical conventions. For now, I have one presentation booked in the National Conservatory of Nice, France.

-My next goal after this project is completed will be to apply its vision to my playing and composing. I will keep making music from the perspective of connecting it to non-musical elements that matter to me. Or as the founder of the Berklee Global Jazz Institute says it, I will “play the score of the movie of my life”.

-A long term goal that I have is to also apply this vision to my teaching practice. I believe that in order to be creative, it is crucial for musicians to have personal, emotional attachment to chords, notes, intervals, rhythm etc. This attachment, although often naturally present, is rarely discussed in music education, especially at an entry level. I would like to develop techniques that would allow students of any age to connect music to other sensorial pathways. This would encourage them to relate to musical theory to a more personal level.

- Impact on the Student Completing the Work

This year at the BGJI, and this work I focused on truly started a personal and artistic transformation in me. I went from looking at music from a theoretical point of view exclusively, finding music to be very frustrating at times, to approaching it with more simplicity, joy and depth at the same time. This project forced me to truly expand musically: the connections that my synesthesia create were hard to rationally understand at times, and making music out of them was a real challenge. The two paintings and two poems introduced me to new harmonic and melodic concepts that I would have never explored otherwise.

On a more general level, studying synesthesia and meeting musician synesthetes taught me a lot -and raised new questions -on what music is, and humans are as creative beings.

- Works Cited

- Kadosh, R. C., Henik, A. and Walsh, V., 2009. Synaesthesia: learned or lost?

- Simner, J. Mulvenna, C. Sagiv, N. Tsakanikos, E. Witherby, S.A. Fraser, C. Scott, K. Ward, J.

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