The Influence of Jazz Music in Twentieth Century Art

Curriculum Unit 01.02.08
by Janna Leigh Ryon

Introduction

The area of music and art appreciation has been absent in many school systems nationally. Too many of today's students do not look at the effect of music on today's society. Although we are bombarded with pop music and pop culture, we tend to overlook the influence of music in our everyday lives, yet music gives us a sense of belonging. It gives us a sense of connection with the popular world and ourselves. Music allows people to feel as if they are not alone. Music shares our good times and bad, and with that, we see how it affects our emotions. While there are distinct levels of understanding about how music influences society, this unit looks at it as it influences visual art in the Twentieth Century. It attempts to provide students with a concentrated look into music as it affects artists' lives and the art they produce. Many artists related their work to the music they heard and how they felt. I want my students to learn that there is more to music than what they hear. As music produces these strong emotions, I would like for the unit to heighten their awareness and give them ideas of how music not only influences themselves, but others as well.

In writing this unit, I am going to plan it to coincide with my Music Appreciation class. It could also be used in an Art Appreciation class. Using the history of specific musical selections and music's impact on emotions (our emotions and the artists' emotions), discussion of music and related artwork is a unique approach to the study of visual art. For many artists, music helps them reach their deepest feelings and their philosophies of life and in turn, use those feelings in their work. Then, as we look at the artwork, we are able to see how the music affected them enough to paint how the music was making them feel. I think that being able to interpret music and the feelings that it incurs will help us interpret and understand Twentieth Century visual arts to a fuller extent.

In this unit, I would like the students to listen to various musical selections and gain different perspectives on them. The students should tell the class how it affects them and everyone should listen and take note of each students' comments. They will be asked how they think the music affected each artist emotionally. After listening to each selection, the students will then look at the comparable artwork and they will be asked questions concerning how they think the music influenced the artist in that particular painting.

In order to learn about the influences of music in Twentieth Century artwork, I am using an object analysis approach. Object analysis concentrates on an object from a particular time or culture. We are using both art
and music as the object in this approach. In studying these different objects thoroughly, conclusions about their influences on each other can be reached.

Professor Jules Prown of Yale University has developed a method of studying objects. It engages the average art viewer in a step-by-step approach to grasping an understanding of things. He describes the three major phases of object analysis as description, deduction, and speculation.

In the descriptive phase, the observer is limited to what can be seen in the object itself in its simplest sense. Being objective, you are making a general observation about the art. Description begins with looking at the physical dimensions and moving further to looking for lines, patterns, colors, light, and texture.

The deduction phase uses the information from the first phase. We begin to interact with the object and draw conclusions, constantly asking questions of the image. What just happened or is about to happen? Where is the light source? With our interaction, we engage ourselves intellectually and emotionally. This phase relies on our senses and our responses to the object.

The final phase of object analysis is speculation. In this phase, we are using as much creative imagining as possible. We are reviewing what we have observed in the previous two phases and forming theories and hypotheses based upon them. Through research, we look for validation so our questions can be answered satisfactorily.

As a member of "Art as Evidence: The Interpretation of Objects," I have begun to have a better knowledge of art's purpose and portrayal after using his methods. Using Mr. Prawns' approach, I believe that it is applicable to music as well as art. I believe it can be used effectively as means for better understanding art and the musical cultures which produced these art forms.

**Unit Objectives and Strategies**

As we listen to musical selections in this unit, certain objectives are crucial for achieving our goals. Some objectives are to be long range, others short range. A short range objective with music will be for the students to be able to explore their own responses to sound as they listen to the music as a regular part of the class structure. Various themes and sounds of different music will be introduced for each lesson. The goal is to translate sound into emotion and then into art. In addition, the students will familiarize themselves with a large variety of sounds. Their sensibility to music will hopefully improve.

Some short range music objectives will be:

- Developing the students' sense of rhythm and beat.
- Developing a realization that we are all affected differently by music.
- Developing the ability to talk openly about music and emotion.
- Developing knowledge of musical instruments and how we respond to them.
Some long range music objectives will be:

- Developing an awareness that certain music evokes certain colors and moods.
- Developing intuitive responses to music.
- Developing knowledge of color and how we respond to it.
- Developing an emotional relationship with various music selections.
- Developing a knowledge of the history of specific music and art works.
- Developing knowledge of resemblances that music has to twentieth century art.
- Developing the ability to analyze music using the object analysis method.

After the students familiarize themselves with these objectives, another general objective includes the appreciation and understanding of visual art. This might take the greatest amount of time to achieve. Looking at abstract art of the twentieth century, there are certain objectives there that are crucial for achieving our goals. We again have short range objectives as well as long range objectives.

Some short range visual art objectives will be:

- Developing immediate responses describing the artwork (color, shape, line).
- Developing the ability to talk openly about art and emotion.
- Developing the realization that we have different reactions to visual art.

Some long range visual art objectives will be:

- Developing the ability to make deductions about art.
- Developing the ability to make speculations about art.
- Developing an awareness that certain artwork evokes certain colors and moods.
- Developing the ability to imagine and understand what the artist is feeling.
- Developing the ability to analyze art through the object analysis method.
In this unit my students will:

- collectively use specific works of art with specific pieces of music to study their relationship to each other.
- listen to selected music pieces and discuss personal emotional relations.
- receive background information on the artist related to that specific artwork.
- discuss what the artists’ emotions might be as they view the artwork.
- look at the artwork and talk about what they see in it.

What can the students say about the artist? They will develop these abilities through the aforementioned methods of description, deduction, and speculation.

For the description portion, the students will describe the artwork and they will listen to the related music and describe it. As music is different, they will describe the composition, what kind of piece it is (full orchestra, string orchestra, chamber group, jazz ensemble, etc.) and its genre. They will notice the instruments in the pieces and the context in which they are played (i.e. How many solo lines and how many group solo lines? Who are playing the melodies high pitched or low pitched instruments?)

Using deduction, the students will make deductions based on the object as they perceive it physically and functionally. With the music, they will make deductions based on the object as they perceive it aurally and functionally. Deduction involves three steps: sensory engagement, intellectual engagement, and emotional response.

Sensory engagement allows the viewer and listener to imagine what he/she would see, hear, smell, taste, and feel in the artwork. (Sensory engagement is not possible for music. As we are not visually looking at music, it makes it impossible to engage our senses into what we are not seeing.)

Intellectual engagement allows us to pose and answer questions such as:

- What is the music telling you?
- Is the pitch high or low?
- Is it fast or slow?
- What is the timbre or mood of the instruments?
- Are the instruments playing alone or together?
- What colors do you hear?
- What lines do you see? Are they horizontal (underlying beat, tempo)? Vertical (stresses on the first beat of each measure)? Diagonal? i.e. instrumental lines Do they go up in volume without coming down or vice versa?
- Do the instruments play a part of the melody only to pass it off to another instrument?
- What kind of spacing is there between instruments?
The third step asks the viewers and listeners for their emotional response. As this is important in art, it is especially important when listening to music. It is not uncommon to realize that these responses will be widely shared by all students participating. A particular artwork or piece of music may trigger joy, fright, awe, perturbation, revulsion, indifference, curiosity, or other responses that can be quite subtly distinguished. They point to specific insights. We will see how the students relate separately to the paintings and the music.

The final step is speculation. The students attempt to speculate about the culture that produced the artwork and the music. Using the information developing from the prior two methods, the first step is to form hypotheses. Summing up what has been learned, students develop theories explaining the various effects observed and felt. With respect to the theories they come up with, I believe that quite different questions from classmates might arise at this point. The students will then back up their theories to answer these questions. The answers will reflect the artist's articulation of beliefs. At this point, the students will have discovered unique viewpoints of the materials being studied and will have a heightened awareness of not only artwork, but music as well.

**Classroom Activities**

**Lesson 1:**

**Artist:** Arthur G. Dove (1880-1946)

**Music:** George Gershwin (1898-1937) "Rhapsody in Blue"

**Works to be studied:**

- Dove's "Rhapsody in Blue, Part I George Gershwin" (1927) and "Rhapsody in Blue, Part II George Gershwin" (1927)
- Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" (1924)

**Background Information**
Rhapsody in Blue was a landmark in American musical history. Commissioned by Paul Whiteman in 1924, the Rhapsody symbolized the serious ambitions of jazz musicians and composers. In composing this work, Gershwin welcomed the opportunity to expand both the possibilities and the audience for jazz:

There had been so much chatter about the limitations of jazz, not to speak of the manifest misunderstandings of its function. Jazz, they said, had to be in strict time. It had to cling to dance rhythms. I resolved, if possible, to kill that misconception with one sturdy blow. Inspired by this aim, I set to work composing with unwonted rapidity. No set plan was in my mind no structure to which my music would conform. The rhapsody, as you see, began as a purpose, not a plan (Zilczer, 363).

The premiere on February 12, 1924, created a sensation. The concert not only established Gershwin as a serious composer, it also elevated jazz from the local clubs to the concert hall.

Arthur Dove, one of the many thousands who listened to Gershwin’s music, produced two little-known works a collage and an oil painting based on Gershwin’s jazz rhapsody. Dove derived constant inspiration from music. He had become much interested in the melodies coming over the radio. Experimenting with sounds, he had worked out his shorthand system that recorded sounds as music does on a scale.

Dove was so interested in relating line to music that he worked out his own method of recording musical sound in a long vertical form similar to ticker-tape. This was a score for written music...not a painted interpretation of it. The linear paintings were related to these musical transcriptions and had linear patterns similar to Kandinsky (Zilczer, 362).

The musical scales were used vertically and the sounds were written by movements that were linear instead of notes. These musical pieces were expressed in terms of color, as music is expressed in terms of sound. Dove was convinced that abstract painting could attain an emotive power comparable to that of music: “anybody should be able to feel a certain state and express it in terms of pain or music...Art is nearer to music, not the music of the ears, just the music of the eyes.” Dove repeatedly combined specific allusions to music into his abstract compositions. Eventually his exploration of musical analogy in abstract painting attracted him to the most popular and distinctly American style of contemporary music jazz. From the start, the paintings were linked intimately to the music that had inspired them.

Listening and studying "Rhapsody in Blue" by George Gershwin through Object Analysis

Using description, we hear that it is a jazz ensemble with solo piano. It is about 10-11 minutes in length. How many solo lines do we hear? How many group solo lines? Who are playing the melodies soloist, high pitched or low pitched instruments?

With deduction, we feel the rhythms of the piece. We begin to sense ourselves with an emotion of sorts. How is it making us feel? What kind of effect is it going to have on us? We hear the instrumentalists reacting to each other, particularly the pianist with the other musicians. Staccato lines jump around in a rhythm which suggests direction, yet the rhythm is quite turbulent. In parts the band responds with biting sarcasm. Elliptical shapes and sharp wavelike lines rise up and down in a vertical pattern. Since the piece is based on music that we are familiar with, there is a lively sense of recognition after we make the connections. The composition has lines that are broken and choppy and also has some sweeping lines. The melody of the piece soars in and out of the choppy lines.

Finishing with speculation, we can assess that jazz is really a combination of a little ragtime, the blues,
classicism, and spirituals. It is a notated work of improvisation and rhythm. It has moments of sounding exact rhythmically and harmonically, moving to moments of sounding improvised. While the music is written out, it is written with flourishes and polyrhythms that might indicate a feel for improvisation. At times it throws us off by combining jazz and classical. However, it is a piece that revolves around combining them both. In a couple words, this is a perfect realization of the work brash and egotistical just the impression we would expect from such a composer daring enough to combine jazz and the classics.

Follow-Up Questions

1. Is the pace of the music slow or fast? What kind of place does it suggest?

2. It the mood agitated, mellow or cool? With those answers, do we feel the artist might use more horizontals or verticals?

3. Can you visualize a color to the sounds you hear? What do you feel the artist will be visualizing?

4. Are the tones you hear light, dark or murky? Do you think that will influence the artists brush stroke (smooth or rough)?

5. Where is the music best sensed in color, line, or composition?

6. After listening to the music, what can we tell about the art?

7. What sounds might inspire the painting?

Studying Dove's “Rhapsody in Blue, Part I George Gershwin” through Object Analysis

We begin to look at Dove’s first painting influenced by Gershwin. Using description, we see a collage of oil and metallic paint on aluminum with a clock spring. The art measures 11 3/4 x 9 3/4. We see in the collage panel Rhapsody in Blue, Part I, a field of light-blue and turquoise pigment is inflected with strands of short black lines. Within these colors, we see splotches of yellow, pink, and maroon which animate the surface and enrich the predominantly light-blue hues of the painted collage. An area of deep violet in the lower portion of the panel arrests the downward movement of the vertical axes created by three major intervals of long meandering lines.

Some questions to ask involving description:

- What colors are obvious in the art?
- What forms do we see?
- What kind of lines do we see?
- How many dimensions?
- What is the texture of the art?
- What designs or motifs do we see if any?
Using deduction, we might be able to look at the painting as it represents the actual music with the soloist. The aluminum panel and metallic paint might give a certain brilliance to the sound of the music. The lines and bends in the paint could demonstrate the melodies in the music. Where does the music begin and end in the painting?

Some questions to ask involving deduction:

- What is the relation between the depicted art and our world?
- Where are we positioned in the art and what role, if any, might we play?
- How would we enter the pictorial space?
- What happened prior to the painting and what may happen next?
- What might our reaction be to the painting?
- What feelings does this abstract art leave me with?
- What role does the broken clock spring represent?
- Can we see that this might be improvisational art mixed with mechanistic allusions eluding to Gershwin's jazz rhapsody?

Using speculation, we can guess that the lines in this painting could achieve an improvisational freedom closely related to musical melody. We might see that from that point on, the artwork is expressed in terms of color as music is in terms of sound. With the aluminum panel and metallic paint, Dove was perhaps using these materials to evoke the machine aesthetic seeing that the uncoiled clock spring is indeed the central element of in the artwork.

Some questions to ask involving speculation:

- What time of day is it?
- What is the season of the year?
- What do you imagine happening in this picture?
- What do you feel the artist was depicting?
- What ideas does it leave you with?
- What do you perceive this picture to interpret?
Lesson 2:

Artist: Jackson Pollock

Music: Jackson Pollock Jazz CD

This is a compilation CD of jazz and swing music that can be used repeatedly in the lesson plan. It provides a various mix of performers and musical styles.

Works to be studied:

Pollock's "Autumn Rhythm" (1950)

Musical selections by Coleman Hawkins

Background Information

The painter Lee Krasner once remarked that Jackson Pollock "would get into grooves of listening to his jazz records not just for days day and night, day and night for three days running, until you thought you would climb the roof!...Jazz? He thought it was the only other really creative thing that was happening in this country." As Pollock's wife, Krasner could of course speak with special expertise. With this information, we see that there might be some correlation between works produced by Pollock and certain jazz structures. More recently, there have been propositions that the basic qualities in Pollock's paintings improvisation, directness, elements of chance and accident largely derive from a jazz aesthetic (Mandeles, 140). For Pollock, jazz music in its different forms, served as a way of executing the unconscious, and convoking spontaneous invention in his artwork.

Pollock didn't want people to analyze his art or look for recognizable figures or scenes. "I think it should be enjoyed," he said, "just as music is enjoyed" (Mandeles, 140). This jazz music that accompanied Pollock's improvising on a horizontal canvas was hot, powerful, spontaneous, and penetratingly emotional. For example, without losing sight of chord structure, Coltrane and his fellow musicians would develop long improvisatory solos; this recognizable aural imagery continued to nourish Pollock's intensely worked paintings. It is not surprising that given Coltrane's improvisations, the song's interpretation was still understood by the lyrical interpretation and its extended length and flow. Even though the lines were improvised on and given freedom by the soloists, the melodies all centralized around a certain chordal structure, ending in the same place each time. In that respect, that is why the interpretation was still understood. A similar effect was achieved in Pollock's paintings his use of large-scale canvases evolved with open, flowing lines, shown by his pouring technique. What is drawn together in Pollock's works is an essential parallel between the structural principles of his painting and those of jazz. Both have structure and at times have freedom, but they end in the appropriate place with the other instruments or colors.

Listening and studying "Boff Boff (Mop Mop)" by Coleman Hawkins and the Leonard Feather's All Stars

Using description, we listen to Coleman Hawkins play his tenor saxophone. He has a very dark mellow sound. The piece is played by Hawkins and a jazz ensemble, alternating solo lines between Hawkins and others in the ensemble. It is a little more than three minutes in length.

Using deduction, we hear a theme that the ensemble opens the piece with. There is a flexible but continuous pulse. We notice melodic runs in the solo piano as well as Hawkins' horn, along with sudden bursts and rich-
toned plummets. He improvises the melody using varieties of pitch and intensity in short and extended phrases, with sudden runs and bursts. To close the piece, we hear the same solo theme that opened the piece. As jazz music is improvised, it becomes chaotic at times. Perhaps at this point, after listening, we might feel uncertainty and confusion as to who is soloing and what instruments are playing.

Finishing with speculation, we can assess that Hawkins breaks down the formal architecture of representational or harmonic improvisation. It marks a shift in emphasis from object to process, permitting sound to function as a carefully orchestrated but individual aural element.

Questions

1. Is the pace of the music slow or fast? What kind of place does it suggest?
2. Is the mood agitated, mellow or cool? With those answers, do we feel the artist might use more horizontals or verticals?
3. Can you visualize a color to the sounds you hear? What do you feel the artist will be visualizing?
4. Are the tones you hear light, dark or murky? Do you think that will influence the artists brush stroke (smooth or rough)?
5. Where is the music best sensed in color, line, or composition?
6. After listening to the music, what can we tell about the art?
7. What sounds might inspire the painting?

Studying Pollock’s “Autumn Rhythm”

Using description, we see oil on canvas. The size is 105 x 207”. It contains autumn colors brown, oranges, and black.

Some questions to ask involving description:

• What colors are obvious in the art?
• What forms do we see?
• What kind of lines do we see?
• How many dimensions?
• What is the texture of the art?
• What designs or motifs do we see if any?
With deduction, we see a variety of drips, spatters and pouring of paint on the canvas. There are many horizontal lines. There are also many wide arcing lines.

Some questions to ask involving deduction:

• What is the relation between the depicted art and our world?
• Where are we positioned in the art and what role, if any, might we play?
• How would we enter the pictorial space?
• What happened prior to the painting and what may happen next?
• What might our reaction be to the painting?
• How does it make us feel?

Finally, by speculation, we can assume that Pollock was spontaneous in his artwork, painting similarly to what he heard composed and performed in jazz music. The breakdown of the artwork shows that while there is a formal architecture, his work embodies a harmonic improvisation. It combines a visual element with an audible element. His work expresses an intense energy like jazz music does. You begin to see how he uses paint as if it were highly charged with subatomic particles by the splatters and pours, the lines and the colors. It exemplifies the careful balance between accident and control that characterizes both his art and the important jazz of the period.

Some questions to ask involving speculation:

• What do you imagine happening in this picture?
• What do you feel the artist was depicting?
• What ideas does it leave you with?
• What do you perceive this picture to interpret?

Lesson 3:

Artist: Stuart Davis

Music: Jackson Pollock Jazz CD

Works to be studied:

Davis' "Swing Landscape"

Musical selections: Count Basie and His Orchestra
Background Information

Stuart Davis was born in Philadelphia in 1894. He grew up in an artistic environment and as he grew older, appreciated the art value of music, especially jazz. Stuart Davis viewed technological developments such as radio as forces which changed the fundamental experience of American life. He believed that visual art needed to change in style in order to reflect the audible art brought by modern twentieth century media. Davis celebrates jazz by characterizing a new, jazz-inspired visual language a method of examining and communicating modern American life. He analyzed the significance and role of commercial jazz in American culture.

By the Swing Era, jazz was America's most popular musical genre. The technological intervention of the recording industry had brought jazz to a greater number of Americans by immortalizing it on records and broadcasting it through the radio. These technologies made jazz a universal, pervasive part of the American landscape. Davis found that his paintings could not help being influenced by the jazz sensibility of American culture. He wrote:

...I have always liked hot music. There's something wrong with any American who doesn't. But I never realized that it was influencing my work until one day I put on a favorite record and listened to it while I was looking at a painting I had just finished. Then I got a funny feeling. If I looked, or if I listened, there was no shifting of attention. It seemed to amount to the same thing like twins, a kinship. After that, for a long time, I played records while I painted (Kelder 12).

Davis' work concentrated on the technological communication (recording and broadcasting) of jazz, rather than on creation of jazz music itself. It no longer reflected the sensibilities of the African-American culture that created it. The broadcasting of jazz caused a shift in reality of all Americans. It was Davis who employed this method of envisioning reality in 1938's "Swing Landscape."

Listening and studying "One O'Clock Jump"

Using description, we listen to Count Basie and his Orchestra solos between piano to start, sax, trombone, and trumpet. There is a continuous beat and rhythm underlying the ensemble, best heard by drumset and bass. It is about three minutes in length.

Using deduction, we hear a theme that opens the piece. There is a continuous pulse that keeps the piece moving right along. The melody is introduced and moves from one instrument to another, incorporating improvisation. There are other instruments that back up the soloists. They provide the background chord progressions. What instruments are heard? What sounds do they produce brilliant, dull, focused, etc.? What notes bend? Where do we hear melismatic lines?

Following up with speculation, we can assess that swing music is music that is meant to be danced to. It is a constant piece of music offering no changes in rhythm or tempo. The music combines jazz with dance. It offers the harmonies and improvisations as jazz does, with a more emphasized rhythm underneath it, indicating its dance qualities.

Questions

1. Is the pace of the music slow or fast? What kind of place does it suggest?
2. Is the mood agitated, mellow or cool? With those answers, do we feel the artist might use more horizontals or verticals?
3. Can you visualize a color to the sounds you hear? What do you feel the artist will be visualizing?
4. Are the tones you hear light, dark or murky? Do you think that will influence the artists' brush stroke (smooth or rough)?
5. Where is the music best sensed in color, line, or composition?
6. After listening to the music, what can we tell about the art?
7. What sounds might inspire the painting?

Observing Davis' "Swing Landscape"

Using description, we see a colorful and vibrant painting. It is oil on canvas, 86 3/4 x 172 7/8 inches. There are many blues in this painting. We see various geometric forms. There is a pair of sunglasses and a metronome in the bottom left corner.

Some questions to ask involving description:

- What colors are obvious in the art?
- What forms do we see?
- What kind of lines do we see?
- How many dimensions?
- What is the texture of the art?
- What designs or motifs do we see if any?

With deduction, we might feel that the art is free-spirited, improvisatory, or apparently a non-specific composition. It has a full conglomerate of color, snappy floating shapes, staccato patterns, and crisp drawings.

Some questions to ask involving deduction:
• What is the relation between the depicted art and our world?
• Where are we positioned in the art and what role, if any, might we play?
• How would we enter the pictorial space?
• What happened prior to the painting and what may happen next?
• What might our reaction be to the painting?
• How does it make us feel?

Finally, using speculation, we see this work of art displaying a type of figurative depiction, using different symbols, sources, and content. The colors give a feeling of jazz with the use of blues and cool colors. The use of warm colors perhaps shows the unpredictability of jazz, as well as the vibrancy of that music form. This painting represents the feeling of jazz, even though it might not be evident at first glance. The tension between apparently conflicting themes of warped harmonies and dissonances of jazz add energy to the picture. The fact that the music is incredibly vibrant and unpredictable is quite noticeable.

Some questions to ask involving speculation:

• What time of day is it?
• What is the season of the year?
• What do you imagine happening in this picture?
• What do you feel the artist was depicting?
• What ideas does it leave you with?
• What do you perceive this picture to interpret?

Teaching Materials

Slides or color copies of specific artworks can be printed off various websites.

Davis' Swing Landscape can be found at the following websites:
Dove's *Rhapsody in Blue, Part 1* can be found at:

Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm* can be found at:
http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanvisions/gallery/g_7.3.autumn.html

Music CD's can be purchased through any classical music venue.

**Teacher Bibliography**


This explains the methodology I used for each piece of music and art.

**Jackson Pollock**


This article provides the most information on comparing his work with jazz music.


This book provides excellent background information and a deeper look into other works of his.

**Stuart Davis**


This is a good book for history on Davis many actual conversations noted in book.

**Arthur Dove**


Again, excellent reading material for the background and life of Dove.


This article gives an excellent view of Dove's response to Gershwin's music.