

7-10-2008

Kandinsky's Dissonance and a Schoenbergian View of *Composition VI*

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Kandinsky's Dissonance and a Schoenbergian View of *Composition VI*

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Date of Approval:
July 10, 2008

Keywords: music, abstraction, painting, structure, theory

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ABSTRACT

In this study, I clarify the relationship between Wassily Kandinsky's move towards abstraction in painting and his encounters with the music and theory of Arnold Schoenberg. Prior studies have concentrated on the similarities in their theories, but I examine Kandinsky idiosyncratic understanding of Schoenbergian concepts and the evolution of his engagement with music theory over the period of 1909 to 1914. I identify dissonance as the aspect of Schoenberg's music and theory that Kandinsky found most relevant to his own developing compositional theory for abstract painting. In music, dissonance is commonly considered to be combinations of tones that sound harsh or discordant. Schoenberg denied the traditional opposition between consonance (conventionally pleasing sounds) and dissonance and advocated, at this stage of his career, for the use of any combination or progression of notes as long as it served the needs of a specific composition. Similarly, Kandinsky described his compositional strategies for abstract painting as the arrangement of colors and forms in the specific context of an individual work, with the "principle of dissonance" as a guide. Kandinsky's "principle of dissonance" was a compositional structure consisting of a multitude of oppositions and contrasts of colors and forms, producing disorienting and conflicting effects, that Kandinsky held in dynamic tension across the whole painting to produce a

unifying equilibrium. This “principle of dissonance” was not completely congruent, in its specific compositional procedures, with the meaning and use of dissonance in either the conventional music theory of the period or in Schoenberg’s alternate conception of dissonance. However, Schoenberg’s arguments for the acceptability of unresolved dissonances and what Kandinsky perceived as an “antilogical” compositional structure bolstered Kandinsky’s assertions that these principles could support legitimate compositional strategies for his abstract painting. Finally, I analyze Kandinsky’s account of the creation of his 1913 *Composition VI* and how his description bears the traces of his engagement with Schoenberg. Kandinsky details a structure for *Composition VI* that, comparable to his understanding of Schoenberg’s work, is not immediately obvious, but in which any combination of forms can be juxtaposed to create a unifying whole in the context of the specific work.

Introduction

A dynamic engagement between music and the visual arts was a critical factor in the emergence of abstraction in early 20th century art in general,¹ and particularly in the theoretical and artistic developments of Wassily Kandinsky as he moved towards painting that would not refer to objects as they appear in the visible world. What painting lacked, and what Kandinsky described as its most critical need if it was to move into the realm of abstraction, was a compositional theory comparable to the theory of harmony in music.²

Kandinsky's encounters with the music and theory of Arnold Schoenberg form a crucial juncture in his exploration of music theory as a model for such a compositional theory for abstract painting. The parallels between the works of Kandinsky and Schoenberg have been addressed frequently in recent art historical literature with prior

¹ See Judith Zilczer, "Music for the Eyes: Abstract Painting and Light Art," in Kerry Brougher, Jeremy Strick, Ari Wiseman and Judith Zilczer, *Visual Music: Synaesthesia in Art and Music Since 1900* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2005); Javier Arnaldo, "Musical Analogies" in *Analogías musicales: Kandinsky y sus contemporáneos* (Madrid: Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisiz, 2003) and Musée d'Orsay, *Aux origines de l'abstraction: 1800-1914: Musée d'Orsay, 3 novembre 2003 – 22 février 2004* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2003) for recent reviews of the general use of musical analogy in early abstraction.

² See Kandinsky's letters to Schoenberg dated 9 April 1911 and 22 August 1912 in Jelena Hahl-Koch (ed.), John C. Crawford (trans.), *Arnold Schoenberg – Wassily Kandinsky, Letters, Pictures and Documents* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1984), 27-28, 56-58. Hereafter, *Schoenberg-Kandinsky Letters*. There were, of course, theories addressing methods of composition in the visual arts dating back to Alberti. Kandinsky was looking for a certain type of compositional theory, similar to that of music, that he thought would be useful for abstract painting – one suitable not for the arrangement of objects, but the ordering of the elements of painting itself. For a review of compositional theories for painting, and a discussion of their relation to Kandinsky see Hubert Locher, "Towards a Science of Art: the Concept of 'Pure Composition' in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Art Theory," in Paul Taylor, Ed., *Pictorial Composition from Medieval to Modern Art* (London: Warburg Institute, 2000), p. 217-251. Also see a discussion of Kandinsky's concept of composition and compositional theory in Felix Thürlemann's essay on a previously unpublished manuscript in "Wer sehen kann, wird das Richtige fühlen: Kandinskys Entwürfe zu einer Kompositionslehre" in Helmut Friedel, Gabriele Münter and Johannes Eichner-Stiftung Eds., *Wassily Kandinsky: Gesammelte Schriften 1889-1916* (Munich: Prestel, 2007).

studies typically concentrating on the similarities in their theories.³ I contend that the complexity of the relationships between the artists' theory and works can not be fully revealed in examinations that focus on just the convergence of their ideas. First, Kandinsky's engagement with musical concepts develops over the course of his writings during the period from 1909 to 1914, encompassing periods both before and after his encounters with Schoenberg. Secondly, it is critically important to consider divergences in Kandinsky and Schoenberg's treatment of musical concepts in their respective theories.⁴ Words and concepts used to describe musical phenomena cannot be directly and identically applied to the practice of painting and there are inherent conceptual slippages when terms from one realm are used in the other. In addition, given

³ Peter Vergo, "Music and Abstract Painting: Kandinsky, Goethe and Schoenberg," in Michael Compton, (ed.), *Towards a New Art: Essays on the Background to Abstract Art 1910-12* (London: The Tate Gallery, 1980) provides an analysis of the extent of Kandinsky's use of musical analogy and the limits of the application of synaesthetic ideas to his art. James Leggio, "Kandinsky, Schoenberg, and the Music of the Spheres" in James Leggio (ed.), *Music and Modern Art* (New York: Routledge, 2002) examines correspondences between Schoenberg's theories on dissonance and Kandinsky's writings, but concentrates on their application in his works of the 1920s. Magdalena Dabrowski, "Kandinsky and Schoenberg: Abstraction as a Visual Metaphor of Emancipated Dissonance," in Esther da Costa Meyer and Fred Wasserman (eds.) *Schoenberg, Kandinsky, and the Blue Rider* (New York: The Jewish Museum, 2003) analyzes possible expressions of dissonance in works from a wide range of periods in the artist's production. Klaus Kropfner, "Latent Structural Power versus the Dissolution of Artistic Material in the Works of Kandinsky and Schönberg," in Konrad Boehmer (ed.), *Schönberg and Kandinsky: An Historic Encounter* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997) provides an informative discussion of hidden structure in Schoenberg and Kandinsky's work. See Walter Frisch, "Convergences: Music and the Visual Arts," in Walter Frisch, *German Modernism: Music and the Arts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) for a discussion of Kandinsky and Schoenberg using Adorno's convergences as a model for their relationship. The book as a whole also provides an excellent background for the milieu in which Kandinsky's exploration of musical concepts and abstract painting developed.

⁴The difficulties in interartistic comparison and need to acknowledge relations beyond convergence are addressed in the literature on the relations between word and image. For example see W.J.T. Mitchell, "Beyond Comparison: Picture, Text and Method" in W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 83-107, and his discussions of the importance of recognizing the "whole ensemble of relations between media," difference as important as similarity (89-90) and interartistic juncture as "a site of dialectical tension, slippage, and transformation" (106). For an additional caution against metaphorical slippages and the tendency to "conflate different techniques in order to arrive at synonymity, rather than identify...differences" (3) and a review of a range of practices for interartistic comparison, see the Introduction to Peter Collier and Robert Lethbridge, Eds., *Artistic Relations: Literature and the Visual Arts in Nineteenth-Century France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 1-12.

Kandinsky's self-reported limitations in his understanding of music theory, it follows that his understanding of musical concepts would not be entirely congruent with that of Schoenberg. In fact, I suggest that Schoenberg's theory and music can help us to understand some aspects of Kandinsky's use of musical concepts, but in significant ways the painter's understanding of these concepts diverges from their treatment in Schoenberg's theory of harmony and in the compositional system that was dominant in music at the time. It is only in appreciating Kandinsky's idiosyncratic understanding of musical concepts that we can begin to evaluate their significance for comprehending his theory of harmony for painting and for viewing the structure of his abstract painting.

In this study I examine the relationship of concepts associated with Schoenberg's music and theory to Kandinsky's employment of similar ideas in the development of his compositional theory for abstract painting. I identify and explain the specific aspects of Schoenberg's music and theory that Kandinsky noted as being most relevant to his own search for a theory of harmony in painting. I investigate Kandinsky's employment and transformation of similar concepts in his theoretical writings from 1909 to 1914 and demonstrate how Kandinsky's idiosyncratic understanding of musical concepts helps to clarify the structure he proposes for his abstract paintings. Finally, I examine the ways in which Kandinsky's account of the creation of his 1913 *Composition VI* bears the traces of his engagement with Schoenberg and how Kandinsky's understanding of Schoenberg's music and theory helps to explain the compositional structure of *Composition VI* – a structure that is not immediately obvious, but can be seen by contemplating the juxtapositions of lines and colors in the finished work.

Relationship between the Arts

Kandinsky himself makes the case for the difficulty in establishing connections between the arts. Responding to misunderstandings of his earlier writings, Kandinsky emphatically states in a 1914 lecture: “I do not want to paint music.”⁵ He indicates that this should have been clear from a careful reading of *On the Spiritual in Art*. In this, his major pre-war theoretical treatise, he states that “the different arts have set forth on the path of saying what they are best able to say, through means that are peculiar to each.” He describes a common “struggle toward the nonnaturalistic, the abstract, toward inner nature” in all the arts.⁶ Kandinsky suggests that as part of this process, artists turn toward an examination of their own materials and there follows a natural comparison with the elements of the other arts. He then asserts that “the richest lessons are to be learned from music” as it “has for several centuries been the art that uses its resources not to represent natural appearances, but to express the inner life of the artist and to create a unique life of musical tones.” The artist who does not wish to imitate natural appearances is envious of the abilities of music to express the inner world and “may turn toward it and try to find the same means in his own art.” Kandinsky attributes the contemporary “search for rhythm in painting, for mathematical, abstract construction, the value placed today on the repetition of color-tones, the way colors are set in motion, etc.” to such attempts to pursue, in painting, the expressive capabilities of music (*OSA*, 154). However, he adds a cautionary note, indicating that comparison between the arts

⁵ Wassily Kandinsky, “Cologne Lecture,” in Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (eds.) *Kandinsky Complete Writings on Art* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1994), 400.

⁶ Wassily Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, in Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (eds.) *Kandinsky Complete Writings on Art* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1994), 153. Hereafter cited in text with the abbreviation *OSA*.

can only be successful and victorious if not merely the external, but also the principles are learned. I.e., one art has to learn from another how it tackles its own materials and, having learned this, use in principle the materials peculiar to itself in a similar way, i.e., according to the principle that belongs to itself alone. (OSA ,154)

Kandinsky specifically acknowledges that painting cannot achieve the same results as music and differentiates the domains of each. For example, while music has the resource of extension in time, painting “can in an instant present the spectator with the entire content of the work, which music is unable to do.” Kandinsky does not propose that painting import, unaltered, the methods of music, but instead asserts that painting should “examine its forces and its materials...as music has long since done, and to attempt to use these materials and forces in a *purely painterly way* for the purpose of creation.”⁷ In the course of his theorizing on the possibilities for abstraction in painting, Kandinsky examines the principles of music and finds specific concepts, particularly in the music and theory of Schoenberg, that assist him in thinking about his own art.

Context for Kandinsky’s Encounter with Schoenberg

Before moving to a discussion of Kandinsky’s encounters with Schoenberg’s music and theory, I would first like to set the context for their initial contact in January 1911 by clarifying the moment in their respective careers at which the meeting took place and examining Kandinsky’s prior knowledge of musical concepts and theory.

Before their initial contact, Kandinsky and Schoenberg had written the bulk of their major theoretical treatises of this period, and both were already at transitional points in their artistic careers. Many of the similarities in their works represent a convergence of ideas that had been developed separately and thus suggestions regarding Schoenberg’s

⁷ OSA, 155. Emphasis mine.

impact on Kandinsky should be made with appropriate caution. Although not published until December 1911, the substantial portion of Kandinsky's *On the Spiritual in Art* was completed by 1909. At the time of his encounter with Schoenberg, Kandinsky had already incorporated musical concepts into his writings about the possibilities for abstraction in art and was working towards greater abstraction in his paintings, but had not yet achieved his full-fledged abstract style.⁸ Schoenberg's *Theory of Harmony* was also published in 1911, although it was written in the summer of 1910. This textbook, and the music Kandinsky heard at a January 1911 concert to be discussed below, were produced during a time when Schoenberg was abandoning the dominant compositional procedures of the time. Later, he would go on to develop a new compositional system (the 12-tone system), but the kind of works to which Kandinsky responded did not follow the rules of any established compositional system.⁹

Although Kandinsky's musical background provided him some basis for understanding Schoenberg's works and theories, his understanding of music theory was limited. Kandinsky had some training in music, as he played the cello from childhood and was proficient enough to play for gatherings of his friends, but he did not achieve professional standards.¹⁰ Such training would have provided him with at least a rudimentary understanding of the dominant compositional system of the time. Kandinsky

⁸ See Reinhard Zimmermann, "Early Imprints and Influences" in Hartwig Fischer and Sean Rainbird (eds.), *Kandinsky: The Path to Abstraction* (London: Tate Publishing, 2006), 36, 39, 40, 42.

⁹ These works represent a specific stage in Schoenberg's musical development. As I will discuss below, they are generally considered to belong to his atonal period. As they have different theoretical bases, it is important to distinguish these works from Schoenberg's early tonal works and his later development of 12 tone serialism. I will examine only the music which Kandinsky is known to have heard and the theory relevant to it. For an overview of Schoenberg's musical development, see Walter B. Bailey, *The Arnold Schoenberg Companion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998).

¹⁰ Jelena Hahl-Koch, "Stages of the Friendship" in Jelena Hahl-Koch (ed.), John C. Crawford (trans.), *Arnold Schoenberg – Wassily Kandinsky, Letters, Pictures and Documents* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1984), 135.

also showed familiarity with the work and compositional methods of a number of prominent composers, particularly Wagner and Debussy, in sections of *On the Spiritual in Art* completed by 1909.¹¹ However, Kandinsky specifically acknowledged in correspondence with Schoenberg that he had only a superficial grasp of music theory.¹² As I will discuss in greater detail below, Kandinsky did not study Schoenberg's theory in any depth until well after their initial encounter in 1911. He seems to have been comfortable with only certain broad concepts and principles derived from music theory in general and Schoenberg's theory in particular.

Kandinsky's Response to Schoenberg's Music

One of the most crucial junctures between Kandinsky and Schoenberg's music occurred at a concert in Munich on January 2, 1911. This performance included the Second String Quartet, Op. 10 and Three Piano Pieces, Op. 11, works that showcased Schoenberg's understanding and use of dissonance during his period of "free atonality," and marked Kandinsky's first direct exposure to Schoenberg's model. I will discuss Schoenberg's understanding and use of dissonance in these compositions in more detail below. Here it is sufficient to be aware that these pieces mark a change in compositional structure, particularly in the treatment of harmony, from Schoenberg's earlier works and from the body of music with which the audience would have been familiar. Particularly striking and informative is Kandinsky's immediately positive response to Schoenberg's music. Although he did not yet personally know the composer, Kandinsky sent him a

¹¹ Dating of portions of *OSA* to the German typescript and subsequent versions are as noted in Lindsay and Vergo, *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, 1994. See *OSA* p. 148 for Kandinsky's discussion of Wagner's use of *leitmotiv* and Debussy's impressionism.

¹² Hahl-Koch, *Schoenberg-Kandinsky Letters*, 28.

letter expressing his appreciation for the concert and his perception of their similar strivings for a “new” harmony.¹³

Such a response to Schoenberg’s music and this concert in particular was unusual and notable. As a matter of fact, contemporary accounts of this concert reported mixed reactions. A review from the *Allgemeine-Musik-Zeitung* indicated that the concert left “no impression but of – to put it mildly – pointless experimentation. There was no shortage of applause, but there was plenty of laughter and cursing as well.”¹⁴ Commenting specifically on the Second String Quartet, critic Otto Keller wrote that “[w]e detect no treatment of thoughts or motifs, one patch follows another without rules, and we certainly don’t get a sense of beginning, middle, or end, and the whole thing stops suddenly, with only God or the composer knowing why.”¹⁵ He described the Three Piano Pieces as “aimless wanderings on the keys with nothing to connect them.” Critic Arthur Hahn described the Second String Quartet as “seriously muddled.” He elaborated on the Three Piano Pieces:

The almost hair-raising cacophonies seemed almost too much even for those who up until now had followed the musical revelations of Schoenberg’s *weltschmerz* with a straight face. One can only shake one’s head in astonishment at the cheek of this sort of thing being taken for what has always been understood as music. These same ‘sound effects’ gave rise to accidental convergence of completely random notes. At times coincidence itself might lead to tonal combinations that could sound harmonic to our ears. Schoenberg however – and this remains the only continuity in his compositions including the piano pieces – deliberately selects only the opposite of what sounds ‘right’ to our ears.¹⁶

¹³ Hahl-Koch, *Schoenberg-Kandinsky Letters*, 21.

¹⁴ Fred Wasserman, “Schoenberg and Kandinsky in Concert,” in Esther da Costa Meyer and Fred Wasserman (Eds.), *Schoenberg, Kandinsky, and the Blue Rider* (New York: The Jewish Museum, 2003), 19.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 20.

¹⁶ *Ibid*.

In contrast to such hostile reactions, Schoenberg's student Karl Linke described the minority of people who accepted Schoenberg's music at the time:

There are people who had only one feeling when they heard this music for the first time: This is what we had thirsted for, this is us exactly, with the ghostly, restless things within us and above us – a release from a torpid sentimentality. This handful of people understood each other so well, without having spoken a word to one another. A stronger language had brought them together.¹⁷

This is the point of contact I wish to emphasize in the relation between Schoenberg's theory and music and Kandinsky's theory and painting. As I have noted above, Schoenberg and Kandinsky had essentially completed the first drafts of their main theoretical manuscripts before they became acquainted. Kandinsky immediately recognized the similarity between Schoenberg's ideas and those he had developed in his own theoretical writings. Beyond this encouraging convergence, Schoenbergian concepts also provided Kandinsky with an expanded vocabulary for discussing his abstract art.

Kandinsky's engagement with Schoenberg's ideas was not a wholesale appropriation of musical concepts with direct application to painting. Instead, Kandinsky borrowed some aspects of Schoenberg's compositional theories, but transformed them and employed musical terminology idiosyncratically when expounding on his compositional theories for abstract painting. I suggest that Kandinsky's explorations of

¹⁷ Karl Linke "As Introduction," in *Arnold Schönberg* (1912), as translated by Barbara Z. Schoenberg and published in Walter Frisch (ed.), *Schoenberg and His World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 208. Kandinsky also contributed an essay on Schoenberg's paintings to this *Festschrift* (see "The Paintings", 238-241). Much of this essay is devoted to a discussion of painting as "an external expression of an inner impression in painted form" (239). Kandinsky asserts that Schoenberg's "inner wish...speaks" (240) in his painting as it does in his music: "so too in his painting does Schoenberg renounce the superfluous (therefore the harmful), and proceed along a direct path to the essential (therefore to the necessary). He pays no attention to any embellishments and artistic detail." (241). In discussing Schoenberg's paintings, Kandinsky does not make reference to Schoenberg's ideas on dissonance which, as I will discuss in the following pages, were critical in Kandinsky's immediate response to Schoenberg's music and theory and were an important component of the musical concepts Kandinsky used in thinking about and developing a theory of construction for his own painting.

Schoenberg's music and theory helped him to contemplate and convey his ideas about compositional structure for abstract painting. Further, his understanding of Schoenberg's music and theory can help us to achieve a richer understanding of analogous compositional structures in Kandinsky's more abstract paintings of the period.

For a more complete appreciation of Kandinsky's engagement with Schoenbergian concepts, it is critical to understand Schoenberg's music and theory during this period, as well as Kandinsky's comprehension of them. In the following section, I will explain the challenges of Schoenberg's music and theory to conventional musical composition and will identify the aspects of Schoenberg's music and theory which Kandinsky found most congruent with his developing compositional principles for abstract painting.

Schoenberg's Dissonance

What is most striking in the negative reactions of some audience members is their difficulty in making sense of the Second String Quartet and the Three Piano Pieces. As noted above, contemporary critics talked about compositions that seemed without rules, random, based on "aimless wanderings" and in which the composer seemed to select "only the opposite of what sounds 'right' to our ears." If, as Linke described, those who appreciated Schoenberg's music shared a language, these listeners clearly did not comprehend it.

To appreciate the frustration of some audience members and Kandinsky's enthusiastic response to Schoenberg, it is first important to have a basic understanding of the dominant compositional system and Schoenberg's alterations to it. The diatonic tonal system developed in the 17th and 18th centuries and was the dominant method of

composition for most of the works with which the Munich audience would have been familiar. It is comprised of a system of major and minor scales with each scale composed of seven tones. Compositions in this system are written in major or minor keys – they are based around a tonal center, with harmonies generally being formed from certain combinations of the seven related notes in the scale.

The diatonic tonal system has rules regarding which notes can be played together (simultaneity) and which combination of notes should follow each other (progression). One of the primary modes of organization in the diatonic tonal system is the opposition between consonance and dissonance. When notes are played that are part of the chosen scale or “key” for the composition and combined at specified intervals, the result is a restful consonance which can stand on its own. If a note is played which is not one of the notes of the chosen scale, or a combination of notes are played that are not at the specified, acceptable intervals from each other, the result is a sense of clashing sounds known as dissonance. According to the conventions of the diatonic tonal system, such dissonances cannot stand on their own, but must be resolved by a return to consonance, by a return to notes in key. Dissonance serves to create tension and indicates a direction for the music to progress – inevitably, in this system, towards consonance. Musicologist Susan McClary vividly describes the significance of the rules of the diatonic tonal system for its audience.¹⁸ She characterizes the structure consisting of establishment of a key,

¹⁸ Susan McClary provides an excellent account of the conventionality of the tonal system and its cultural stakes in her book *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Clarity* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 2000. See particularly the chapter “What is Tonality?” (p.63-108) in which she describes the establishment of a key, excursion through other keys and return to home as a sort of quest narrative (66), the illusion of cause and effect in tonal composition (67, 88), the desire for closure generated by and delay of gratification taught by movements away from and back to the tonic key (68) and the cultural priorities of “progress, rationality, intelligibility, quests after goals, and the illusion of self-contained autonomy” (68) which supported the development of the diatonic tonal system.

excursion through other keys and return to home as a sort of quest narrative and construes the opposition of consonance and dissonance as providing the illusion of cause and effect. For audiences used to listening to such tonal compositions, the introduction of dissonance in tonal music thus produced a strong desire for closure in the return to consonance.

Such structural rules made compositions that followed them comprehensible to an early 20th century audience. Given a key, listeners would expect certain combinations of notes and a somewhat predictable progression of notes which they would consider acceptable. The diatonic tonal system also prescribed articulatory methods that differentiated a foreground melody from its accompanying harmony and that emphasized salient thematic elements. Tonal compositions progressed according to established patterns of variation and modulation providing a logic through which pieces could be understood. Through the course of the 19th century, composers incorporated an increasing amount of dissonance in their works and prolonged the time from introduction of dissonances until the eventual return to consonance.¹⁹ In the early period of his career, Schoenberg's compositions, while becoming increasingly dissonant, adhered more closely to the prescriptions of this diatonic tonal system. In contrast, Schoenberg's "atonal" works, such as those played at the January 1911 concert, relied on an internal logic which was unique to, and had to be worked out within, each work. The audience could not refer to the logic of the diatonic tonal system to make sense of these compositions.

¹⁹ Richard Wagner, whose music and theory were important for Kandinsky prior to his exposure to Schoenberg, is known for such expanded use of dissonance, although his works remain in an overall tonal context. When discussing the influence of Wagner, Kandinsky does not specifically address dissonance, although this and particularly emancipation of dissonance from its prescribed uses in the diatonic tonal system is the primary focus (in terms of music theory) of Kandinsky's interactions with Schoenberg.

Such departures from established compositional practice, exemplified in Schoenberg's Second String Quartet and Three Piano Pieces played at the 1911 concert, were precisely the aspects that were so striking and appealing to Kandinsky.²⁰ In his first letter to Schoenberg, written January 18, 1911, days after the Munich concert, Kandinsky wrote:

The independent progress through their own destinies, the independent life of the individual voices in your compositions, is exactly what I am trying to find in my paintings...I am certain that our modern harmony is not to be found in the 'geometric' way, but rather in the anti-geometric, antilogical way. And this way is that of 'dissonances in *art*['], in painting, therefore just as much as in music. And 'today's' dissonance in painting and music is merely the consonance of 'tomorrow.'²¹

Instead of perceiving "aimless wanderings" in Schoenberg's compositions, Kandinsky saw "independent life," and rather than the absence of harmony he found an alternative, modern harmony. Kandinsky had similar aspirations for his painting – for a new form of harmony or compositional structure that might not be immediately apparent, but would be based on principles of "antilogic."

Kandinsky's initial positive reaction to these features was based not solely on his experience of listening to the music, but also on his exposure to Schoenberg's theory. An excerpt from the composer's *Theory of Harmony* had been printed in the concert program and read:

Dissonances are only different from consonances in degree; they are nothing more than remoter consonances. Today we have already reached the point where we no longer make the distinctions between consonances and dissonances. Or at most,

²⁰ Music theorists have debated the extent to which Schoenberg's music broke from diatonic strategies. Schoenberg himself saw his work as an extension of these techniques and late 19th century music had already extended the use of dissonance. See Ethan Haimo, *Schoenberg's Transformation of Musical Language* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), particularly "'Atonality': A Revisionist Thesis" for a good review of these issues. What is most important, here, however, is that the divergence from typical structures was sufficient for many contemporary listeners to find the pieces incomprehensible.

²¹ Hahl-Koch, *Schoenberg-Kandinsky Letters*, 21. Emphasis is in the original letter.

we make the distinction that we are less willing to use consonances. I believe that it will eventually be possible to recognize the same laws in the harmony of those of us who are the most modern as in the harmony of the classics; but suitably expanded, more generally understood.²²

In the diatonic tonal system, distinctions between consonance and dissonance are based on the location and relation of notes within a harmonic overtone series. Schoenberg justified his ideas about dissonance based on his understanding of how this overtone series works. Acoustically, any note played is not a pure tone, but has overtones of notes associated in a harmonic series. In the diatonic tonal system, notes that are closely related to the original note or “tonic” in this harmonic series and occur at specific intervals may be played together and the result is a restful consonance. Further from the tonic in the harmonic overtone series, however, the notes get closer together and the intervals become dissonant. Under the terms of the diatonic tonal system, consonance and dissonance are considered to be, and function as opposites.

In an early chapter of *Theory of Harmony*, Schoenberg discusses the properties of the overtone series, the effects of overtones on listeners, and the reasons he conceives of dissonance not as the opposite of consonance, but merely a “further removed consonance.”²³ When a tone is sounded, initial stronger-sounding overtones are followed by weaker-sounding ones. According to Schoenberg, the stronger sounding tones are more familiar to the ear, while the later, barely perceptible tones sound strange to listeners. He goes on to assert that while overtones distant from the fundamental tone contribute less to the overall tone, they are still “recorded by the subconscious.”

Overtones closer to the fundamental tone contribute more to the overall impression a

²² Hahl-Koch, *Schoenberg-Kandinsky Letters*, 24-25.

²³ Arnold Schoenberg, Roy E. Carter (trans.), *Theory of Harmony* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978), 20-21.

listener has of a sounded tone and more remote overtones contribute less, but this is a difference in degree and not in kind. If there is only a difference in degree, then consonance (combinations from overtones closer to the fundamental) and dissonance (combinations including overtones further from the fundamental) should not be considered opposites. According to Schoenberg:

They are no more opposites than two and ten are opposites, as the frequency numbers indeed show; and the expressions ‘consonance’ and ‘dissonance’, which signify an antithesis, are false. It all simply depends on the growing ability of the analyzing ear to familiarize itself with the remote overtones, thereby expanding the conception of what is euphonious, suitable for art, so that it embraces the whole natural phenomenon.²⁴

If consonance and dissonance are no longer opposites and dissonances are considered as natural and acceptable as consonances, this has important implications for composition.

There will be no restrictions on the combinations of notes that could be used together.

Instead of using just the seven notes of a scale, the basis for the diatonic tonal system, chords could be formed from any combination of the 12 semitones. Further, chords using any combination of the 12 semitones could stand on their own without being required to resolve to conventionally conceived consonance, that is to notes closer together in a harmonic overtone series.

Since, theoretically, in Schoenberg’s conception, any combination of notes can be used in any combination and in any sequence, there are no set compositional procedures for works like those Kandinsky heard at the 1911 concert.²⁵ The rules of simultaneity and progression (rules about what notes can be combined and what combinations of notes should follow each other) which held for works composed within the diatonic tonal

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Although Schoenberg’s later 12-tone system has many set compositional features, the works Kandinsky heard at the January 1911 concert were written in a freely atonal idiom.

system, no longer apply. Instead, each work has a unique structure. As George Perle describes in discussing compositions such as those played at the January 1911 concert, “the ‘rightness’ of a particular note depends not upon its possible containment within a preestablished harmonic unit, as it does in tonality, but upon larger compositional factors whose meaning must be discovered within the work itself.”²⁶ Such freedom to use any combination of elements and the need to establish the “rightness” of any element, not with predetermined theory, but in the context of individual works were important elements in Kandinsky’s developing ideas on compositional practices for painting.

The Second String Quartet, Op. 10 and Three Piano Pieces, Op.11 played during the January 11 concert attended by Kandinsky provided a musical embodiment of Schoenberg’s ideas on the expanded uses of dissonance and their consequences for compositional structure. The fourth movement of the Second String Quartet and all of the Three Piano Pieces can be considered pantonal.²⁷ That is, they do not consistently center on any one key, but rather make use of the full range of 12 semitones in combinations deemed appropriate by the composer in the context of each composition. Schoenberg describes the first and second movements of the Second String Quartet as having “many sections in which the individual parts proceed regardless of whether or not their meeting results in codified harmonies...[and] the overwhelming multitude of dissonances cannot be counterbalanced any longer by occasional returns to such tonal triads as represent a

²⁶ George Perle, *Serial Composition and Atonality: An Introduction to the Music of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 9.

²⁷ Although the term “atonal” is most frequently used for these compositions, Schoenberg objected to this term. “Pantonal” more accurately conveys the relationships among all keys in his compositional strategy and as such I find it a more useful term in comparisons with Kandinsky’s similar strategies in the organization of his abstract paintings. For additional discussion see Leonard Stein, “The Atonal Period in Schoenberg’s Music,” in Walter B. Bailey, *The Arnold Schoenberg Companion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 83 and Haimo’s “‘Atonality’: A Revisionist Thesis”, noted in footnote 20 above.

key.”²⁸ Similarly, In a *Festschrift* prepared for Schoenberg in 1912, Anton von Webern described the Three Piano Pieces as characterized by “individuality of the themes” and “the combination of motives that are completely oppositional.”²⁹ Since Schoenberg can proceed from one note to any other note with no restrictions, no matter what other notes are being played at the same time by the other musical instruments or voices, the individual lines or voices of the composition could indeed be considered as having “independent life,” to use the term Kandinsky adopted in his first letter to Schoenberg.³⁰

In this section I have identified the aspects of Schoenberg’s music that baffled many contemporary critics, but allowed Kandinsky to see a commonality in their approaches to art. Kandinsky was not the only attendee at the January 1911 concert who perceived compelling similarities between his search for a new harmony in painting and Schoenberg’s musical and theoretical work. In fact, Kandinsky probably received

²⁸ Arnold Schoenberg, “My Evolution,” in *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 86

²⁹ Anton von Webern, “Schoenberg’s Music,” in *Arnold Schönberg (1912)*, as translated by Barbara Z. Schoenberg and published in Walter Frisch (ed.), *Schoenberg and His World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 224.

³⁰ In his recent analysis of convergences between Schoenberg and Kandinsky (see Frisch, “Convergences: Music and the Visual Arts,” full reference in note 3), Frisch suggests that it was the linearity, and specifically the polyphonic independence achieved in the quartets in the January 1911 concerts that prompted Kandinsky to comment on the “individual life of the independent voices” in Schoenberg’s works (see Frisch p. 122-123). When Frisch discusses polyphonic independence, he is referring to a style of music in which the various musical parts move independently or have equal importance. (For extended discussions of the various meanings of polyphony, see Wolf Frobenius: ‘Polyphony: Western’, *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 31 January 2008), <http://www.grovemusic.com> and Jonathan Dunsby “polyphony” *The Oxford Companion to Music*. Ed. Alison Latham. Oxford University Press, 2002. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. University of South Florida. 3 April 2008.). <http://www.oxfordreference.com.proxy.usf.edu/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t114.e5271> . When Kandinsky talks about the “individual lives of the individual voices”, he could have been responding, in part, to polyphonic aspects of Schoenberg’s compositions. When examining and discussing Schoenberg’s theory, however, Kandinsky concentrates on the concept of dissonance. Polyphony is a separate concept from dissonance in music theory (it is possible to have consonant or dissonant intervals when polyphonic lines coincide), but Kandinsky to some extent elides this difference. When considering his engagement with musical terms and concepts, it is crucial to remember that he does not always employ them in ways that are entirely consistent with their use by musicians.

assistance in noticing these connections from a new acquaintance who would soon become an important friend and collaborator: Franz Marc.

Marc, Schoenberg and Kandinsky's *Composition II*

Although acquainted through correspondence, Kandinsky and Marc had met, in person, the night before the January 11 concert and it was Marc who suggested that they attend the performance of Schoenberg's music.³¹ In a letter of January 10 to his wife Maria Franck, Marc expressed his excitement about the concert and indicated that "[t]he uncanny thing about him seems to be his complete abandonment of tonality – he no longer works crosswise through the keys but does so longitudinally – which seems to be related to Kandinsky's ideas."³² Even before the concert, then, Marc perceived similarities in the ideas, or theories of Kandinsky and Schoenberg. As Marc reports in the same letter that he spent most of the previous evening talking with Kandinsky and his partner Gabrielle Münter, it seems likely that he would have discussed such perceived convergence of ideas with Kandinsky and perhaps primed him for receiving Schoenberg's work in such a light.

Following the concert, Marc expounds on this connection between composer and painter in a letter to August Macke. Here, he concentrates not on Kandinsky's theory, but on the ways in which he views Kandinsky's paintings in terms of Schoenberg's music.

Can you imagine a music in which tonality (that is, the adherence to any key) is completely suspended? I was constantly reminded of Kandinsky's large *Composition*, which also permits no trace of tonality [...] and also of Kandinsky's 'jumping spots' in hearing this music, which allows each tone sounded to stand on its own (a kind of *white canvas* between the spots of color!).³³

³¹ Wasserman, "Schoenberg and Kandinsky in Concert," 17.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ August Macke/Franz Marc, Wolfgang Macke (ed.), *Briefwechsel*, (Cologne: Du Mont Schauberg, 1964), 40.

Marc also comments on Schoenberg's conception of dissonance as a more remote consonance and the possible applicability of these ideas to painting.³⁴

It is not clear from the letter what specific painting Marc referenced or what qualities of the painting suggested "no trace of tonality." Peg Weiss argues that the large *Composition* to which Marc referred might be *Composition II* of 1910 which he had seen and been impressed by in an exhibition the previous fall.³⁵ Unfortunately, this painting was destroyed during World War II and only a black and white photograph remains (see Figure 1). However, a structurally similar sketch gives some indication of the colors used (see Figure 2). In the sketch, round areas of various colors are scattered around the canvas. Colors are layered and juxtaposed within, and sometimes crossing the boundaries of black outlines that divide the space and suggest some schematic figures. The relationship between the colors themselves, and between the colors and the figures, is unclear. These features could make the painting seem as if it was composed of unrelated spots of color with no readily observable cohesion, causing the eye to jump around the canvas from colored spot to spot. In fact, Marc does not describe any figures or any perceived relationship between elements of Kandinsky's painting, only "jumping spots" and "spots of color." In his approbation of Schoenberg's music and Kandinsky's painting,

³⁴ Ibid. Marc's comments on dissonance in painting are as follows: "It is absolutely not obligatory that complementary colors be made to appear next to each other as in a prism; they can, insofar as is possible, be 'kept apart.'" The partial dissonances that thereby arise will be cancelled out in the appearance of the entire picture; they will seem consonant (harmonic) insofar as they are complementary in their distribution and intensity." English translation by Walter Frisch in *German Modernism: Music and the Arts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 120. As we will see below, Marc's ideas of how dissonance might be achieved in painting, technically, differs from Kandinsky's focus on contrasts. Both artists, however, suggest that aspects of dissonance in certain parts of the painting will seem to resolve into consonance in the overall context of the painting. I will discuss this important compositional strategy in detail below.

³⁵ Peg Weiss, "Evolving Perceptions of Kandinsky and Schoenberg: Toward the Ethnic Roots of the 'Outsider,'" in Juliane Brand and Christopher Hailey (eds.), *Constructive Dissonance: Arnold Schoenberg and the Transformations of Twentieth-Century Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 36.

however, Marc regards the suspension of tonality not as a lack of coherence, but as an opportunity for the separate elements of a work, whether tones in music or colors in painting, to have their own independent lives, to stand on their own. Marc's comments are particularly significant as they are evidence that at least one contemporary viewer of Kandinsky's painting was able to relate to and describe Kandinsky's painting in Schoenbergian terms and was thus capable of having a meaningful experience with the painting without referring to recognizable objects depicted in the painting.

Like Marc, art historians have posited correspondences between Schoenberg's music and Kandinsky's paintings. In contrast to Marc's description of *Composition II*, however, most of these analyses do not discuss the painting in light of the aspects of Schoenberg's music that Kandinsky identified as most salient and important for his own art, namely the use of dissonance and the "independent lives of the individual voices" in the composition.³⁶ In particular, they do not carefully analyze Kandinsky's theoretical texts to determine *his* understanding of dissonance and its function in his compositional theory for abstract painting. I contend that it is not sufficient to examine dissonance as it is understood in the diatonic tonal system or in Schoenberg's theory and pantonal works,

³⁶ Several scholars have analyzed *Impression III (Concert)* (see Figure 3) as the painter's response to the January 1911 concert and Schoenberg's music. The general approach has been for scholars to attempt to identify figures in the painting corresponding to audience, instruments and musicians and to propose depictions of Schoenberg's dissonance in the painting by analyzing Kandinsky's use of color based on the descriptions of the effects of color he proposes in *On the Spiritual in Art*. See for example, Peg Weiss, "Evolving Perceptions of Kandinsky and Schoenberg: Toward the Ethnic Roots of the 'Outsider,'" 35; Jelena Hahl-Koch, *Kandinsky* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), 152; Magdalena Dabrowski, "Kandinsky and Schoenberg: Abstraction as a Visual Metaphor of Emancipated Dissonance," in Esther da Costa Meyer and Fred Wasserman (eds.) *Schoenberg, Kandinsky, and the Blue Rider* (New York: The Jewish Museum, 2003), 88; and Walter Frisch, "Convergences: Music and the Visual Art," in *German Modernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 128-135. Such discussions refer to Kandinsky's general suggestions about the effects of color, in isolation, taken from a text not directly concerning the painting at hand. As I will discuss below, Kandinsky emphasized that the effects of color are not uniform, but depend on their juxtaposition and the overall context of the specific painting.

but it is critical to examine how *Kandinsky* understood dissonance and what might constitute dissonance in painting.

Kandinsky's comprehension of dissonance seems to have evolved over the course of his theoretical writings from 1909 to 1914, the period in which he reports working most intensely towards a theory of composition for abstract painting. Accordingly, in the following sections of this paper, I will look at Kandinsky's developing "principle of dissonance" for composition across this period of theoretical development. In his theory, Kandinsky describes compositional strategies based not on the distribution of recognizable, or even veiled objects, but on the arrangement of colors and forms in the specific context of an individual work, with the "principle of dissonance" as a guide. Kandinsky's specific understanding of dissonance and its relation to Schoenberg's music, and some general aspects of his theory, will provide a better understanding of the "hidden structure" that Kandinsky wished to produce in his paintings. I will explore the nature of this "hidden structure" by examining both Kandinsky's theoretical writings and his account of the creation of a specific painting – *Composition VI*. I see an explication of such structure in Kandinsky's account of the creation of *Composition VI*, which he painted in 1913, towards the end of the pre-war period in which he was exploring the possibilities for composition in abstract painting. Kandinsky's description of the effects he experiences in looking at the painting – effects of clashing, disorientation, and the independence of color and line – recalls those he noted in response to Schoenberg's pantonal music. Further, I see the compositional structure he describes for *Composition VI* as comparable to his understanding of Schoenberg's methods in his pantonal works

and as delineating a “hidden structure” that can be perceived by contemplating the surface features of the finished work.

Kandinsky’s Knowledge of Music Theory

Before looking more closely at Kandinsky’s compositional strategies for abstract painting and their relation to Schoenberg’s music and theory, it is appropriate here to add an interpretive caution by returning to the issue of Kandinsky’s knowledge of and understanding of music theory. As I have mentioned, Kandinsky had some training in music, but had difficulty understanding music theory. He clarifies his level of comprehension in correspondence with Schoenberg in the months following the January 1911 concert.

Kandinsky seems to have pursued music theory, and particular the theories of Schoenberg, most closely in the years from 1911 through 1912. In a letter to Schoenberg on April 9, 1911 he indicates that he is looking into music theory and trying to understand how it is constructed, but claims he is doing so “naturally only superficially: my powers are not sufficient for a deeper look.” Kandinsky did not closely examine the more technical aspects of Schoenberg’s theory until well after their initial contact. It was not until December 1911, the same month that Kandinsky’s *On the Spiritual in Art* was first published, that he received a copy of *Theory of Harmony* directly from Schoenberg.³⁷ In a letter dated January 13, 1912, he reported that his friend, the composer Thomas von Hartmann had borrowed it before he had had a chance to read it. However, he indicated that “[Hartmann] explained to me a lot which I certainly would not have understood in your book. We spoke about it for hours, and what I have already

³⁷ Hahl-Koch, *Schoenberg-Kandinsky Letters*, 40.

got from it pleases me *very* much.”³⁸ It isn’t until late August of 1912 that Kandinsky writes to Schoenberg about his experiences reading *Theory of Harmony*. He indicates difficulty in understanding the more technical aspects of the textbook: “What is so stupid and always irritates me, is that I cannot read works about music. The parts of your book that are generally understandable, I read with *great* pleasure...what irritates me is that I cannot understand the positive side of your book.”³⁹ Schoenberg was a contributor to Kandinsky and Marc’s *Blaue Reiter* Almanac, published in May 1912, but his essay reinforced the general principles with which Kandinsky was already familiar and did not reference technical aspects of his theory.⁴⁰ Kandinsky seems to have understood general principles in Schoenberg’s book, but not the specific, technical points of his harmonic

³⁸ Ibid, 42.

³⁹ Ibid 56.

⁴⁰ See Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc (Eds.), Klaus Lankhiet (Ed. And Introduction), *The Blaue Reiter Almanac*, New Documentary Edition (New York: The Viking Press, 1974). In general, the music-related texts in the *Blaue Reiter* were not directly relevant to this focused study of the Schoenbergian ideas that Kandinsky found most helpful in discussing compositional strategies for his art. In “The Relationship to the Text,” (90-102) Schoenberg argues against the demand for a “text” -- demands that music must convey a specific idea, action or feeling – and advocates approaching music from a “purely musical point of view.” Hartman writes “On Anarchy in Music” (113-118) incorporating ideas similar to Schoenberg – that external laws don’t exist, hearing can be developed so that unfamiliar sounds can become acceptable; and all means are appropriate if they arise from “inner necessity.” Kulbin’s essay “Free Music” includes an intriguing discussion of “close dissonances” and the unique vibrations they produce, but Kandinsky does not employ these terms in his discussion of his compositional theory for abstract painting. The *Blaue Reiter* explores relationships between the arts, essential commonalities shared by the arts, the roles of the arts, and attempts to produce a unification of the arts in a *Gesamtkunstwerk* or total work of art. In her book, *L’Oevre d’art totale à naissance des avant-gardes: 1908-1914*, Marcella Lista (Paris: Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques; Paris: Institut national de l’art, 2006, p. 67-110) discusses the relationship between Schoenberg and Kandinsky in the context of Kandinsky’s explorations of and pursuit of a total work of art, focusing particularly on his stage composition *The Yellow Sound* (also included in the Almanac). Lista asserts that Kandinsky abandoned the pursuit of a total work of art in his 1913 move to abstraction and that his engagement with the *Gesamtkunstwerk* led, paradoxically, to his eventual focus on a self-sufficient art of abstract painting. I do not believe that Kandinsky considered his dual focus on unification of the arts and on developing the specific contributions of his own art to be incompatible. Lista finds it more useful to consider Kandinsky’s relationship with musical concepts in the overall context of his pursuit of a total work of art rather than looking at the binary relationship between music and painting. I contend that both levels of analysis can be useful. With my focus on Kandinsky’s specific understanding of dissonance, a targeted examination of the relationship between Schoenberg’s music and theory and Kandinsky’s theory and painting is most appropriate.

theory. Kandinsky seems to have been comfortable with and used only certain broad concepts and principles derived from music theory in general and Schoenberg's theory in particular.

With this caution in mind, in the next section I will look in more detail at Kandinsky's understanding of dissonance and what elements might constitute a dissonant compositional structure for abstract painting. In particular, I will examine how these ideas evolve through his theoretical writings from 1909 to 1914 and how they relate to Schoenberg's use of dissonance in his music and theory.

Kandinsky's Theory and Musical Concepts

Consonance and Dissonance

Prior to his encounter with Schoenberg's music, Kandinsky had already incorporated musical language and concepts in his descriptions of compositional strategies for painting. For example, in a section from the 1909 German typescript of *On the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky enlists the concepts of consonance and dissonance to explain how a "purely graphic 'counterpoint'" might be accomplished in painting. "Counterpoint" is a musical term and refers to "the coherent combination of distinct melodic lines in music."⁴¹ He describes such a compositional structure as created by

the juxtaposition of forms that together constitute the larger formal patterns, built up out of groups of forms; the juxtaposition of individual forms with these larger groups of forms, which makes up the overall composition of the whole picture;

⁴¹ Arnold Whittall "counterpoint" *The Oxford Companion to Music*. Ed. Alison Latham. Oxford University Press, 2002. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. University of South Florida. 16 April 2007
<<http://www.oxfordreference.com.proxy.usf.edu/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t114.e1670>>. Although Kandinsky uses the term "counterpoint" in this early version of OSA and at one point mentions the need to find a "thoroughbass" for painting (*OSA*, 877), these seem to be isolated incidences. Again, it is important to remember that Kandinsky did not have a strong background in music theory and he sometimes uses terms interchangeably that have more distinct meanings in music theory. He most commonly refers to the need to find a theory of harmony for painting.

*further, the principles of consonance or dissonance of all those parts mentioned, i.e., the meeting of individual forms, the limitation of one form by another, likewise the jostling, the confluence or dismemberment [Mit- und Zerreißen] of the individual forms; similar treatment of different groups of forms, the combination of the hidden and the revealed, of the rhythmic and the arrhythmic upon the same surface, of abstract forms – on the one hand purely geometrical (simple or complex), on the other, indescribable in geometrical terms; combinations of delimitations of forms one from another (more/less strongly), etc., etc...*⁴²

As I have described previously, in music constructed in the diatonic tonal system, the coherent combination of melodic lines in music was achieved by rules directing the voices that were based on the distinction between consonance and dissonance, and the conventional need for dissonance to resolve into consonance. In the passage above, Kandinsky proposes principles of consonance and dissonance at play in the juxtaposition of forms on a canvas. Although he does not specify what might constitute either consonance or dissonance in painting, he associates them with the “limitation of one form by another” and “the jostling, the confluence or dismemberment of the individual form.” Presumably, “jostling” forms would be dissonant and the “confluence” of forms would be consonant, but there is no explanation in this passage of what types of forms and combinations of forms would produce these effects. In his references to the play of consonance and dissonance in painting, Kandinsky is using the terms for the techniques of musical composition, here in the diatonic tonal system, as a framework for thinking about the compositional factors which must be taken into account when paintings becomes, in his terms, “exclusively pictorial.”

There is, of course, no direct correspondence in painting to the musical concepts of consonance and dissonance. There is no overtone series for color tones. There were no

⁴² OSA, 171, emphasis mine.

compositional models of establishing a color tone, presenting one which was physically (in terms of characteristics of the wavelength) further away, and then requiring a return to the original color tone or wavelength. In fact, according to Kandinsky, there was not yet in painting any theory of harmony comparable to that in music. In a letter to Schoenberg, Kandinsky explains that:

The fact is that the greatest necessity for musicians today is the overthrow of the ‘eternal laws of harmony,’ which for painters is only a matter of secondary importance. With us, the most necessary thing is to show the possibilities of composition (or construction) and to set up a general (very general) principle. That is the task I have begun in my book – in very ‘free’ strokes.⁴³

Here, Kandinsky recognizes the conventionality of the “eternal laws of harmony.” He does not wish to directly translate musical concepts into painting nor does he wish to set up rigid rules for composition in his own art. Instead, he wants to broaden the possibilities of acceptable compositional strategies for painting, particularly strategies based solely on the juxtaposition of color and form.

Color, Form and Contemporary Harmony

In describing such “purely pictorial composition” in *On the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky advocates for disharmonious combinations of colors and forms in a new harmony for painting. He explains that the effect of any particular color is influenced by the colors and forms with which it is juxtaposed and asserts that “the incompatibility of certain forms and certain colors should be regarded not as something ‘disharmonious,’ but conversely, as offering new possibilities – i.e., also [a form of] harmony (*OSA*, 163).”

⁴³ Hahl-Koch, *Schoenberg-Kandinsky Letters*, 57. Note in this passage that Kandinsky equates composition and construction. Distinctions between these terms and their implications for painting would become important and contentious for the Moscow Constructivists at INKhUK in the 1920s (Kandinsky was the Institute’s founding director) as discussed by Maria Gough in “Composition and Construction” in her book *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 21-59. During the period I examine, however, Kandinsky for the most part uses the terms interchangeably.

Rejecting rigid rules for allowable combinations, Kandinsky's principles of composition for abstract painting are similar to Schoenberg's treatment of dissonance -- all combinations of elements are allowable if they serve a particular composition and practices previously considered "disharmonious" can now be considered acceptable as part of a new harmony.

Kandinsky elaborates on the specific ways, particularly in the use of color, disharmony and contrast can be used in a new harmony of composition for painting. He devotes a large section of *On the Spiritual in Art* to an examination of the effects of color and frequently makes musical comparisons: yellow "affects us like the shrill sound of a trumpet being played louder and louder"; "light blue resembles the flute, dark blue the 'cello, darker still the wonderful sound of a double bass"; and both black and white are compared to musical pauses.⁴⁴ However, when Kandinsky describes compositional methods for painting, he does not mention these associations with musical timbres. He does not suggest that colors be juxtaposed as these musical voices might be combined in music. Instead, Kandinsky concentrates on the oppositions and interactions between colors. He organizes colors into oppositional pairs according to their warmth or coldness (yellow and blue) and lightness or darkness (white and black).⁴⁵ He also sets up oppositional pairs for the complementary colors red and green, and orange and violet. However, the effects of simple colors and oppositional pairs are not sufficient for Kandinsky's new harmony in painting. He describes harmonization on the basis of simple

⁴⁴ *OSA*, 181, 182, 185.

⁴⁵ The influence of the ideas of Goethe and Schopenhauer on Kandinsky's color theory, particularly relative to oppositional pairs, has been documented in prior studies. See Editors' Notes for *On the Spiritual in Art* and Javier Arnaldo, "Musical Analogies" in *Analogías musicales: Kandinsky y sus contemporáneos* (Madrid: Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisiz, 2003). My focus is not so much on his analysis of the effects of color in isolation, but on Kandinsky's theories for their combination in the context of a composition.

colors as the “the permeation of a particular tone-color, the joining together of two contiguous colors by means of a mixture of one with the other (*OSA*, 193).” Kandinsky associates this kind of harmony in painting with the music of Mozart – works that “create a welcome pause amidst the storms of our inner life...but we hear them like the sounds of another, vanished, and essentially unfamiliar age.” Instead, Kandinsky asserts that “on the...principle of antilogic, colors long considered disharmonious are now placed next to each other (*OSA*, 193).” For example, he describes red and blue as physically unrelated colors, but considers their juxtaposition to be “the most strongly effective and most suitably harmonious because of the great spiritual contrast between them. Our harmony is based mainly upon the principle of contrast, the most important principle in art at all times (*OSA*, 193-194).” Kandinsky enumerates the various uses of color in the new harmony:

‘Permitted’ and ‘forbidden’ combinations, the clash of different colors, the overriding of one color by another, or of many colors by a single color, the emergence of one color from the depths of another, the precise delimitation of an area of color, the dissolution of simple or complex colors, the retention of the flowing color area by linear boundaries, the bubbling over of the color beyond these boundaries, the intermingling [of colors] or [their] sharp division, etc., etc. – all this opens up purely pictorial (= painterly) possibilities in an infinite series stretching into the unattainable distance. (*OSA*, 194)

Kandinsky wrote this section of *On the Spiritual in Art* prior to his encounter with Schoenberg, but the harmony he proposes converges with Schoenberg’s use of dissonance in the music and theory to which Kandinsky later responded so approvingly. As with Schoenberg’s dissonant chords, in Kandinsky’s harmony of painting there is use of “forbidden” combinations and clash of tones. Both artist and composer allow any combination of elements (colors or tones) and multiple possibilities for compositional

forms in the service of a particular work. Schoenberg's music and theory were an affirmation for Kandinsky that such compositional strategies were suitable for a modern, abstract art.

Kandinsky's description of abstract forms also converges with the general principles of Schoenberg's music and theory. Kandinsky describes abstract forms (in this use, he clarifies that these are forms that do not describe any real object) as having "their own existence, their own influence and effect (*OSA*, 165)," just like the "independent voices" he noted in Schoenberg's music at the January 1911 concert. He enumerates the square, the circle, the triangle, the rhombus and the trapezoid as representative of these abstract forms but extends them to "all other innumerable forms, becoming ever more complicated, having no description in mathematical terms. All these forms are citizens of equal status in the realm of abstraction (*OSA*, 166)." Like the increasingly complex "dissonant" chords of Schoenberg, Kandinsky's increasingly complex abstract forms are acceptable in the range of possibilities of expression, have equal status with simpler forms and can exist as entities on their own without a need to resolve into or describe any "real" object.

Kandinsky further characterizes the combination of color and line in his contemporary harmony as consisting of

[c]lashing discords, loss of equilibrium, 'principles' overthrown, unexpected drumbeats, great questionings, apparently purposeless strivings, stress and longing (apparently torn apart), chains and fetters broken (which had united many), opposites and contradictions -- this is our harmony. Composition on the basis of this harmony is the juxtaposition of coloristic and linear forms that have an independent existence as such, derived from internal necessity, which create within the common life arising from this source a whole that is called a picture. (*OSA*, 193)

Again, the general principles supporting Kandinsky's theories regarding contemporary harmony in painting are remarkably similar to those of Schoenberg's pantonal music and theory. "Principles overthrown" and the "independent existence" of elements of the composition were the very aspects that Kandinsky noted and applauded in Schoenberg's work. Kandinsky's own theoretical work, then, seems to have prepared him to respond to certain aspects of Schoenberg's music.

Kandinsky's specific strategy of juxtaposing colors and lines in opposites and contradictions, however, distinguishes his compositional structure and his harmony of painting from comparable strategies in either the traditional diatonic tonal system or Schoenberg's works. As we have seen, in the diatonic tonal system, consonance and dissonance are paired and treated as opposites, with dissonance being required to return to consonance. In contrast, Schoenberg did not consider dissonance and consonance to be opposites as they are different only in degree and not in kind. In his focus on oppositions, then, Kandinsky's compositional structure is somewhat more similar to that of the diatonic tonal system. However, Kandinsky also describes the effects of these oppositions as "clashing" and unresolved tension – effects comparable to those produced by Schoenberg's unresolved dissonance. Although Kandinsky studied general principles of music theory, looked to music as a model of compositional theory for abstract art, and saw similarities in his theory of harmony for painting and the general principles of Schoenberg's contemporaneous theory, his compositional strategies for abstract painting are thus not direct appropriations of the musical models he studied. These musical models do not provide a blueprint for specific compositional procedures, but help to clarify Kandinsky's specifically painterly harmony and its compositional strategies.

Types of Composition for Painting

Following his encounter with Schoenberg and during the period of increased engagement with music theory beginning in 1911, Kandinsky elaborates his ideas for a painterly composition. He advocates for symphonic, antilogical, and hidden types of composition, the same qualities he associates with the composition of Schoenberg's pantonal works.

In the first German edition of *On the Spiritual in Art*, published in December 1911, Kandinsky adds a concluding section that was not in the 1909 typescript, and in which he contrasts melodic and symphonic types of construction. Melodic compositions consist of "primitive geometrical forms or a structure of simple lines serving the general movement (*OSA*, 216)." In contrast, symphonic composition is complex and consists of "several forms, again subordinated to an obvious or concealed principal form" (*OSA*, 215) where the external form may be very difficult to find. Kandinsky further subdivides types of symphonic composition. Some are "still bound very closely to the melodic" and "built out of feelings of repose, of tranquil repetition, of a fairly balanced division of parts." He specifically compares this form of symphonic construction to the tonal music of composers such as Mozart and Beethoven (*OSA*, 217-218). However, Kandinsky himself prefers and is seeking a "new symphonic type of construction, in which the melodic element is used only occasionally, as one of the subordinate parts – thus taking on a new form (*OSA*, 218)." Kandinsky does not make specific comparisons to composers here, but this description suggests that perhaps he was thinking about Schoenberg's pantonal music, in which the contemporary audience found it difficult to identify melodies or themes, as an example.

Even more closely associated with Kandinsky's understanding of Schoenberg's music and theory, as I have reconstructed it so far, are his assertions that a new harmony should be built on the principles of antilogic, which Kandinsky associates with dissonance. As we have seen, in his first letter to Schoenberg in January 1911, Kandinsky contends that modern harmony, for both music and painting, will be found in the "anti-geometric, antilogical way" and in "dissonances in art." Similarly, in a section of *On the Spiritual in Art* which was added for the second edition of 1912, Kandinsky describes construction in keeping with modern day harmony as "[n]ot the immediately obvious, eye-catching type of ("geometrical") construction, nor the richest in possibilities, nor the most expressive, but rather the hidden type that emerges unnoticed from the picture and thus is less suited to the eye than to the soul (*OSA*, 208)." More specifically

This hidden construction can consist of forms apparently scattered at random upon the canvas, which – again, apparently – have no relationship one to another: the external absence of any such relationship here constitutes its internal presence. What externally has been loosened has internally been fused into a single entity. Precisely here lies the future theory of harmony for painting [*Harmonielehre der Malerei*]. These 'somehow' related forms have a fundamental and precise relationship to one another. (*OSA*, 208)

In a letter to Schoenberg in August 1912, Kandinsky elaborates that instead of obtrusively geometrical composition, "construction is also to be attained by the 'principle' of dissonance."⁴⁶

Such a "hidden" construction, based on the principle of dissonance, is consistent with what I have shown as Kandinsky's understanding of Schoenberg's music, if not

⁴⁶ Hahl-Koch, *Schoenberg-Kandinsky Letters*, 57. In this letter, Kandinsky specifically associates "obtrusively geometrical" composition with the Cubists. He describes this manner of composition in his discussion of Picasso in the 1911 First Edition of *On the Spiritual in Art*: "In his latest works (1911), he arrives at the destruction of the material object by a logical path, not by dissolving it, but by breaking it up into its individual parts and scattering these parts in a constructive fashion over the canvas." (*OSA*, 152).

entirely consistent with the composer's theory. As discussed above, Schoenberg's manner of composition was not immediately apparent to a majority of contemporary listeners. Many perceived the notes as "scattered at random" across the compositions. However, as was noted in a *Festschrift* of 1912 to which Kandinsky contributed, sympathetic listeners recognized that Schoenberg's music "has harmonies, but we cannot grasp them, nor analyze them, and we cannot find its themes. There is always an edifice present, but we are unable to reconstruct it ourselves."⁴⁷ The notes and chords were related in a precise manner, based on the needs of individual compositions. The possibilities for relationships between notes and chords were expanded through Schoenberg's understanding of dissonance as merely a further removed consonance. This new understanding of dissonance, for Schoenberg, was not so much a "principle of dissonance" which could be used as a compositional strategy in itself, rather it expanded the range of compositional possibilities. Kandinsky also sees a variety of possibilities for construction in painting, but concentrates on a type of composition based on the "principle of dissonance" – a principle he associates with a type of construction based on opposites, contradictions and contrast.⁴⁸ Similar to the way he describes Schoenberg's pantonal compositions, Kandinsky's paintings based on this "principle of dissonance" will not have an immediately obvious compositional structure. However, he assures his readers and viewers that his paintings are not mere "apparently purposeless strivings," but have an underlying structure comparable to, and valid as, theories of harmony in

⁴⁷ Linke, "As Introduction," 207.

⁴⁸ See also Klaus Kropfinger, "Latent Structural Power versus the Dissolution of Artistic Material in the Works of Kandinsky and Schönberg," in Konrad Boehmer (ed.), *Schönberg and Kandinsky: An Historic Encounter* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997) for an informative discussion of hidden structure in Schoenberg and Kandinsky's work. Unlike my approach, Kropfinger examines hidden structure in Kandinsky's paintings by examining preliminary sketches.

music, and further to the most modern compositional theories of music, as represented by Schoenberg. I will discuss more specifically how Kandinsky guides his readers and viewers in approaching the “hidden” structure of oppositions in his painting, but first would like to address Kandinsky’s rationale for the appropriateness of dissonant compositional structure.

Dissonance in the Spirit of the Times

In his advocacy for symphonic, antigeometric/antilogical, “dissonant” construction in painting, Kandinsky provides additional justification for this type of construction as well as an indication of why Schoenberg’s music and theory appealed to him as a model: he asserts that these methods are most suitable to the conditions of the times. As I have noted above, Kandinsky dismisses harmony based on simple colors as being “precisely the least suitable for our own time” and associates it with the work of Mozart, which Kandinsky hears as being from an “essentially unfamiliar age (*OSA*, 193).” In discussing antigeometric construction, he states that “if we think of the definition of modern day harmony given in this book, then even in the realm of construction we are able to recognize the spirit of the times (*OSA*, 208).” This connection between contemporary art and its times, one of the main themes of *On the Spiritual in Art*, is made even more explicitly in an article published in the same month as the January 1911 concert of Schoenberg’s music. Kandinsky asserts that

The timely (or truly contemporary) work of art, as I’ve already stated, reflects, *inter alia*, its epoch. And our epoch is a time of tragic collision between matter and spirit and of the downfall of the purely material worldview...it is this tragedy of displacement, instability and weakness of the material world that is reflected in art by imprecision and by dissonance.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Wassily Kandinsky in “Whither the New Art?” in Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (eds.) *Kandinsky Complete Writings on Art* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1994), 103.

Kandinsky perceived unrest, conflict and dematerialization in his contemporary world. In the same article, he invokes the impact of Nietzschean philosophy, describing his time as one of “enormous questions” in which “everything that had once appeared to stand so eternally...suddenly turns out to have been crushed...by the merciless and salutary question ‘Is that really so?’”⁵⁰ The upheaval of the fall of positivist materialism and Kandinsky’s hopes for a concurrent rise of the spiritual was a main theme of *On the Spiritual in Art*. In such a context, Kandinsky’s appreciation for the ways in which Schoenberg attempted to “overthrow the ‘eternal laws of harmony’” reflects his ideas on the function of art and artists in society. Kandinsky welcomed the “downfall of the purely material worldview” and thought that dissonant works which reflected the weakness and instability of the material world could assist in the spiritual awakening and advancement of its viewers. Kandinsky contributed to the spiritual awakening of his viewers not only through his work, but through the writings intended to help his audience to understand his abstract art.

Reminiscences

Kandinsky’s writings on a modern compositional theory for painting were not only a way for him to understand his own art and a way to think about issues that confronted him as he moved towards greater abstraction in painting, but were also a

⁵⁰ Ibid. For more on Kandinsky’s case for the rise of the spiritual and fall of positivist materialism see particularly *OSA*, 139-152. Kandinsky discusses additional sources of unrest in his autobiographical essay of June 1913, *Reminiscences* [see Kandinsky, *Reminiscences*, in Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (eds.) *Kandinsky Complete Writings on Art* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1994)]. He describes political upheaval in Russia (361-362) and the influence of scientific developments: “The collapse of the atom was equated, in my soul, with the collapse of the whole world. Suddenly the stoutest walls crumbled. Everything became uncertain, precarious and insubstantial (364).” For a discussion of the broader intellectual, artistic and historical context of dissonance in the early 20th Century, see Thomas Harrison’s *1910: The Emancipation of Dissonance*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996) and particularly a chapter on the opposition of spirituality and materialism in Kandinsky’s theory, p. 52-60.

means of providing his audience with a framework for understanding and experiencing his abstract paintings. In texts accompanying an album of 60 full page reproductions of his paintings, *Kandinsky, 1901-1913*, the artist makes the educational function of his writings more explicit.⁵¹ Specifically in *Reminiscences*, an autobiographical essay of June 1913 that was published as part of this album, Kandinsky acknowledges that paintings without recognizable objects would challenge contemporary viewers, noting that “...canceling out the object in painting makes very considerable demands of one’s ability inwardly to experience purely pictorial form, so that the spectator’s development in this direction is absolutely essential...”⁵² In fact, Kandinsky describes the principal aim of his earlier theoretical texts “to awaken this capacity for experiencing the spiritual in material and in abstract phenomena.”⁵³

In *Reminiscences*, as well as in his other theoretical writings, Kandinsky presents his viewers with multiple avenues for relating to and accepting his work. His arguments for the acceptance of abstract art cover a broad territory with Kandinsky invoking such varied references as contemporary scientific developments in the further division of the atom to the principles of Christianity.⁵⁴

Nonetheless, Kandinsky’s references to music permeate the essay and are an important component of his rationale for abstract art. In describing his ambition as a painter, Kandinsky expresses his wish to capture, through painting, the effects of the colors of Moscow during the twilight hour. He uses an extended symphonic metaphor to

⁵¹ *Kandinsky Complete Writings on Art*, 355. The album was published in late October 1913 by the Verlag “Der Sturm.”

⁵² *Reminiscences*, 380.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 381.

⁵⁴ See *Reminiscences*, for arguments regarding the atom (364), the principles of Christianity (277-279) and the relationship between and separate realms of art and nature (373, 376).

describe this “Moscow hour” and his description evokes his responses to Schoenberg’s music. Kandinsky describes a “red fusion” that “is only the final chord of the symphony, which brings every color vividly to life, which allows and forces the whole of Moscow to resound like the *fff* of a giant orchestra. Pink, lilac, yellow, white, blue, pistachio green, flame red houses, churches, each an independent song...”⁵⁵ A giant chord with each component color being an “independent song” recalls the “independent lives” of the voices (notes or instruments) that Kandinsky applauded in Schoenberg’s pantonal compositions.

In this same essay, Kandinsky describes an episode earlier in his career in which he heard Wagner’s *Lohengrin* as the realization of his “Moscow hour.” As a result of this experience, Kandinsky had a renewed understanding of the power of art in general and determined that “painting could develop just such powers as music possesses.”⁵⁶ However, Kandinsky reports that at the time of this realization he still felt the “impossibility of seeking out these powers, let alone discovering them”⁵⁷ Thus, Wagner’s music offered inspiration, but did not offer a method or practical assistance for how this might be achieved in painting.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ *Reminiscences*, 360.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 364.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*.

⁵⁸ See Riccardo Marchi, “Kandinsky, l’abstraction et le monde en 1913,” forthcoming in Nadia Podzemskaia (ed.), *Abstraction dans les arts: un concept à définir*, special issue of the journal *Ligeia. Dossiers sur l’art* (Paris), for a discussion of the “power of art” that Kandinsky perceived in Wagner’s *Lohengrin*. Marchi asserts that through Wagner’s music, Kandinsky perceived his “fairy-tale Moscow” as fully *gegenstandlos* (without objects), transformed into pure color and lines. The “kernel” of the world is *gegenstandlos*, with a core of life and animation. Kandinsky’s experience with Wagner’s music offered a solution to his problem of painting the “Moscow hour” – like Wagner’s music, Kandinsky’s abstract paintings would not be copies of the world of objects, but would be “analogical images” of this “kernel” of the world. Marchi’s discussion is very helpful in clarifying the philosophical underpinnings of Kandinsky’s abstraction and I share Marchi’s emphasis on Kandinsky’s writings and an approach to viewing his paintings which takes into account the conditions of visibility of the finished painting. In this study, I focus on a different aspect of the relationship of Kandinsky’s abstract art to music and specifically on the ways in

By the time *Reminiscences* was written, however, Kandinsky asserts that painting has caught up with music in the realm of the “compositional, where the work springs mainly or exclusively from ‘out of the artist,’ as has been the case for centuries in music.”⁵⁹ I suggest that beyond his response to Wagner’s *Lohengrin*, Kandinsky’s response to Schoenberg’s music provides guidance in the effects the painter wished to create with his abstract paintings and to their compositional structure.

In texts also published in the album *Kandinsky 1901-1913*, Kandinsky provides a rare account of the creation of specific paintings and, in his description of *Composition VI*, he suggests a way of experiencing the painting that I propose is analogous in many ways to his understanding of and response to Schoenberg’s pantonal music. In this text, which I will discuss in more detail below, Kandinsky identifies specific compositional features of his painting as a guide that can help his ideal viewer to see relationships between components of the painting, that is between the colors, lines, forms, and their multiple interactions. These references to compositional strategies, as well as the references to music in his theory, give his viewers a way to begin thinking of paintings as compositions – as having expressive possibility in specific combinations and juxtapositions of lines, colors and forms without having to represent recognizable objects. Some compositional features he describes in ways similar to strategies used in the diatonic tonal system. This would have been a common ground, a starting place for people who had some basic understanding of music to begin to relate to abstract painting. He challenges the audience by incorporating aspects of Schoenberg’s understanding of

which Kandinsky’s interactions with and interpretations of Schoenberg’s music can help us to understand the compositional structure of his abstract paintings.

⁵⁹ *Reminiscences*, 379.

dissonance which was far from universally accepted, as we have seen from the critics' reactions to the January 1911 concert. However, Kandinsky strongly believed that dissonant composition was the most suitable to the times, for both music and painting and such challenging of the audience would be consistent with his wish to awaken and advance the intellectual capacities of his viewers.

Dissonant Composition and a Schoenbergian View of *Composition VI*

Composition VI is particularly well suited to be viewed in light of Kandinsky's theories of dissonant composition for abstract painting and the relevance of Schoenbergian concepts. Kandinsky specifically associates *Compositions* with symphonic construction in painting. In contrast to *Impressions*, which are direct impressions of "external nature" and *Improvisations* which are "expressions of events of an inner character," but "chiefly unconscious," Kandinsky describes his *Compositions* as

The expression of feelings that have been forming within me in a similar way (but over a longer period of time), which, after the first preliminary sketches, I have slowly and almost pedantically examined and worked out...Here, reason, the conscious, the deliberate, and the purposeful play a preponderant role. Except that I always decide in favor of feeling rather than calculation. (*OSA*, 218)

Kandinsky's theoretical writings are presumably most useful in viewing these types of works – not ones that were quickly executed and "chiefly unconscious," but ones he carefully examined and worked out. In addition, some art historians consider this to be the year in which Kandinsky's "fully fledged abstract style emerges" with both color and line freed from representational associations.⁶⁰ Finally, given Kandinsky's assertions that compositional structure is dependent on the context of specific works, the account Kandinsky provides of the creation of this specific painting is invaluable in examining

⁶⁰ See Reinhard Zimmermann, "Early Imprints and Influences" in Hartwig Fischer and Sean Rainbird (eds.), *Kandinsky: The Path to Abstraction* (London: Tate Publishing, 2006), 36, 39, 40, 42.

the ways in which Kandinsky's theories of dissonant composition can be relevant to the viewing of his painting.

In his essay describing the creation of *Composition VI*, Kandinsky reports that he had the picture in his mind for a year and a half.⁶¹ If this is accurate, he would have started thinking about this piece in 1911 – the year of his encounter with Schoenberg's music and theory. In that year he had made a glass painting on the subject of the Deluge which he describes as having “various objective forms... [including] nudes, the Ark, animals, palm trees, lightning, rain, etc” (TP, 385).⁶² Kandinsky wanted to paint a *Composition* on this subject and took the glass painting as a point of departure. He reports making numerous sketches, first with “corporeal forms,” then trying to dissolve these forms and also attempting to create the picture through “purely abstract” means, but with no success. It was not until this painting came back from exhibition that Kandinsky saw it again with new eyes and was “struck, first by the colors, then by the compositional element, and then by the linear form itself, without reference to the object (TP, 386).” Following this insight, he begins the task of constructing the painting, a task he no longer discusses in this text as a process of dissolving specific, recognizable forms, but instead describes as a process of balancing the individual elements of the composition against each other.

Kandinsky describes the primary organization of *Composition VI* in a manner consistent with his theories of dissonant composition for painting. He identifies three

⁶¹ Kandinsky, “*Composition 6*”, *Reminiscences/ “Three Pictures”* in Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (eds.) *Kandinsky Complete Writings on Art* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1994), 385. Hereafter cited in text with the abbreviation TP.

⁶² The glass painting titled *The Deluge* is reproduced in Hans K. Roethel and Jean K. Benjamin (eds.), *Kandinsky: Catalogue Raisonné of the Oil Paintings, Volume One 1900-1915* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 413. Its present location is unknown.

centers in the picture: one “on the left the delicate, rosy, somewhat blurred center, with weak, indefinite lines in the middle” a second “on the right (somewhat higher than the left) the crude, red-blue, rather discordant area, with sharp, rather evil, strong, very precise lines” and a third center, between the two (nearer to the left) which is not initially recognized but emerges as the principal center (TP, 387). Kandinsky points to this third center as an area of pink and white between the other centers that “seethe[s] in such a way that they seem to lie neither upon the surface of the canvas nor upon any ideal surface (TP 387).” Kandinsky’s description of the original two centers recalls an organization similar to the traditional diatonic tonal opposition of consonance (the rosy center) and dissonance (the “crude,” discordant center). From the juxtapositions of these centers, however, comes an interesting development – the emergence of a new principal center. In an organization comparable to diatonic tonal compositions in music, one would expect an opposition of consonance and dissonance to resolve in a return to restful consonance. The third center, however, is not restful, but seething and suspended “somewhere” other than the surface of the canvas.

This description of the third center of *Composition VI* is consistent with Kandinsky’s understanding of Schoenberg’s use of dissonance in his pantonal compositions. Instead of a return to restful consonance, an unresolved dissonance – in the case of *Composition VI*, an active seething area that does not allow the viewer to come to rest – is an acceptable compositional strategy for Kandinsky in his painting, as it was for Schoenberg in his pantonal compositions. One of the ways the third center remains an area of unrest, if it is viewed as Kandinsky suggests, is that it is located “somewhere” hard to determine in reference to the surface of the canvas. Given such disorienting

effects and unconventional compositional structure, Kandinsky faced criticisms of his painting similar to those leveled at Schoenberg's pantonal compositions. In *Reminiscences*, he notes that critics found in his most recent paintings "confusion, a dead end, deterioration, and very often a fraud."⁶³ Kandinsky saw similarities in his approach to art and Schoenberg's and saw both as having compositional strategies that were "antilogical" but purposeful. By detailing the strategies he uses in creating *Composition VI*, he refutes claims that his marks are random and purposeless and offers his viewers a way of experiencing and understanding the organizational structure of his work.

As I have described above, in his theoretical writings Kandinsky not only acknowledges that his organization is not immediately apparent and obvious, he embraces such "hidden construction" as the hallmark of his compositional organization. Kandinsky's description of a third center which "one only recognizes subsequently as being a center, but is, in the end, the principal center" is an example of how he expects the viewer to understand this hidden construction.⁶⁴ It is not an elaborate underlying structure that only he himself, or possibly scholars looking at his sketches or searching for hidden referents, would know, but would emerge naturally from a sustained interaction between the viewer and the painting.⁶⁵

Moving to the smaller forms in the painting, Kandinsky describes additional "antilogical" features producing effects of conflict throughout the painting. He notes a

⁶³ *Reminiscences*, 368.

⁶⁴ *Reminiscences/Three Pictures*, 387.

⁶⁵ This is different from the "hidden construction" that Rose-Carol Washton Long pursues in her exploration of veiled imagery in Kandinsky's abstract painting ("Kandinsky's Abstract Style: The Veiling of Apocalyptic Folk Imagery," *Art Journal*, XXXIV/3, 217-228) and Klaus Kropfinger explores in his search for latent structure as revealed in the sketches for *Composition VII* in his article "Latent Structural Power versus the Dissolution of Artistic Material in the Works of Kandinsky and Schoenberg" (see footnote 3 above for full reference).

direct conflict in the upper part of the picture between “long, solemn lines” and “thicker lines running obliquely toward them.” He describes distributing flecks of pink throughout the canvas to mitigate the effects of these clashing lines. For Kandinsky, the pink flecks produce a feeling of tranquility, but this, in turn, must be contrasted with patches of blue, which he considers a typically cold color, but in this context produces a warming effect. In looking at the relations between colors and lines on the canvas, Kandinsky gives the impression of a viewer seeing a procession of contradictory and conflicting effects. In fact, *Composition VI* is full of such juxtaposition of opposites - curved and straight lines, bright and muted colors, extremes of light and dark, areas of thinner and thicker paint, lines and areas of color seeming to move in different directions, diagonal movements, areas of dense interplay of intersecting lines as in the upper right and areas of relatively open space as in the rosy section just left of center. A viewer attending to all these oppositions, in the way Kandinsky specifies, would not be at rest, but would experience a kind of unresolved dissonance.

In addition, Kandinsky not only opposes elements, but thwarts expectation in his use of color, as Schoenberg frustrated expectations in his use of tones. Kandinsky describes typically cold blue as producing a warm effect in the context of this painting. He also asserts that the “long, solemn lines” in *Composition VI* have a different effect from similar lines used in *Composition IV*. Similarly, Kandinsky applauded Schoenberg’s use of any combination of notes in any progression, especially those that were unexpected or nontraditional, as he deemed necessary in the context of a specific composition. Kandinsky’s description of such effects in his painting should also serve as a caution to scholars who attempt to explain the function of certain colors in Kandinsky’s

works of this period based on his description of their properties (in general) in *On the Spiritual in Art*. According to his description of his compositional process, Kandinsky must work out the effects of the juxtapositions of colors and lines in each painting and the viewer must seek these relationships as they look at each painting. In *Reminiscences*, Kandinsky expresses his desire for the viewer to approach a painting “with an open mind, expecting to pick out in it a language to which he can relate.” What Kandinsky does in his writings about his work is to provide a manner of approaching the painting, a guide to beginning to learn this “language.”

In another form of opposition, colors and lines in *Composition VI* continually overrun one another such that it is difficult to determine the relationship between any given line and the space, color(s) and lines adjacent to it. Such compositional features allow the sort of “independent life” that Kandinsky applauded in Schoenberg’s music and wished to create in his paintings. For Schoenberg, tones no longer required to be related in specified ways can move in their own direction, independently of each other. For Kandinsky, color and line do not have to be related in the same ways they would need to be if they were representing recognizable objects and so can function independently. Such organizations could also produce similar results for the viewer: much as the audience for Schoenberg’s pantonal compositions at the January 1911 concert did not experience the restful return to consonance they would have expected, Kandinsky’s colors and lines, if viewed in the way he describes, would not resolve into familiar forms for its viewers.

Despite the seeming independence of elements and the many contrasts he used in *Composition VI*, Kandinsky asserts that “all these elements, even those that contradict

one another, inwardly attain total equilibrium, in such a way that no single element gains the upper hand... (TP, 388).” Kandinsky’s description of the creation of *Composition VI* is essentially an account of his painstaking balancing of contrasting elements against each other. This is the unifying organization of Kandinsky’s placement of colors and lines on the canvas: equilibrium based on the balancing of multiple, complex contrasts over the entire surface of the canvas. There is no need for his “dissonant contrasts” to resolve to a state of rest, as their balancing dynamic tension, integrating all areas of the canvas, produces a state of wholeness and equilibrium. The organization of the painting, as Kandinsky describes it, is similar to Schoenberg’s use of unresolved dissonances. For Schoenberg, there was no need for his dissonances to resolve to consonances in the context of a work in which neither consonances or dissonances would “gain the upper hand.” Of course, Schoenberg did not use traditional oppositional strategies for consonance and dissonance, as he did not acknowledge a functional difference between them – dissonances were merely further removed consonances. Kandinsky did not mimic Schoenberg’s specific compositional strategies, but employed similar general principles, namely the acceptability of unresolved tensions, and juxtaposition of any combination of forms, to produce a unified compositional structure in the unique context of a specific work. As Kandinsky advocated: “one art has to learn from another how it tackles its own materials and, having learned this, use in principle the materials peculiar to itself in a similar way, i.e., according to the principle that belongs to itself alone (*OSA*, 154).

Conclusion

In this study I have attempted to clarify the relationship between Kandinsky’s move towards abstraction in painting and his encounters with the music and theory of

Arnold Schoenberg. This relationship cannot be reduced to a simple one of either influence or convergence. Instead, Kandinsky's encounters with Schoenberg represent a critical juncture through which we can explore the extent and limits of the painter's engagement with musical concepts as he worked on a developing theory of composition for abstract painting.

Rather than merely looking to music as a general model for abstract art, Kandinsky explored compositional principles derived from the diatonic tonal system and Schoenberg's pantonal music. He employed the musical concept of dissonance as a framework for thinking about compositional structure in his abstract paintings. Unlike previous studies, I have carefully examined Kandinsky's writings to elucidate his specific conception of dissonance in paintings as distinct from its meanings in music. His painterly "dissonance" was an idiosyncratic transformation distinguished from, but incorporating strategies comparable to both the diatonic tonal system and Schoenberg's theories of dissonance. Kandinsky's compositional structures were not organized in ways entirely consistent with Schoenberg's treatment of dissonance in his pantonal works. However, Schoenberg's arguments for the acceptability of unresolved dissonance and an "antilogical" compositional structure bolstered Kandinsky's arguments that these principles could support legitimate compositional strategies for abstract art.

Kandinsky's understanding of Schoenberg's pantonal music, and his account of the creation of *Composition VI*, help to clarify the "hidden" structure of his abstract painting. In his description of the painting, Kandinsky offers a way to experience *Composition VI* that is akin to music, and particularly to Schoenberg's pantonal music, in the effects it produces, but in which the painting is not meant to portray music or mimic

its specific compositional strategies. He relates a compositional structure comprised of a multitude of contrasts, in large and small areas of the canvas, that produce disorienting and conflicting effects, while his balancing of these tensions across the whole painting produces an effect of a unifying equilibrium. Thus, Kandinsky provides a way to see the painting as having a unifying, if not immediately apparent, structure that can be seen from looking at elements available to the viewer in the surface features of the finished painting. Some scholars have tried to identify Kandinsky's "hidden" structure in his more abstract pre-war paintings by searching for underlying content in the form of recognizable objects or by looking at preliminary sketches to identify its underlying structure. Instead, I see Kandinsky's notion of "hidden" structure as more comparable to his approach to Schoenberg's pantonal works – a compositional structure that is not immediately obvious, due to its unfamiliarity and complexity, but in which any combination of forms can be juxtaposed to create a unifying whole in the unique context of a specific work. According to Kandinsky, the "hidden" structure would become apparent and emerge from contemplation of the work when a viewer approached it in an appropriate manner, like that he suggests in his description of *Composition VI*. By looking at the features of the painting as Kandinsky describes them and in light of his own understanding of the function of dissonance, we can also see how the juxtaposition of lines, colors and forms in *Composition VI* could create for a viewer the kind of experience Kandinsky had while listening to Schoenberg's music and appreciate the "hidden structure" in the arrangement of colors and lines on the canvas.

The relationship between the theories and works of Kandinsky and Schoenberg is an indication of the complexity of such interartistic encounters. It is not sufficient to

identify the musical concepts with which artists were engaged. It is also necessary to specify how artists employed them, for what specific purposes, and how artists transformed these concepts as they moved between the realms of music and painting. Through studies that examine not just similarities in approach, but the limits and specific parameters of analogies between the arts, we can begin to productively clarify the multiple relationships between music and abstract painting.

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Figures



Figure 1. Photograph of *Composition II*. (Wassily Kandinsky, 1910, oil on canvas, 78 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 108 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. Painting destroyed during World War II.)



Figure 2. *Sketch for Composition II*. (Wassily Kandinsky, 1909-1910, oil on canvas, 38 ³/₈ x 51 ⁵/₈ in. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.)

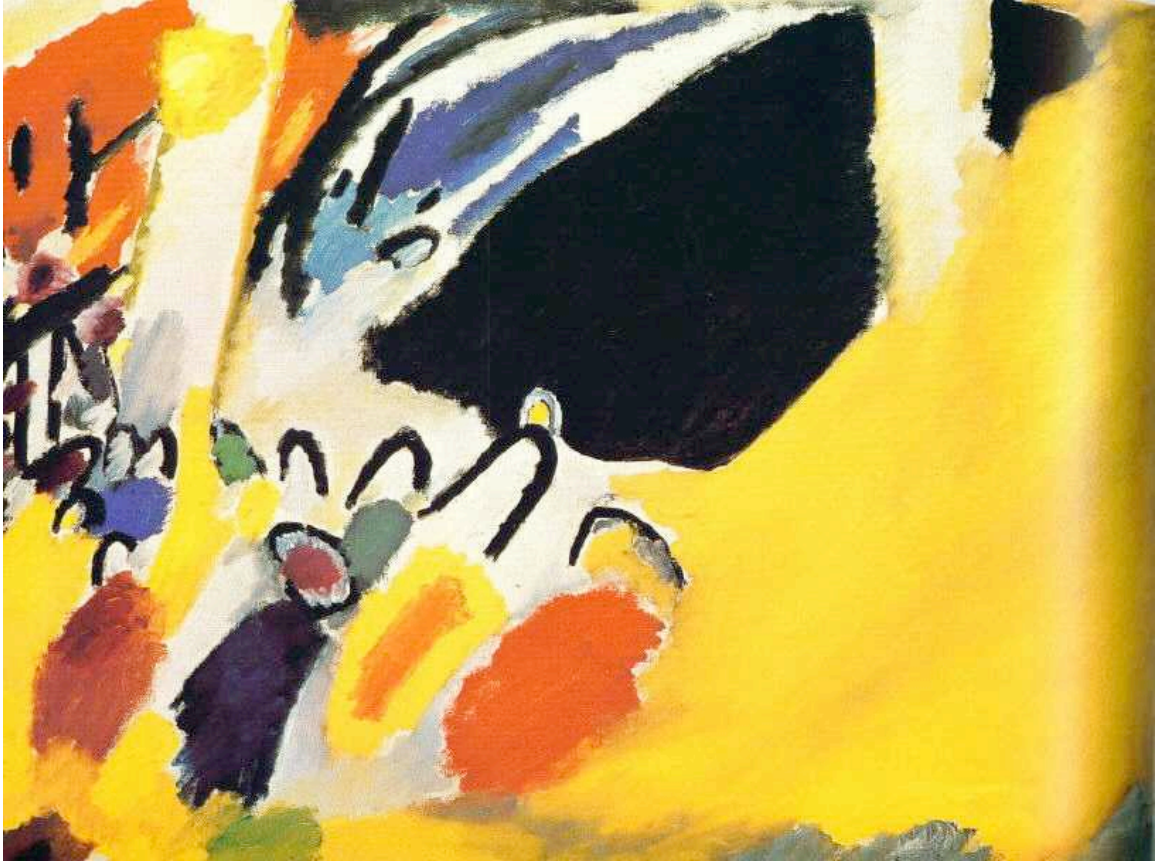


Figure 3. *Impression III*. (Wassily Kandinsky, 1911, oil on canvas, 30 ½ x 39 ⅓ in. Städtische Galerie, Munich.)



Figure 4. *Composition VI*. (Wassily Kandinsky, 1913, oil on canvas, 76 ¾ x 118 ⅛ in. State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.)