Animated Music | Musical Animation

Tuesday, October 11, 2011
7:30 pm
Martha-Ellen Tye Recital Hall
INTRODUCTION BY CURATOR BILL ALVES

When Walter Pater wrote “all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music” in 1877, he was admiring music's ability to reach directly to our emotions without the filter of representational form, or as he put it, to “obliterate” the distinction of “matter from form.” In music, the content is the form, and Pater's contemporaries Baudelaire and Rimbaud were already inventing a poetry that at least began to chip away at the wall between the two. By the end of the century, James McNeil Whistler was creating paintings called Nocturne and Symphony, and Arthur Wesley Dow approached his paintings as “visual music.”

Today technology has granted the term “visual music” a new life, familiar to many through the media of music visualizers, VJs, and YouTube. The term has come to encompass abstract animations with music (synchronized or not), visualizations creating by mapping elements of music to color and space, real-time visual responses by a computer and performer to music, and abstract art in motion without sound at all. Christopher Hopkins and I have chosen a program of work created digitally with music, but each artist uniquely approaches the marriage of Pater's matter and form.

Perhaps the first true performer of visual music was Wallace Rimington, a contemporary of Whistler and Dow who constructed a fantastic electrical behemoth known as a “light organ.” Instead of sounds, the keyboard of this instrument projected colored lights that dazzled audiences in Victorian England. However beautiful Rimington's shifting colors, his instrument allowed only the vaguest suggestion of shape and form. For that, artists would soon turn to the technology of film.

Of the handful of artists who first saw in film the possibility to create moving abstractions rather than photographed narratives, certainly the most prolific and innovative was Oskar Fischinger. Fischinger's animations are supple choreographies of forms, sometimes, like Rimington's light shows, in silence, but often tightly and compellingly synchronized to music. Fischinger's new art of image and sound impressed Walt Disney, who hired Fischinger. However, because of Disney's discomfort with abstraction, few of Fischinger's ideas made it into the final form of the film Fantasia (1941), at once a commercial breakthrough and lost opportunity in the history of visual music. Nevertheless, Fischinger's approaches to these synesthetic correspondences continued to inspire other artists, among them the brothers John and James Whitney.

The Whitney brothers traveled from California to Paris in 1939, hoping that their immersion in European modernism would light a path for abstract film. John, the musician brother, sought in film the direct path to the emotions that Pater heard in music. However, he came to realize that the dramatic power of music resulted from the complex interplay of tension and resolution and did not emerge from a simple mapping of basic elements in one art form (such as pitch) to another (such as color). The brothers worked to find a way to control motion on a screen with the same precision that a composer controls music.

Once again, technology was the liberating factor. After World War II, the Whitney brothers scavenged precision gears and mechanisms from decommissioned artillery guidance mechanisms, constructing an elaborate animating mechanical computer. In the 1960s and 70s, John Whitney became a pioneer in digital computer animation, creating a remarkable series of works, including tonight's Arabesque.

When I began to work with John Whitney in the 1980s, his ideas about how music's harmonic relationships could find their complement in the controlled motion of visual elements were a revelation to me. In his work and that of his brother James, content and form merged effortlessly into an overwhelming sensual experience that continues to inspire today's explorers in this young art form.
PROGRAM

Aleph (2002)  Bill Alves
computer animation with electroacoustic music

Autarkeia Aggregatum (2005)  Bret Battey
computer animation with electroacoustic music

Yin Tan (video)
Jeffrey Stolet (music)
3D animation with music

Stellation (2008)  Bill Alves
computer animation with string quartet and electronic sounds

INTERMISSION

Static Cling (2000)  Bill Alves
computer animation with electroacoustic music

Sweeping
Karatchi Scramble
Intermezzo
Puddle Jumper
animation with acoustic music

film with acoustic music

Breath of the Compassionate (2009)  Bill Alves
computer animation with gamelan and electronic sounds
NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

*Aleph* (2002) was inspired largely by the geometric patterns of Islamic art, an art derived from the same proportions and numerical symbolism as the tuning systems of the ancient Greeks and Byzantines. In the music I have adopted similar proportions, known in music as just intonation, as well as intricate and slowly transforming patterns of pitches and timbres. Writers have connected the arithmetic symbolism of this art to the Arabic language and alphabet, the first letter of which, aleph, is a single vertical stroke. This stroke represents the descent of light, the “creative ray which initiates existence.” From this simple division follows the expansion into creation, and the connection of all people to the cosmological rhythms of number and pattern.

*Autarkeia Aggregatum* (2005) is an integrated sound and image composition emphasizing continuous flow and transformation. There are no cuts or splices in the visual aspect of the work; it unfolds instead as a constantly evolving, massed animation of a set of over 11,000 individual points. When seeking a title for the piece, I turned to the *Monadology* — the philosopher Leibniz’s theory of fundamental particles of reality (*monads*). I appropriated the two words from that work: *autarkeia* (Greek) for self-sufficiency, and *aggregatum* (Latin) meaning joined, aggregated. The terms together appropriately suggest an aggregation of the activities of autonomous entities. More subtly, a resonance with Classicism draws me to the words. The resonance is one of an inner fullness of being expressed outwardly in elegant, self-sufficient restraint.

*Elements in Transformation* (1998). For some years, Ying Tan studied, interviewed, and assisted the visual music pioneer Jordan Belson. Belson's meditative and ecstatic films served as an inspiration for these two short pieces. Unlike Belson's work, Tan created hers in 3-D computer animation with an electronic score for them composed by Jeffrey Stolet. Some of Belson's symbolic imagery has echoes in Tan's work: the central mandala-like celestial disc and the pyramid-like convergence to a point. The elements ultimately transformed in Tan's works are spiritual as much as visual.

*Stellation* (2008). “Stellation” is the geometrical process of extending elements of polygons on a surface. Constellations of these elements are arranged in a delicate choreography in Islamic abstraction and Javanese batik textiles, both of which inspired this work's visual patterns as well as its sonic tessellations. The string instruments in this work are retuned to the same mathematical ratios visible in the images, and the sounds and images were composed together.

*Static Cling* (2000) was inspired by the resonant patterns that emerge from the chaos of our world, like the patterns one can see in interstation tuning. The soundtrack is derived entirely from the sounds of the nightly ritual chaos of local news broadcasts, much as the animation is created from patterns of visual resonance. In this way beats, harmonies, and visual designs converge on the same Pythagorean relationships.

*Four Works of Chris Casady* (2005-2009). The style of Chris Casady's films evoke masters like Oskar Fischinger and a both whimsical and forceful energy. *Sweeping* was Casady's first experiment using Flash software for abstract animation. *Intermezzo* is a brief and intense experiment in visualizing a musical moment by John Dentino, inspired by 1930s non-objective painting. *Karatchi Scramble* is an abstract parade of calligraphic scribbles that builds into an animated vortex, suggesting that language sucks you in.
**Puddle Jumper** is a voyage into irreverent imagery to accompany a mélange of wildly different moods.

John Whitney's classic *Arabesque* (1975) was inspired by the graceful patterns of Arabic abstractions but is based on a typically simple process. One hundred points are arrayed in a circle and move laterally, wrapping around to the opposite side when they move off the screen. Because the speed of their movement varies in the same proportions of musical harmonies (the second point travels twice as fast as the first, the third three times as fast, and so on), the points arrive at moments of “resonance,” symmetry created by the mathematics of the motion, in the same proportions that Arabic artists used in their art. *Arabesque* is structured in seven sections, variations on the basic pattern. The soundtrack is a recording of Persian santur player Manoochelher Sadeghi and Larry Cuba assisted programming the IBM computer used in this realization.

**Breath of the Compassionate** (2009) is named for a type of pattern in Islamic geometric abstract art in which adjacent tiles alternately expand and contract into one another. This sense of visual inhalation and exhalation is known as the “breath of the compassionate” (*al-nafas al-rahmânî*) after the teachings of Ibn al’Arabi, who named this universal principle of creation, joining the elements of fire, air, water, and earth. The music, for just intonation gamelan instruments and electronics, was composed in tandem with the images.

**Biographies**

**Bill Alves** (Guest Artist and Curator) is a composer and video artist based in Southern California. He has composed music and abstract animation in tandem since the 1990s, after having worked with computer animation pioneer John Whitney Sr. In 1993-94 he studied gamelan music in Indonesia and now directs an American Gamelan ensemble at the Claremont Colleges. The third edition of his book *Music of the Peoples of the World* (Cengage/Schirmer) will be released in 2012, and CDs of his music are available on EMF and Spectral Harmonies. *Celestial Dance*, a DVD of his video work, has just recently been released by Kinetica Video Library.

**Bret Battey** creates electronic, acoustic, and multimedia concert works and installations. He has been a Fulbright Fellow to India and a MacDowell Colony Fellow, and he has received recognitions and prizes from Austria’s *Prix Ars Electronica*, France's *Bourges Concours International de Musique Electroacoustique*, *Abstracta Cinema* of Rome, and *Amsterdam Film eXperience* for his sound and image compositions. His degrees in music composition come from Oberlin Conservatory and the University of Washington, where he was also a Research Associate at the Center for Digital Arts and Experimental Media. He is a Senior Lecturer with the Music, Technology, and Innovation Research Centre at De Montfort University, Leicester, UK.

**Chris Casady** works in motion picture effects, music videos and TV commercials from his studio in Los Angeles, CA. He has won two Clio awards for work in animated commercials and has directed animated music videos for the Beastie Boys, Eddie Murphy, and Michael Jackson. His film *Pencil Dance* (1988) won top awards at international animation festivals in Canada, France, Japan and Italy and his recent *Puddle Jumper* (2007) was an award winner at the Punto y Raya Festival.
**John Dentino** is a composer and filmmaker known for his work with his band The Fibonaccis.

**Jeffrey Stolet** is a Philip H. Knight Professor of Music and is director of intermedia music technology at the University of Oregon. His electroacoustic and intermedia works have been presented at many international festivals and venues. He is also the director of Future Music Oregon.

**Ying Tan**'s extensive creative practice both as an artist and a designer has resulted in a wide range of work including film, video, animation and digital imaging, landscape painting, and communication design of all shapes and forms. Her recent work explores the relationship between vision and sound in time-based design, design without boundaries, and interdisciplinary collaborations. She teaches at the University of Oregon and is active in developing academic exchange programs with institutions in China, where she used to live.

**Christopher Hopkins** (Festival Director) *Tammy: do you have mine from last year?*

_C. Buell Lipa Festival of Contemporary Music_
An unusually thoughtful memorial fund has been established by the widow of an ISU professor who loved music. The fund honors the memory of C. Buell Lipa, a man whose interests and knowledge spanned centuries. Lipa was a professor emeritus of English. During more than thirty years on the Iowa State faculty, Lipa reflected his broad interests in his teaching and in his association with students and faculty. “What means most to me was his gentleness, a quality that informed everything he did and said,” wrote one student after Lipa’s death in 1978 at the age of 73.

The Lipa Festival is funded in part with support of the C. Buell Lipa Memorial for 20th Century Music, the Louise Moen Hamilton Fund for Excellence in Music, and the Alvin Edgar Fund for the Performing Arts - a part of the Iowa State University Foundation. Donations to the C. Buell Lipa Memorial Fund may be directed to the Iowa State Foundation, Memorial Union, 2229 Lincoln Way, Ames, IA 50011-7164. Contributions are tax deductible.