TOWARDS 'A BEAUTIFUL LAND': THE INFLUENCE OF ROTHKO AND ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM IN COMPOSING FIVE PANELS (NO. 5)

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ABSTRACT

Five Panels (no.5) is an experimental electronic composition that takes as its starting point the classic (post-1949) abstract paintings of Mark Rothko. As a result, and in contrast to my previous works, Five Panels (no.5) is more minimal regarding its gestural content and makes less use of teleologically oriented structuring processes. The work focuses more on the details within each sound and on subtle shifts in timbre and acoustic space. This article will cover the influence of Rothko and abstract expressionism more broadly on Five Panels (no.5).

THE INFLUENCE OF EXPRESSIONISM

Towards the end of the 1940s the paintings of both Rothko and Guston moved from symbolic realism to abstraction. When referring to the early abstract paintings of Guston, John Cage considered them examples of 'a beautiful land'[1]. For me, Cage’s comment seemed particularly apt as I have moved in the past few years, from an interplay of found sound objects typical of musique concrète to a more abstract and minimal musical syntax. This change in style is not merely a desire to use different sounds but a deeper recognition that abstraction has the ability to encourage the listener to become involved with a work in a very different way from one that uses fragments of environmental or other referential sound. Rothko and other abstract expressionists, particularly Barnett Newman also recognised that abstract painting encouraged a different form of engagement with the viewer than representational or figurative art. In their lack of any figurative content the paintings of Rothko, Guston and Newman engender a completely different emotive response on the part of the viewer. Rothko, when discussing the rectangular colour forms that are characteristic of his classic style, observed that,

"every relationship implies an anecdote, not in the sense of a story which is simply an anecdote of human action, but in the sense of a philosophical narration of bringing all the related elements together to some unified end."[5]

This statement could equally be applied to Five Panels (no.5). Whilst each sonic layer remains timbrally and spatially differentiated, there are relationships, however abstract, between them. Newman’s awareness of this difference in perception of abstract art on the part of the viewer is expressed in his writings on his work Onement I (1948). Newman was also aware of the more minimal surface content in the paintings that both he and Rothko were creating as they move further and further into the realms of abstraction. Newman realised that prior to painting Onement I he was filling the void with forms because he took for granted that the atmospheric approach was a prior condition of pictorial space. Much like Rothko, he had been occupying this space with gestures and marks that functioned like actors.[3]

Having read this, I realised that I too, had also taken for granted certain approaches to the production of electroacoustic music and electronica. In Five Panels (no.5) I see myself moving away from filling my compositions with numerous sonic actors that interact in various ways with their references to the everyday and also eschewing the overt teleological gestural language I have previously employed in my compositions. This shift away from the repesentation in sound of the everyday or concrete results in a different form of perception on the part of the listener. In Five Panels (no.5) the lack of concrete figuration or sonic references encourages a contemplation of ‘otherness’. Michael Bridger considers this change in perception as a move from musique concrète’s essentially metonymic mode of communication to the metaphoric mode of abstract music. Through his move to abstraction Rothko wanted “to destroy the finite associations with which our society increasingly enshrouds every aspect of our environment.”[4] The implication here and in Michael Bridger’s writings, is that abstraction can encourage a deeper contemplation of the artwork. Like Newman, Rothko wanted the viewer to experience his pictures not just look at them. He wrote that,

"the subject matter of abstraction is not familiar objects but quite real experiences and relationships of a more general kind. Abstract works] use abstracted notions of shapes and emotions in plastic terms to establish unity in a superior category…"[5]

For Rothko, abstraction did not imply a cool detachment. On the contrary, it allowed for a more direct communication of universal emotions. Death, ecstasy and tragedy were the emotive forces Rothko most often
referred to in his writings and interviews. Sheldon Nodelman writes that Rothko,

insists on the experiential concreteness of abstract art and its capacity to meaningfully address the human condition. Moreover, he identifies the work’s distinctive operative mode as that of generalization from particular things, events or feelings to broader, more universal relationships.[9]

The way that these universal relationships and emotions are communicated according to most critics is through Rothko’s use of colour. Nodelman continues,

Rothko regards colour, with its inherent properties of projection and recession, as the most powerful formal agent for the realization of tactile plasticity. He contrasts the illusory plasticity achieved by the graying of colour to cause the represented objects to appear to recede into the distance (with the blurring of edges as a necessary corollary) with the more powerful effect conveyed by colors, which do not lend themselves to the representation of atmosphere at a distance but manifest an inherent dynamic of projection and recession that can be given unencumbered play. The latter generates a space invested with what he calls a ‘tangibly mucous’ character, a substantialized space that strengthens the tactile sensation by seeming to resist motion in any direction within it, thus causing the motion itself to be perceived by contrast as more powerful.[7]

Rothko, however, always maintained that his paintings were not about colour. This statement becomes somewhat clearer when one looks at three related paintings from the mid-1950s: Untitled (1955), Yellow and Gold (1956), and Untitled (1956). All three are made of yellow and orange/gold. The different emotive responses engendered by these three paintings are due to their varying degrees of colour saturation. The idea of Five Panels, as a complete cycle, is similar to the three paintings mentioned above from 1955/56: that is to take similar sonic material and through different sound processing and spatial manipulation to create five different but clearly related panels of sound. This concept and approach is somewhat akin to Feldman’s description of his music as ‘rearranging the same furniture in the same room’.[8] In Five Panels (no.5) the varying degrees of ‘saturation’ are translated onto the timbral manipulation of sound, and colour to pitch. This correlation between timbre/saturation and colour/pitch is not merely a subjective response to the paintings. Ann Sarno’s article concerning cross-modal approaches to Rothko’s work highlights a number of scientific studies that ground these connections in concrete practice. Sarno clearly argues for a cross-modal approach where musical and colour/saturation effects have their pairs. This theory is further supported by Timothy Hubbard’s article ‘Synesthesia-like mappings of lightness, pitch and melodic interval.’[9]

As well as a synesthetic mapping of colour to sound, Five Panels (no.5) also employs a similar structure to Rothko’s classic paintings. Rothko’s superimposed rectangular blocks become blocks of sonic material, each with its own ‘saturation’ value and timbral colour. Though Rothko’s work presents a flat pictorial surface, something Feldman himself talks of in relation to his own music in the notes to For Frank O’Hara, such titles by Rothko as Black on Deep Purple (1964) and Nodelman’s discussion of ‘projection and recession’ clearly imply a hierarchy of layers. Yet this hierarchy still does not pertain to classical notions of perspective. It is a layering in, and through space, rather than perspective. Anne Chave recognises the kinaesthetic properties of these later paintings. Chave writes that Rothko’s rectangles did not simply define the picture plane: they may be seen as floating parallel to that surface, but they are also locked into spatial struggles both against the picture plain and against each other, as variously obstructing from and receding into space.[10]

Similarly Stephen Johnson writes of Rothko’s work as, an immobile procession [that] suggests the contradictory principles of stasis and movement, elements which permeate Rothko’s classic paintings. Stability arises from rectangular shapes and symmetrical arrangements, flux from the ambiguous relation between the rectangles and the surface plane. Movement occurs not from side to side, but from front to back, as rectangles appear simultaneously to advance or recede.[11]

In Five Panels (no.5) there are five identifiable layers: 1) a continual sustained guitar harmonic ‘ground’; 2) processed guitar harmonics; 3) sine-based sustains; 4) individual guitar harmonics; 5) ‘glitch’ elements What is important however, is not just the recognition of these sonic layers but also their relationship. Apart from the paintings produced for what was to become known as the Rothko Chapel, Rothko never used tape to delineate one block of material from another. In many instances in his work it is this lack of delineation combined with saturation of colour that creates the organic, intangible quality in his work. Rothko’s style in the classic paintings is all to do with soft edges, blurring the boundaries between one horizontal bar and the next. The bars dematerialize at the edges. They are not independent entities they exist in relation to their surroundings. Stephen Johnson writes that, ‘in some places they vaporize so unevenly and indeterminately that the viewer has difficulty distinguishing where one surface leaves off, and the other begins.’[12] Johnson continues, ‘rectangles are created from paint applied so thinly that in places the ground shows through. This often stimulates a pulsation between surfaces...’[13] Instances in which the atemporal ‘ground’ (layer one) shows through in Five Panels (no.5) occur at 0’45, 4’10 and 6’15 where harmonic changes, glissandi, or slow melodic figures permeate the foreground layers.
A further characteristic of Rothko’s classic paintings apart from their presentation of vertically stacked colour rectangles, is also their size. Rothko said,

I paint very large pictures… I realise that historically the function of painting large pictures is painting something grandiose and pompous. The reason I paint them… is precisely because I want to be very intimate and human. To paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience, to look upon an experience as a stereopticon view or with a reducing glass. However, you paint the larger picture, you are in it.[14]

In Five Panels (no.5) the desire to place the audience ‘in’ the piece is not only achieved through the use of surround sound but also by removing all visual cues by playing the work in as near darkness as possible. The idea of the transcendental and the direct relationship between the viewer and a painting or a listener and the sound is also strongly expressed in the live performances of Fransisco López. López removes all references to the visual in his performances thereby removing the notion of a physical mediation and immediately creating a sense of ‘otherness’. Fransisco López in ‘Against the Stage’ writes that he persistently refuses to play on stage, even hiding his diffusion console in a small tent in the middle of the auditorium. López performs as much as possible in complete darkness. He writes,

Having nothing to contemplate visually in the traditional sense makes possible the departure from frontal sound. As opposed to the directionality of visual elements, sound is perceived coming from every direction…. In a live event this allows immersion, intensified phenomenological experience, to ‘be inside’ the sound instead of listening to it...Visual darkness lights up regions of the mindscape and the spirit that are normally dormant and darkened by visual light. The ear not only hears but also decisively influences our spatio-temporal perceptions. The combination of visual darkness and being ‘inside’ the sound (instead of listening to it) creates a strong feeling of immersion where your own body moves into the perceptive background.[15]

Rothko had the desire to place the viewer in a very close physical relationship with the painting. In the Rothko Chapel, Rothko created a hermetic environment in which the paintings dominate, free from outside visual distractions. Feldman wanted to achieve a similar result in his work Rothko Chapel writing that ‘Rothko’s imagery goes right to the edge of his canvas, as I wanted the same effect with the music – that it should permeate the whole octagonal-shaped room and not be heard from a certain distance. The result is [that] the sound is closer, more physically with you than in a concert hall’. [16]

Stephen Johnson writes that ‘Sensing that the room required sound to come from the sides, Feldman deployed his chorus antiphonally, forcing the listener to become ‘involved with the tonality.’[17] Johnson writes that as the two choirs present different material and ‘By dividing this music into multiple layers – separated in physical space as well as by their musical content – Feldman achieves an effect akin to Rothko’s vibrating surfaces.’[18] Five Panels (no.5) attempts to simulate these vibrating surfaces through the use of surround sound. The listener is placed inside the acoustic space of the piece in order to achieve a sense of musical intimacy by means of sonic immersion.

In Five Panels (no.5) the soundworld is deliberately non-declamatory and the use of spatialisation is subtle. The piece is not intended to proceed on its own journey as an autonomous work, taking the listener along if they so choose. Rather the listener has to create their own journey through their own engagement with the work. Rothko expressed a similar sentiment concerning the role of the viewer. Rothko believed that artworks were not to be thought of as objects but as ongoing processes of communication, in which the participation of the spectator was vital. ‘A picture lives by companionship…expanding and quickening in the eyes of the sensitive observer. It dies by the same token.’[19] The work was thus to be fulfilled in the observer’s existential encounter with it. Ann Sarno writes that ‘without figurative representation, onlookers do not merely observe but experience.’[20]

Similarly in Five Panels (no.5), I do not want the audience merely to listen. I want them to experience. What this experience is will obviously depend on an individual’s level of engagement with the music. One of the reasons, or need, for this increased level of engagement on the part of the listener is that I am trying to direct them as little as possible. Although Five Panels (no.5) has recognisable sound objects, textures, and timbres that come to the fore, disappear, and return this process is cyclical and essentially non-teleological. Jonathan Kramer in The Time of Music maintains that,

If a nonteleogical piece is to be appreciated and enjoyed, the listener must become a creative participant in making the music… the listener can thus become more important to the music than the composer. In this way he or she becomes a part of the music, and thus the distinction between the self and the other, the listener and the music, is minimized.[21]

However, I have at no point attempted to describe the subject matter of the piece. To paraphrase Rothko’s own comment quoted by Katherine Kuh in the Chicago Art Quarterly of 1954: to tell the listener how the music should be listened to and what to listen out for results in paralysis of the mind and imagination. I would rather the listener makes their own way to ‘a beautiful land’.

NOTES

[6] ibid 9
[7] ibid 9
[12] ibid 15, p.36
[13] ibid 15, p.38
[17] ibid 15, p.29
[18] ibid 15, p.39

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**