

Κέρκυρα, 27-29 Απριλίου 2012

Corfu, 27-29 April 2012

ΣΥΝΕΔΡΙΟ
ΦΙΛΟΣΟΦΙΑΣ ΚΑΙ ΜΟΥΣΙΚΗΣ
«Θεωρίες του Χρόνου και Μουσική»

PHILOSOPHY
AND MUSIC CONFERENCE
«Time Theories and Music»



Time Theories and Music Conference

Ionian University / Corfu, 27-29 April 2012

Proceedings

ed. by Panos Vlagopoulos

Ionian University - Department of Music Studies

Corfu, 2013

2012 Corfu Time and Music Conference Proceedings

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Time, Music, and Gardens

Note

This paper contains written and visual material presented by me at the *Time Theories and Music Conference*, together with some background written material that amplifies points made during my presentation. Links are also provided to three videos shown during the presentation.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to Wiley-Blackwell for permission to quote extensively from material which first appeared in *Gardening - Philosophy for Everyone: Cultivating Wisdom*, edited by Dan O'Brien.

GARDENS, MUSIC AND TIME

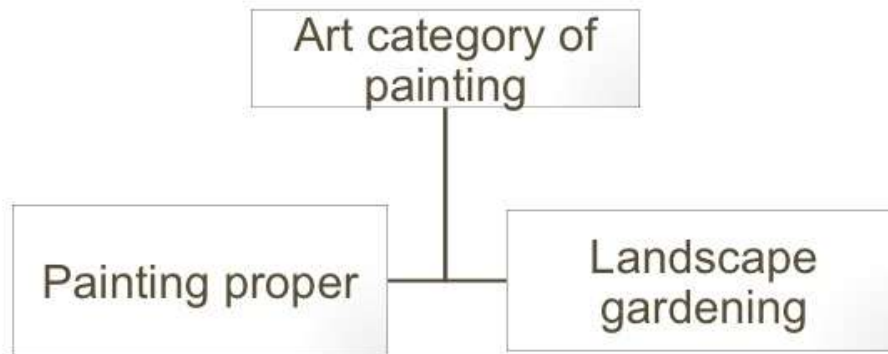


PowerPoint Slide 1 (Video accompanied by part of Bach's *Art of Fugue*.) [available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qjXhCSu2hl>]

The 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant is often considered to be the father of modern aesthetics. In the *Critique of Judgement* he suggests a taxonomy of the fine arts (*beaux arts*) of his time, dividing them into three: the arts of speech, the formative arts and, as he described it, “the art of the beautiful play of sensations”.

He then further divides the formative arts into plastic art (sculpture and architecture) and painting, and painting into “painting proper” and “landscape gardening”.¹ Painting proper involves “the beautiful portrayal of nature” and landscape gardening involves “the beautiful arrangement of its products”.²

Kant: *Critique of Judgement*



PowerPoint Slide 2

Kant goes on to say that gardens, or at least landscape gardens, are “for the eye only, just like painting”³ and that, like any work of fine art, a beautiful garden is one that meets an aesthetic standard. Any work of fine art should be the object of a Judgement that he called a Judgement of free beauty and that is characteristically expressed in language such as ‘That is beautiful!’ The object of such a Judgement is one that is lovely to look at or listen to or touch. A beautiful garden or a beautiful painting is lovely to look at, a beautiful piece of music is lovely to listen to and a beautiful sculpture is, Kant says, both lovely to look at and to touch.

Kant’s classification of landscape gardens as works of visual art reflected the commonsense view of his time. They were works of art because their creation required skill and planning and because they aspired to be beautiful to look at. The view that gardens were primarily works of visual art persisted and was strengthened by successive historical and aesthetic events such as the rise in importance of the picturesque as an aesthetic quality, the continuing influence of the Beaux Arts tradition and the influence of modernism as the dominant theory during much of last century. In fact, the notion that gardens are works of visual art like painting has remained unexplored until the last few decades.

*“Gardens are
for the eye only,
just like
paintings.”*

static

two dimensional

visual objects



PowerPoint Slide 3

I will not challenge the claim that gardens can be understood and appreciated as things that are ‘for the eye’ and that aspire to be lovely to look at. Understanding gardens as a subcategory of painting is a valid way to understand their value, as far as it goes. Gardens can be appreciated as pictures. However, appreciating them in this way affords only an incomplete experience of them. My purpose is to argue that gardens have visual dimensions that painting, sculpture and architecture lack. In particular, I will develop a suggestion that gardens present the passing of time visually in a way that is analogous to the way in which music presents the passing of time audibly, but that differs from it in significant respects. I will argue that appreciating this aspect of gardens supplies a reason for conceptualizing them as a distinctive category of art that offers a unique kind of experience.

Change and the Arts

Changes are essential to gardens in a way that implies gardens are unlike the other objects Kant placed in the category of formative arts. This is because gardens are made of natural objects and,

especially, living organisms, which are arranged to be objects of aesthetic experience. Gardeners expect changes in the organisms they arrange and intend these changes to be amongst the features of gardens to which attention is directed and in which pleasure is taken. In particular, relations in and between the sequences of events that constitute the lives of plants, and between these sequences and those that are changes in inorganic objects that are also parts of gardens, are features that supply reasons for the aesthetic judgments involved in appreciation of gardens. Gardeners arrange or employ inorganic and organic elements in the expectation that characteristic changes will occur in them and with the intention that relations in and between these changes will be the object of aesthetic attention and pleasure. Flowering, as well as flowers, the unfurling of fronds as well as the fronds, sprouting and decaying, fruiting and seeding and relations between these events are to be noticed and enjoyed.

Paintings, non-kinetic sculptures and buildings do change and painters, sculptors and architects expect them to do so, but from an aesthetic point of view few of these changes are desirable. For example, a painting's varnish may darken and its colour fade, a sculpture's marble may chip or discolour and a building's steel may rust or its paint peel off. Ideally objects of these kinds should remain as they were first painted, carved, cast or built, apart from changes, such as the acquisition of a patina, that are perceived to increase their aesthetic qualities and enhance their aesthetic value. This is why the point of restoring a painting, a sculpture or a building is to return it to its original condition, or to that which is considered to be most beautiful. In both cases it would be aesthetically desirable for the object to remain in the condition to which it has been returned. Aesthetic attention to paintings and sculptures is attention to relations between objects in a static configuration.

Gardens are
not like
paintings.


not purely visual

not two dimensional

not static.

Change is inevitable
and so...

time is essential.



**PowerPoint Slide 4 (Time-lapse video of snow drops opening.) [available at:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3P5ooOFMMUo>]**

Gardens are not ideally static. Although gardeners resist some of the changes that are characteristic of the living organisms that are the material of gardens by mowing lawns and clipping hedges for example, they plan for and encourage others. Gardens should develop, not remain as they were when first created. Aesthetic appreciation of gardens that is confined to the way they appear only at particular moments and that does not take account of the relation between these appearances and those that precede and succeed them misses out a whole dimension of aesthetic experience.

Changes are also essential to performances because performances are sequences of events. Typically, the events constituting performances are actions of agents following instructions supplied by a script, a score or a choreography. These actions or their products are intended to be that to which attention is directed and in which pleasure is taken. In dance performances these are the movements of the dancer. In dramatic performances they are the actions of actors, the story they tell and the way in which they tell it. In musical performances they are sequences of sounds produced by the performers.

However, the changes essential to performances are unlike those essential to gardens in a crucial respect because the objects in which the changes occur are not performers. For example, crocuses sprout in the winter or early spring, produce flowers and die down during the summer. These events are what crocuses do. However, crocuses are not performing and they are not carrying out instructions even when in sprouting and flowering they realize a gardener's intentions.

Change and Time

Events are changes in objects and changes involve time. An object changes when the properties it has or the relations in which it stands at one time differ from the properties it has and the relations in which it stands at another time. This means that changes cannot occur without time passing. Time and change are, therefore, inextricably linked. Change and times are essential to gardens because they are essential to a garden's objects, and therefore Hunt is correct when he says that time makes a "fundamental contribution" to "the being of a garden" and a garden "not only exists in but also takes its special character from four dimensions."⁴

Time and its passage exist and can be experienced in different modes. The first of these modes is measurable, predictable time, the time of science and clocks. In this paper I call this chronological time. The second mode is experiential time. This is time as individual humans experience its passing. It is not objectively measurable: it slows down and speeds up according to our individual experience of it in the context of some external or internal event or object. "Time flies when you're having fun," is a cliché that succinctly expresses an opinion about the passage of experiential time. The third mode of time is musical time. This is the time created in a musical work. It is a product of the complex interplay between pulse, metre and the composed temporal units in a work. This time is different from the time taken for a musical performance, which can be declared accurately in terms of chronological time, and it is different from how long the musical composition seems to a listener. It will be discussed more fully later in the paper.

Time and the Arts

Works of art can be divided into three groups based on the way in which they involve time. As I said earlier, paintings and sculpture are works whose temporal aspects are only marginally, if ever, the objects of aesthetic attention. Aesthetic attention to them is not attention to events or processes, but to static configurations. However, some paintings and sculptures are like novels in that they have a temporal dimension because they represent either single events or narratives. The time taken by the events they represent is chronological time. The time taken to look at them or read them is also chronological time. It is variable and largely unconstrained by them. A long novel takes longer to read than a short one but how long it takes to read depends on factors such as how quickly someone reads and how much time she wants to spend reading. However, aesthetic attention to representational painting and sculpture is not attention to temporal aspects of the way in which they represent because it does not have any temporal aspects. Aesthetic pleasure in their representation of narrative is not pleasure taken in its temporal features because it does not have any.

The second group includes opera, dance, theatre and readings of poetry. They have a temporal dimension because they are performances and performances are temporally ordered sequences of events. They take place in chronological time and so does the experience of them. The time taken to experience a performance is constrained by the time the performance takes. Watching a play or dance and listening to an opera begins when the performance begins and ends when the performance ends. In addition, most works in this group represent sequences of events that take place in chronological time. They tell stories. Usually, the time taken by the performance differs from the time taken by the events it represents. A play that lasts two hours might represent events that occur over twenty years. A dance that lasts five minutes might represent the week long life of a butterfly. Because the passage of time is a constitutive component of these arts aesthetic attention to them is attention to time's passage. Aesthetic pleasure is taken in temporal aspects of the way in which they represent their stories.

Musical performances generally do not represent events. As a consequence, the time taken performing them is not to be contrasted with the time taken by the events they represent. In these works the essential artistic activity is the creation of temporal patterns that present the passing of time to the ear. As I will argue, music does this by creating patterns in sounds through rhythm. Aesthetic attention to musical performance includes attention not only to the pitch, timbre and amplitude of the sounds. It must also include attention to the temporal aspects of the performance's sounds.

When we experience gardens as paintings we experience them as we experience members of the first group that do not represent events or tell stories. We attend to them as static arrangements and ignore their temporal aspect altogether.

However, when we experience them as presenting the passing of time we experience them as objects whose temporal qualities are as important as their pictorial qualities. Our experience of them is analogous to our experience of musical performances.

Gardens are like performances.

music

dance

PowerPoint Slide 5

I will now argue that gardens present the passing of time to the eye by presenting visible patterns in changes occurring in and to organic and inorganic objects. The patterns are perceived to be rhythmic just like patterns in sound. They can be the objects of aesthetic pleasure and supply reasons for aesthetic judgments just as audible rhythms can.

Time and Change in Gardens

Gardens cannot literally make time visible; even sundials and floral clocks can't do that. But noticing changes that take place in gardens makes awareness of time possible and noticing patterns in and between these changes makes aesthetic appreciation of it possible. Gardens present visual evidence of the passage of time or evidence of a gardener's or garden designer's attempts to resist the changes brought about by it.

We are aware of change in gardens in two different ways. Firstly we are aware, to a greater or lesser degree, of the changes that occur continuously in all natural objects and that are clearly exhibited in a garden since such objects are the material of which it is made. For instance, the individual plants in a

traditional herbaceous border look completely different in midwinter from the way they look in midsummer. Secondly, insofar as gardens are designed, we may be aware of the designer's having composed, contrasted or otherwise articulated types of change in gardens in order to highlight the passage(s) of time(s) in ways that may be interesting and attractive.

The passage of chronological time is evident in gardens in three ways. There is firstly the time of geology and geomorphology, the time spans over which rocks, landforms and soils are made, changed and eroded. There is secondly biological time, the time spans over which individual plants and parts of plants live, die, and reproduce. Thirdly there are diurnal and seasonal cycles. The time the changes and the cycles take is the same as the time experiencing them takes, if we were to watch them for the whole time they take. This is a way in which changes in gardens are like performances. However we don't usually sit and watch the grass grow or oak trees mature. This is because we would feel that the experience was taking even longer than the time it does take. We would experience it as intolerably long because it would be boring. This is an example of the difference between experiential and chronological time.

I have already claimed that it is in the nature of gardens that they change constantly, the most change occurring in the plants of the garden. Change is essential to all living organisms and the changes that constitute their lives are responsible for the richness and complexity of the experience of time that gardens offer. Moreover, it is the use of plants as materials that makes the art of gardening distinctive and that makes the aesthetic experience of gardens different from the experience of paintings.

Plants are always either growing or dying, and sometimes different parts of the same plant can be growing and dying at the same time. Plants grow, set seed, senesce and die according to their internal biological clocks. You cannot usually see a mature kauri in a newly established garden and nor can you see camellia flowers in summer. You have to wait while the kauri takes its own time to grow and you have to wait for the appropriate season to see the camellia in flower.

The speed of change varies greatly between different plants. Petunias and radishes have brief life spans. The flowers of daylilies and moonflowers are particularly ephemeral although the plants are not. Some aloes mature over several years and then die as soon as they flower. Oaks endure for centuries but change quite markedly each year in tune with the seasons.

The fact that different plants, different parts of plants, and natural materials all have different rates of change presents aesthetic opportunities to the gardener in the way she chooses to combine plants and natural materials. For example, an oak tree grows slowly, its leaves grow and decay relatively quickly, a drift of crocuses underneath the oak appears and disappears at a different rate and a surrounding lawn is managed so that it looks the same all the time. Such a combination of plants affords visual interest but at the same time it creates a complex rhythm of lifecycles, growth and decay that may interest, excite, calm, disturb or reassure an attentive visitor. Similarly, rhythms of change and decay are also present to be noticed by the observant and informed where the passing of

geological and geomorphological time is manifest in the shape of the ground itself, and in the shape, colour and composition of rocks, gravel, sand and soil.

All of this means that the passage of time is inescapable in gardens. There is always evidence of it: flowers opening, worms working the soil, leaves changing colour and falling from the trees, fern fronds unfurling, leaves and petals folding for the night, and even whole gardens maturing or senescing. Gardens do not merely happen to exhibit time's passing: they must do so. Any garden is living. It must change and with that time must pass, no matter how subtly.

The patterns in these changes are there to be seen. They are visible and they are the fundamental artistic material of gardens as a distinctive art from paintings. I will now argue that they are like patterns in sound in that they are rhythms. They are visual rhythms produced in a way that is analogous to the way in which audible rhythms are produced.

“Music Makes the Passage of Time Audible”

Susanne Langer developed a detailed philosophy of the arts in *Philosophy in a New Key*⁵ and *Feeling and Form*.⁶ She was comprehensive in her treatment of music but she did not discuss gardens in any detail. Some preliminary ideas about how she might have treated landscape and garden design were developed in my “Thawed Music?”⁷

“Music Makes the Passage of Time Audible.”

PowerPoint Slide 6

Langer described in detail how the individual arts function as symbolic forms. Each art involves an “illusory field”. Music’s illusory field is time. She claimed that “music makes the passage of time audible”.⁸ I agree with the spirit of this claim, but my account of how music does this, while it owes a debt to her, differs from hers.

Music cannot literally make time audible but, by organizing sounds rhythmically, it can draw listeners’ attention to its passing. Musical time, which rhythm articulates, is a complex product of the interactions between pulse, metre and what I term composed temporal units.


In a composition a composer divides objectively measurable chronological time into a regularly recurring pattern called pulse. A composer then organizes pulses into a metre, which is also usually regular and recurring. When we tap our feet or clap our hands in time to music it is often in accordance with elements of a composition’s metre. Pulse and metre are indicated by a composition’s tempo indication (e.g. allegro or andante) and its time signature (e.g. 2/4 or 3/4).

Rhythm is created in a composition when a composer invents composed temporal units, or rhythmic motifs, that are articulated and experienced in relation to the metre. The temporal events that constitute rhythms are usually linked to melodic units, but this is not always the case. Melody is not necessary. Music requires only rhythm to exist.


Musical Time

CHRONOLOGICAL TIME


PULSE
allegro con brio



METRE
allegro con brio



COMPOSED TEMPORAL UNITS
allegro con brio



PowerPoint Slide 7 (Examples of pulse, metre and rhythm derived from the opening of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5)

Musical time, which rhythm articulates, is not objectively measurable chronological time and nor is it experiential time as defined earlier in this essay. It is however *like* experiential time in that it can appear to slow down, speed up, fragment or even stop. Just as excitement, boredom or shock can make human experiential time appear to pass quickly, drag or stop, so too can a composer manipulate her materials to create a range of temporal effects for our direct experience. (See *Figure 2* and *3* below.) Music uses the passage of this musical time as its fundamental artistic material. Music creates its own experiential, audible time world and offers us the opportunity to pay attention to it.

Experiences of Musical Time

The image displays four musical staves illustrating different experiences of musical time. The first staff is marked 'Moderato' and 'mf', showing a steady 3/4 rhythm with three triplet markings. The second staff shows a dense, fast-moving eighth-note pattern that ends with a fermata and a 'fff' dynamic marking. The third staff is marked 'Moderato' and 'mf', showing a steady 3/4 rhythm with accents. The fourth staff shows a sparse, irregular rhythm with a 'ppp' dynamic marking followed by a 'fff' dynamic marking.

PowerPoint Slide 8 (Musical time appears to (a) speed up and (b) become erratic and unpredictable in these examples.)

Although we experience musical time as being different from objectively measurable, chronological time we inevitably experience the former time in relation to the latter because that is the only way we can experience rhythm and thus experience sound as music at all. Perhaps just as a *cantus firmus* provides a melodic structural element around which a polyphonic musical composition is heard so too chronological time can be said to provide a temporal structural element, a “*rhythmus firmus*”, against, or more accurately, parallel to which, a piece of music is heard.

Gardens make the Passage of Time Visible

The relevant patterns in and between the changes that occur in gardens are visual. These visual patterns are rhythms produced in a way that is analogous to the way in which rhythms are produced in sound. They are patterns in the movements essential to gardens. All growth is movement. Sprouting, unfurling, flowing, fruiting are movements, and so are dwindling, drooping, falling and decaying.

Gardens have pulse, metre and rhythm.

CHRONOLOGICAL TIME

PULSE AND METRE

day/night

seasons

“life” cycles

“COMPOSED” TEMPORAL UNITS

PowerPoint Slide 9

In gardens, as in music, chronological time provides a “*rhythmus firmus*”. In a garden the continuum of chronological time divides itself into regular, recurring patterns experienced as diurnal and seasonal cycles. These cycles set up what we described in music as pulse and metre. It is important to note that in gardens this pulse and metre are not selected by the designer but are provided by nature itself.

Rhythm is created in a garden when a designer organizes natural objects into perceptual units. If they are plants then they bring with them the patterns of the events that constitute the lives of their kinds. For instance, oak trees grow from acorns, each year they lose all of their leaves, grow new leaves, flower and produce more acorns. Crocuses grow leaves and flowers in spring and then die down and hibernate until the next spring. The patterns in these events are given not created and there is a limit to the extent to which a gardener can alter or influence them. These patterns are experienced in relation to each other and to the background provided by the pulse and metre of diurnal and seasonal time, which are themselves stretches of chronological time. When we experience these patterns in this way we experience them as rhythm.

Just as in music, time in gardens is a complex product of the interactions between pulse, metre and selected perceptual units. But there is an important difference: all the elements of garden time are chronological time elements. Unlike musical time, chronological time cannot be slowed down or speeded up, reversed, fragmented or stopped. Gardens use the passage of chronological time as a fundamental artistic material but in so doing they create their own complex arrangement of temporal patterns and thereby offer us opportunities to think about the implications of time and its passage.

In music and gardens our experience of rhythms depends not only on our memory of what has preceded what we see and hear but also our expectation of what may follow what we see and hear. For instance, when deciduous trees are bare in gardens in winter we know that at a certain distance in time in the past the trees were covered in leaves and we know that at a certain distance in time in the future they will again have leaves. Similarly in music our experience of the silence in bar 3 of the Beethoven example above is influenced by what we know we heard in bars one and two, and this knowledge in turn influences what we may expect to hear later in that bar and in the following bars. Thus in both music and gardens these experiences are based on knowledge. But there is a difference. In music our sphere of knowledge is generally restricted to the composition in progress and to the composer's compositional style. However, in gardens our knowledge may be of that particular garden, or one of its plants, a few minutes or a year ago, or it may be a much broader knowledge of living materials and natural processes in gardens or nature generally.

Gardens can draw out attention to (Real) Time and its Passage.

Irreversibility
Unidirectionality
Inevitability
Inexorability

Health
Death
Birth
Senescence
Fragility/Fleetingness



PowerPoint Slide 10

Experiencing Time in Gardens

Because people are living organisms human responses to a garden's rhythms may be especially interesting, evocative and resonant. In gardens we are faced with patterns in real chronological time, rather than the "play" time of music. These patterns may lead to reflections on time and its effects. By providing designed real-time worlds gardens can offer us opportunities to observe painlessly, and to meditate on and experience time's passing. In gardens we see birth, senescence and death, we see slow and fast cyclical changes, and we see "offspring" and "parents". These experiences enable reflections on the "human condition", its permanence or transience, stability or instability, on mortality or regeneration, growth or decay, health or sickness. They allow us to reflect on the vagaries of human as well as plant life.


Our experiences of gardens may direct our attention to time itself, to its irreversibility, its unidirectionality, its re-cyclic nature, its inevitability, its fleetingness and its inexorability. They may direct our attention to our comfort when we embrace time's passage or to our discomfort when we struggle against it. Some gardens, such as the so-called "timeless" Zen-style raked sand gardens, and other gardens that highlight geological or very slow moving time, may invite us to reflect on eternity.

They may offer us the opportunity to step out of our own time, to lose ourselves, to release ourselves from our human time and escape temporarily to a realm where time appears to stand still.

In gardens we are both spectators and participants. We observe and we dance in the garden of time.

Gardens can also draw out attention to an apparent absence of Time

Timelessness
Eternity



PowerPoint Slide 11 (This image is accompanied by an extract from Morton Feldman's *Intermission No6.*) [available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vM4Ytl2lc-I>]

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¹ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement* trans. James C Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952) section 51: 187

² *Ibid* section 51: 187

³ *Ibid* section 51: 188

⁴ John Dixon Hunt, *Greater Perfections: The Practice of Garden Theory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), p. 15

⁵ Susanne K Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957)

⁶ Susanne K Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953)

⁷ John Powell, "Thawed Music?", (Dip. L.A. diss., Lincoln College, 1988)

⁸ Langer (1953) p.110