Visual Phrasing: Manifesting the Power of Musical Expression

DIGITAL APPENDIX

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Appendix

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Extended analysis of initial experiments

Study in E Minor Visual

This experiment involved capturing the essential mood of a musical piece[14] within a static image. I listened to the music several times, and 'objectively' analysed and mapped-out the specific qualities and character of the music. This method allowed me to get a better understanding of the music and develop a feel for a potential aesthetic. For the final outcome (see fig. 26 on p. 4) I applied a specific system where darker values represent lower pitches and lighter values represent higher pitches. This resulted in a visual portrayal of the music.

I initially picked a dark burgundy red to be the main mood colour as I felt it best conveyed the melancholic tone of the music. Using the colour wheel, I picked colours on either side of the burgundy red while considering their relative optical values. The final visual had an orange-yellow dominant aesthetic, which didn't succeed to convey the melancholic and deeply emotional feel of the music I initially intended.

I mentioned earlier that the main objective was to capture the essential mood of the music. With this in mind, the overall structure of the visual looks quite detached, as there is no connection between the rhythmic set of lines, despite my intention to create a smooth and flowing visual feel.

[14] The music is called *Study in E Minor*, composed by Mauro Giuliani in 1811. To hear the music, please open the file 'E Minor.aif' on the disk.
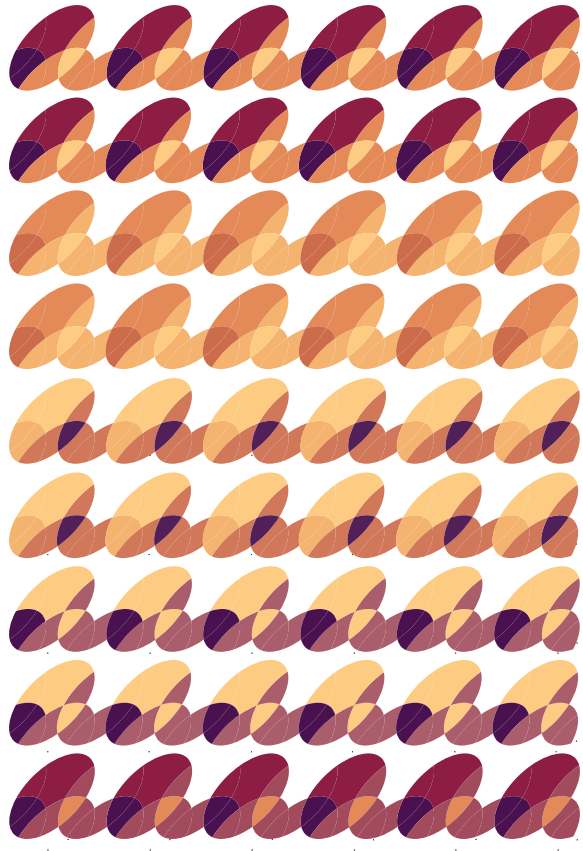
Fig. 26: *Study in E Minor Visual* [Still image]. 04, 2009.

Matrix 1

This experiment applied a formulaic method with a moving image piece. This system uses four different instrumental parts of the music as guides (see fig. 27): the main tune (yellow circles); the bass (purple circles); wood blocks (dark pink circles); cymbals (central orange circle). Circular forms were used to express the fun nature of the music, while a hierarchic system was applied to portray the dominance of the tune; the supportive base; and the cymbals in the centre of the matrix, holding the rhythmic structure together as the consistent 'time/beat-keeper'. The pink wood block circles connect the cymbals to the other two instrumental parts.[15]
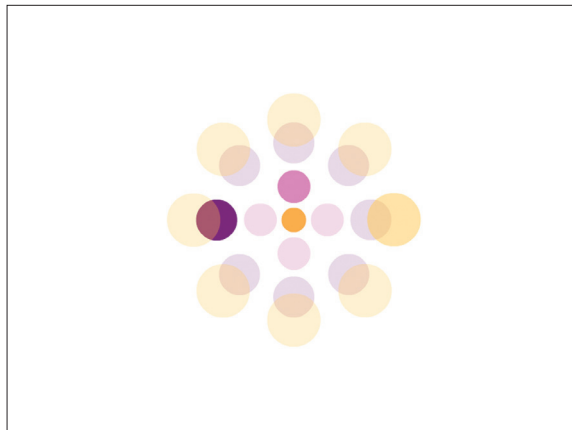

Fig. 27: *Matrix 1* [Moving image still at 3.7 sec]. 05, 2009.

[15] To view *Matrix 1*, please open the file 'Matrix 1.swf' on the disk.

The overall result lacks expression of any particular mood, therefore, the feel of the music the movie is conveying is uncertain. Although this experiment was a good trial to initiate the creation of a matrix, it brought me to an important question: do I want to create visuals that complement the music or convey it? I knew I did not want to create visuals that literally articulated specific pitches of sound, as I strongly preferred to explore ways of capturing the essence of the music. Therefore, at this stage, I was interested in designing a resourceful matrix, and using its versatility to convey different pieces of music.

Preliminary analysis of the automatic drawing experiment

(Written on Wednesday, 28th April, 2010)

The doodle drawing sessions were conducted to visually capture my response to three different pieces of music: *Andante* – a slow, spacious and deeply emotional piece of music that possesses melancholic to highly dramatic transitions; *Rosita* – a fun and lively Polka dance piece; and *Blue* – a very relaxed and dreamy piece.[16]

[16] To hear the pieces of music, please open the files 'Andante', 'Rosita', and 'Blue' on the disk. *Andante* and *Rosita* were composed by Francisco Tárrega (1852-1909); the exact dates of the compositions are not known. *Blue* was composed by Ross Hill in 2005.

Overview of methods

Within the automatic drawing experiment three different methods were applied. Each method guided me to respond to the music in three different ways. The first method involved drawing on an A4 piece of paper after listening to a whole piece of music. Five drawings were completed before I felt the need to listen to the music again to remind myself of its key characteristics, but more importantly, to re-immerse myself in the mood of the music. No time limit was set for creating a drawing.

Two significant changes were applied within the second method: the piece of music was listened to only once before every set of 20 drawings was done; and, unlike for the first method, a very short time was allowed. It needs to be mentioned that this short time limit did not

have a definite period. Instead, the focus was to capture on each page an instantaneous, impulsive sensation, resulting in drawing-time-periods that varied from one-second to three-second responses.

The most significant change applied within the third method was the smaller scale of the doodles, where the size of the drawing area was decreased from a 297 mm by 210 mm rectangle (A4 piece of paper) to a 59.4 mm by 42 mm rectangle. Twenty of these small rectangles were ruled in a grid form on an A4 piece of paper, five rectangles across and four down. A single drawing session consisted of listening to a piece of music prior to drawing 20 *miniature* doodles.

The first method resulted in drawings with a lot of content, full of numerable contrasting lines and forms (see fig. 28 on p. 9). I believe that the absence of a time limit was the key factor that allowed the development of contrasts to occur. More importantly, it also brought forward two issues. Firstly, with no external influence or motivation to complete a drawing within a defined period, my intent to fill or permeate the whole area of a page prevailed over my initial spontaneous intentions, which resulted in more consciously forced strokes. Secondly, instead of concentrating on purely responding to the music, my focus frequently shifted towards responding to the previous stroke that had been made. This encouraged intentions to create interesting, contrasting, or harmonising relationships between the visual elements that had been drawn and those yet to be drawn.
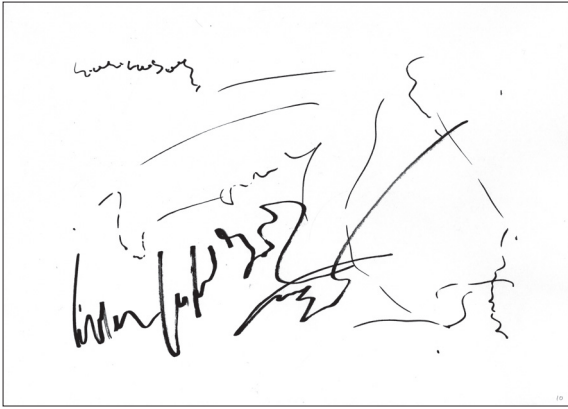
Fig. 28: *Rosita: session 1, drawing 10* [Felt pen on paper]. 03, 2010.

The second method resulted in a lot less content within every drawing, and the short time limit encouraged more spontaneous responses. With every drawing there may have been an influence from the strokes made on the previous drawing, however, it was not as intrusive as in the first method. This also guided my focus to respond more directly to the music, as every new piece of paper presented an opportunity for a fresh response (see fig. 29).

Fig. 29: *Rosita: session 3, drawing 10* [Felt pen on paper]. 04, 2010.

The third method resulted in the least amount of content per drawing area and the divided page structure allowed for the visual recording of consecutive, instantaneous strokes while the music played in my head on a 'time-line'. The structure of the page also aids the analysis of a drawing session as we can see how a response began, how it evolved, and how it ended – whereas in the first method this chronology is very hard to determine. The outcome of a complete session of miniatures seems to resemble the structure of a storyboard or a filmstrip (see fig. 30).
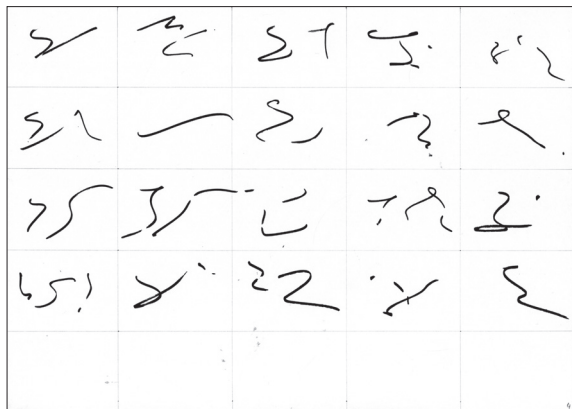

Fig. 30: *Andante: miniature drawing session 4* [Felt pen on paper]. 04, 2010.

Specific analysis of outcomes within each method

Before commencing the doodle drawing experiment I had made a set of hypotheses. I predicted that the three different pieces of music would evoke visual responses that symbolically signified or represented their characteristic moods: the *Andante* drawings would result in aggressive and sharp forms; the *Rosita* drawings would have a frivolous and curly aesthetic; and the *Blue* drawings would appear very smooth and flowing.

First method

Within the first method, the *Blue* drawings most closely adhere to their hypothesis. However, and as an overall result, the hypotheses were not attained. Instead, and as mentioned previously, numerable contrasting lines and forms were juxtaposed within each drawing across all three pieces of music. And there is no repetition or visible consistency of lines and forms, except for the aforementioned juxtaposing contrasts. There was another interesting aspect – the *Andante* and *Rosita* drawings contain a lot of contrast in visual weight, while this contrast in the *Blue* drawings is far less obvious. This is possibly related to the degree of emotion in each piece. *Blue*, possessing a very relaxed, almost neutral mood and fairly consistent flow, resulted in an even visual weight. *Andante* and *Rosita*, even though they possess opposing moods, their degree of emotion is very high. It could be said that the large fluctuations between my neutral, relaxed state and highly emotive responsive state could have produced these extreme contrasts.

Second method

Within the second method, the outcome was considerably different. Across all the drawings produced, the juxtaposing contrasts were replaced with vast variations of curvilinear lines and forms. And while observing the drawings as a collective set, it can be said that they all possess a very similar aesthetic. The clearest distinction that can be discerned at this stage is that the *Andante* drawings contain the most angular lines – possibly a result of my response to the deeply dramatic feel of the music through deep, lengthy, decisive and quite aggressive strokes.[17]

[17] The word *stroke* specifically refers to the instantaneous action or movement. While the words *line*, *curve*, and *form* refer to the visual outcome of the stroke.

This aesthetic similarity is an intriguing result, which raised a few questions: why was my response to three pieces of music, of very different moods, so similar? What part of the music, if any specific part at all, did I respond to in achieving this overall aesthetic consistency? Also, why have I responded in curvilinear forms? Why not sharp, aggressive and jagged forms? It may be a result of my experience as a performer of the guitar – transitions and phrases are never played in a 'start-stop' manner, no matter how 'start-stop' they may sound, as with every transition there is a preparation, an execution, and a release, which only leads to the next preparation.

Third method

The results within the third method are similar to the results of the second one; however, there are some key elements that need to be mentioned. On average, the *Andante* sessions contain the least amount of content within each miniature area, while the *Rosita* sessions contain the most. Also, within the *Rosita* sessions there is a strongly re-occurring 'S' shape ornament – an element that could have most likely been inspired by *Rosita's* dance-like and lively rhythmic phrasing (see fig. 31 on p. 13).
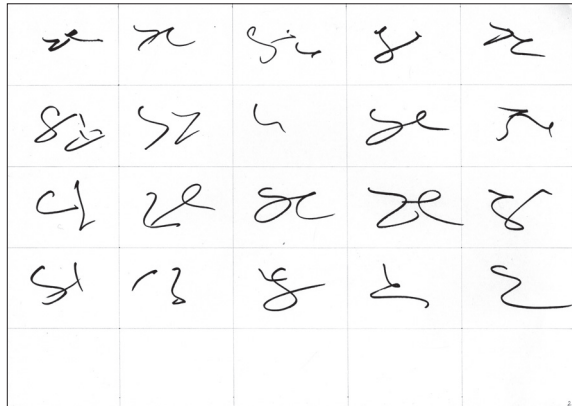
Fig. 31: *Rosita: miniature drawing session 2* [Felt pen on paper]. 04, 2010.

This particular result is encouraging, as throughout the whole doodle drawing experiment I had difficulties with over-glamorising or over-doing a responsive moment and just letting an outcome be what it is. And I can sincerely say that the 'S' shape ornament emerged without any restraint and I freely let my feel for the music take over all conscious actions. Could this 'S' shape ornament be *Rosita's* essence in visual form? And can the visual essence of other pieces of music be found through this method?

Post commentary: reflection on the preliminary analysis

(Written on Monday, 6th September, 2010)

The tone of the preliminary analysis of the automatic drawing experiment appears to be quite objective and scientific. At that particular stage of the thesis I believe I was cautious and somewhat concerned of how personal the research was becoming. I therefore felt the need to achieve an objective understanding, or realisation of the direction the research seemed to be moving towards.

Approximately 250 automatic drawings were created within this initial experiment. The aforementioned concluding thought on the potential mode of finding the visual essence of a musical piece was an intriguing one. This thesis could have developed in such a manner. However, what prevented me from taking that route was the realisation of the infinite possibilities within this type of experiment. I had an insight that no one drawing, or a specific figurative visual element of a drawing, could hold much meaning or any deep value when presented on its own. I therefore pursued a deep immersion in creating a vast volume of automatic drawings that could be viewed as a whole collection, and contemplated as an entity.

After the initial 250 drawings, I settled on applying the second method for consistency, appropriateness of scale, and for more focused responses to music.

Selective commentary on the experimental movie clips of drawings

Following are reflective commentaries on five *Phrasing movie clips*. They are all of short duration due to the highly spontaneous and experimental approach within my practical research.

Phrasing 1 was one of the first experimental movie clips of drawings.[18] The focus was simply to observe the effects of a curve forming itself (see fig. 32). The transition points within the movie are very mechanical and robotic as they appear too abruptly and unnaturally. There are no moments of *preparation*, and so the gestural quality of the drawing has been stripped away. The length of the single, connected sequence seems too long, and so the moment of sensation has been lost. I also feel that there are too many transitions in one moment – too much rise and fall in one succession for the viewer to take in and absorb, and not enough time to observe and contemplate.
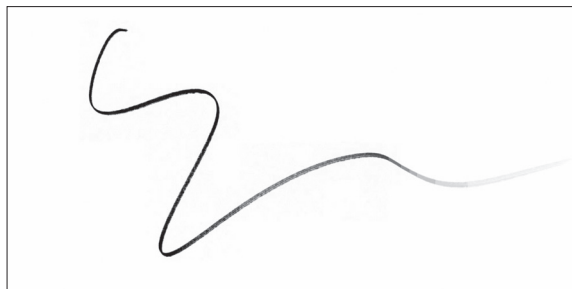
[18] To view *Phrasing 1*, please open the file 'Phrasing 1.mov' on the disk.

Fig. 32: *Phrasing 1* [Moving image still at 2 sec]. 07, 2010.

Within the movie *Phrasing 2* transitions were made smoother through varying the thickness and/or visual weight of a line/stroke.[19] This orchestrated transition emulates a preparation, an execution and a release – in my mind forming very close parallels with the plucking action when playing the guitar (see fig. 33). Another aspect this experiment focused on was directing the viewer's eye to respond to, and follow, a stroke faster or slower in any direction that it moves, or at certain points or moments, to sharply hold the attention of the eye. With these effects I strived to emulate the movement of a melody we hear within a musical passage.
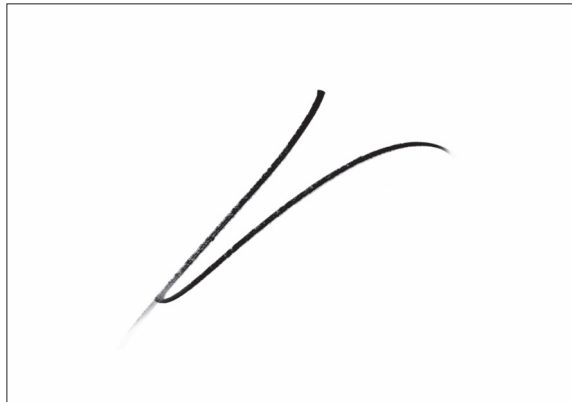
Fig. 33: *Phrasing 2* [Moving image still at 11 sec]. 07, 2010.

Phrasing 3 also focuses on the above notions of emulating a plucking action and the movement of a melody; however, I applied them to just one particular stroke or moment (see fig. 34). I explored alternative modes of formation through varying the speed, and sometimes rhythm, at which the whole stroke, and sometimes segments of the stroke, appeared. Some transitions are smooth and swift; others are a lot clumsier. This experiment emulates the subtle variances of how one moment or phrase can be performed.[20]
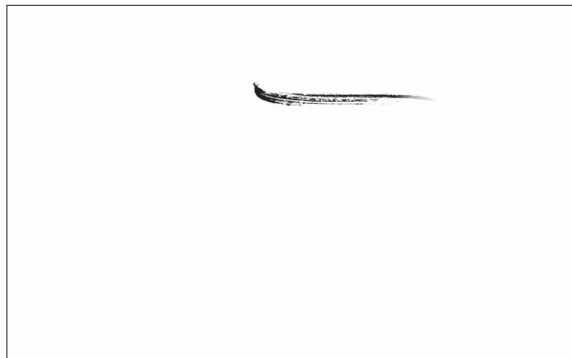
[20] To view *Phrasing 3*, please open the file 'Phrasing 3.mov' on the disk.

Fig. 34: *Phrasing 3* [Moving image still at 8 sec]. 09, 2010.

With *Phrasing 4* I aimed to encourage the viewer to respond to the moving visuals by crafting his or her own expression. In the search for clarity, or closure, the viewer's inner persona is drawn out to interact with or respond to the drawings. Through this interaction, there lies the potential for a relationship to evolve between the viewer and the visual. To encourage this effect, I dramatically slowed down certain transitions, or moments, to provide the viewer with the time to become involved in crafting a relationship.[21] I also increased the ambiguity of the drawings through a subtraction of visual elements. Within these spaces, the viewer is encouraged to bring his or her own completion, or expression (see fig. 35).

[21] To view *Phrasing 4*, please open the file 'Phrasing 4.mov' on the disk.

Fig. 35: *Phrasing 4* [Moving image still at 15 sec]. 07, 2010.

The movie clips discussed thus far have a sparse appearance with minimal content that is very specific, and one could therefore say, directive and commanding. Even with *Phrasing 4* – although the ambiguity was increased – the eye is still forced to focus on one particular element. I therefore took a different approach with the experiment *Phrasing 5* – it is rich with content, and personally, I feel the visuals are conveying a tormented soul (see fig. 36). The movement that is present is not literally portrayed or digitally reconstructed as within the previous experiments. Instead, the visuals express movement through the drawings' authentic quality of line – and there is an interesting resemblance with André Masson's Automatic Drawing (see fig. 2 on p. 22 in the *Concept and Contexts* chapter of the exegesis). The viewer's eye can deviate as it pleases amongst the complexity and variety as the freedom of interpretation is enhanced. Within the richness and the depth of possibilities lies the power of expression.[22]
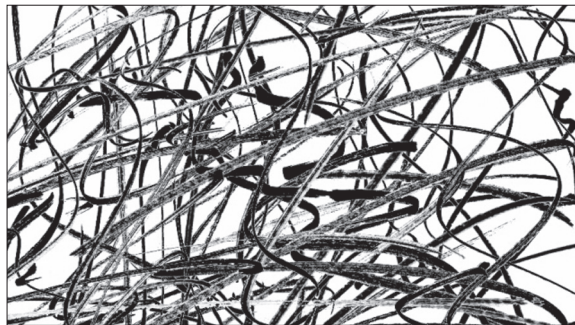
[22] To view *Phrasing 5*, please open the file 'Phrasing 5.mov' on the disk.

Fig. 36: *Phrasing 5* [Moving image still at 10 sec]. 09, 2010.

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