



## THE CONCEIT OF ‘COLOR HEARING’ IN LITERARY STUDIES OF A SONG TEXT

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### Abstract

The article represents the results of stylistic and literary analysis of *The Wild Wild Sea*, a song lyric by Sting. There was shown that the contemporary critical studies of any literary work may involve the elements of other scientific paradigms to create the new vision of an artistic phenomenon. Particularly, the conceits of so-called ‘color hearing’ proved by several prominent scholars and artists seem now productive to analyze the text of a song as a synthesis of verbal and musical means to express the writer’s emotions and worldview.

### Introduction

Music is never limited in ways to transform the purely audible, or sonic, impressions into those visible. Both the visible and audible associations to be evoked by sounds, chords and keys of a musical work obtained the scientific term of ‘synopsia,’ ‘synesthesia,’ or merely ‘color hearing.’ The certain qualities of subjects to see do often evoke in us some analogies with the qualities of sounds; otherwise, we can also associate in ‘reverse way,’ from audible to visible. For instance, there may be a tendency to call some high or loud notes ‘brilliant,’ and furthermore to make a sequence of notes to express the gleams of fire, the lightning, or twinkling stars. A composer can as well arrange the parts of definite musical instruments (string, wood, brass, drums etc.) to visualize sunrise, sunset, twilight and so on.

The more generalized are artistic means, the more free and subjective the associations may be. Thanks to them, many musical works (especially those we like the best) can obtain different additional senses – despite the creative inventions of their authors.

The objectives of this article is to confirm the specifications of functioning of color elements in a song text (*The Wild Wild Sea* by Sting) and their projection onto musical accompaniment, taking into consideration the opinions about the ‘colorful’ initials of the music as well as of the verse.

### Method

We used the traditional methods of linguistic, firstly stylistic, and musical analysis to examine the transformation of sensory images into self-dependent semantic conceits and their functions as specific imagery in song lyrics. The method of close reading was used to study the esthetical functions of color means in creating the special picture of the world in songs by Sting.

### Results and Discussions

Both a composer and a listener live in a visible world. Just like any other kind of arts, music is likely to be a reflection of ideas, subjects, and events in our surrounding. Anyway, a visual element is present in every musical sound or a sequence of sounds.

Since the music exists, people have been trying to comprehend the correlation between invisible music and visible subjects, to put them in order, and otherwise to express the music in color.

As it is known, some people have an absolute ear to music and thereafter are able to define the key of a sound produced by anything. Every sound in perception of an absolute-ear human has its specific hue; therefore ‘color hearing’ is usually exposed in rendering the color to a key note. However, any color sequence for a certain gamut (taking also C-dur into consideration) is never similar for all of the absolute-ear people.

Hindu were the first to see music in color. Every musical sound in their worldview was correspondent to either a planet, or a constellation, or a part of a body, or a hue of a color. Ancient Greek, starting from Pythagoras and his school, correlated seven notes of a gamut to planets, mathematical proportions etc., and particularly – to seven colors of rainbow.

It was Isaac Newton who gave a scientific explanation to correlation between sounds and colors. In his *Optics* (1704), he affirmed the following sequence (Newton, 154): *C is red, D is violet, E is blue, F is azure, G is green, A is yellow, and H is orange* (the only missing note, B, is to be hypothetically defined as apricot orange because half tone lower than H).

Then, in mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, the French monk Louis Bertrand Castelle invented the first ‘colored harpsichord’ to be played by bad-sighted musicians. Each key of the instrument was connected to a color spot appearing on the moving paper stripe: *C blue, Cis azure, D green, Dis olive-colored, E yellow, F apricot orange, Fis bright orange, G red, Gis crimson, A violet, B purple, and H indigo*.

As a really existing phenomenon, and never a symptom of mental disorder as it was usually thought, ‘color hearing’ was greatly appreciated by Romanticists (firstly Hector Berlioz and Ferenz Liszt); but the most splendid period, a pure ‘golden age’ for ‘color music’ was Impressionism represented by French composers Claude Debussy, Paul Ducas, and Maurice Ravel.

Every musician had been forming one’s own vision of world in sounds for ages, to study and thereafter to create. The individual semantics of keynotes, their emotional and intellectual estimation is a result of this sometimes lifelong process.

The term ‘color hearing’ may be drastic due to its oxymoron construct; it is more correctly to speak about ‘color and light characteristics of notes.’ As Mikhail Gnyesin (1956) wrote about Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov, “the perfect and fluent ability to hear a color and to see a sound – the convincible reproduction of the essence of color in musical work together with subtle, attentive and sensitive attitude to human experience – that’s what had made Rimsky-Korsakov the greatest poet of nature.”

On the other side, the composer confessed, “All the keys, chords and sequences – as for me – may be seen in nature itself: for instance, in the color of clouds, or in astonishingly beautiful twinkling of color poles and in brilliance of polar lights. Here comes a congenial ‘Cis,’ and ‘h’ as well, and ‘As,’ and whatsoever you want” (See Rimsky-Korsakov, 2004).

Here are the examples of correlation between keynotes and colors by Rimsky-Korsakov: *C-dur white; G-dur golden brown; D-dur yellowish; A-dur pink; E-dur blue; H-dur indigo; Fis-dur green-grayish; Des-dur scarlet; As-dur violet-grayish; Es-dur gray and bluish; B-dur ivory; F-dur color of first spring green*. We may suppose that the minor keynotes homonymous to those major have merely got the lighter hues of noticed colors.

As it is evident, anyone who tries to juxtapose the color hues with musical sounds obtains the different arrays of colors, presented in culturologically significant numbers – either seven (the quantity of notes in a gamut) or twelve (the general quantity of tones and halftones), where major keys are usually brighter than those minor of the same color.

This hypothesis was set in accordance with earlier observed predominance of minor keys in songs by Sting. It is evident that he included only two or three major songs in each of his albums. For *The Dream of the Blue Turtles* (1985), these are *Love Is the Seventh Wave* and *The Dream of the Blue Turtles*; for *Nothing like the Sun* (1987), these are *Lazarus Heart* and *Secret Marriage*; for *The Soul Cages* (1991), these are *All This Time, Why Should I Cry for You* and *When the Angels Fall*; for *Ten Summoner’s Tales* (1993), these are *If I Ever Lose My Faith in You, Seven Days, and Nothing ‘bout Me*; for *Brand New Day* (1999), these are *Fill Her Up, Ghost Story, and Brand New Day*; for *Sacred Love* (2003), these are *Dead Man’s Rope* and *Sacred Love*. Major and minor keys are equally represented in *The Last Ship* (2013). Exceptionally, *Mercury Falling* (1996) consists of mostly major tracks (the minors are *The Hounds of Winter, La Belle Dame Sans Regrets, and Valparaiso*).

The conceits of ‘color hearing’ are to be discussed on the material of any Sting’s verse representing the color picture, for example *The Wild Wild Sea* from *The Soul Cages* (1991). First of all, its key is B-moll which is usually given some dark hues (purple by Louis Castelle, or grey by Rimsky-Korsakov). The prominent color detail, ‘black sail,’ occasionally coincides with all of the five black keys of a piano to play the song.

As for Christopher Gable, *The Wild Wild Sea* is patterned after an English ballad, with no choruses. There are two main chord patterns that accompany each stanza, with slight variations in order to make transitions smooth. But what is more noticeable and relevant in a ballad-style song such as this is *the variation in the vocal line*. The vocal pattern generally follows the harmonic one; that is, the melody changes when the harmonic pattern changes. Sting's vocal register, naturally, follows the emotional content of the stanza. In true storyteller fashion, the lines describing the storm are at a higher, more exciting level (Gable, 61-62), for example:

*...and my anxious eyes search the horizon  
With the gathering sea at my back...*

*Did I see the shade of the sailor  
Through the bridge of the wheelhouse pane  
Held fast to the wheel of a rocking ship  
As I squinted my eyes in the rain... (Sting, 1991).*

Talking about versification, *The Wild Wild Sea*, due to its lexical and syntactical structure, seems similar to folk ballad *Sir Patrick Spence*; according to its narration, Spence's ship drowned because the captain did not pay attention to malignant signs:

*I saw the new moon late yestreen  
Wi the auld moon in her arm;  
And if we gang to sea, master,  
I fear we'll come to harm (the stanza from Sir Patrick Spence)*

The same signs fill the space of Sting's ballad:

*I saw it **again** this evening:  
Black sail on the pale yellow sky,  
And just as before in the moment  
It was gone where the grey gulls fly (Sting, 1991).*

The very first line contains two symbolic words essential to comprehend the sense of *The Soul Cages* as a whole, – 'again' to indicate the recurrent situation, and 'evening' to expose the artistic time of practically all of the eight verses in the album. According to psychoanalytic theory, the poetic activity grows just in the evening (Freud, 173) to provoke a certain archetype in human consciousness. The cited song has the color image of black sail (in the second line alliterated in 'l') for this archetype which is an allusion to ancient Greek myth about Theseus.

The fantastic imagery and strange events in this song are explained by the speaker's dream. The dream itself does not start until the third stanza:

*That night as I walked in my slumber  
I waded into the sea strand  
And I swam with the moon and her lover  
Until I lost sight of the land...*

After that, the speaker suddenly and inexplicably finds himself aboard the ship that he thinks he saw in the first stanza (first, it was *black sail in a pale yellow sky*; then, *black sail on the reddening sky*). Another common occurrence in dreams is that of 'waking up,' which this speaker does in sixth and seventh stanzas:

*...for I woke in my bed of white linen  
And the sky was the color of clay.*

*At first, just the rustle of canvas  
And the gentlest breath on my face...*

As we can see, the chronotopic image of home ('my bed of white linen') and the vision of morning sky described as 'the color of clay' embody the alternation of anxiety and peace in the song. As for semantic of the word 'clay,' it is pretty hard to imagine what color has been meant, whether the light-gray (as a synonym of *ashes* and an equivalent to Ukrainian 'ноніл') or yellow-brown (as an equivalent to Ukrainian 'глина'). However, any hue may evidence the end of anxious dream and the beginning of the new day.

But the dream gets turned into no more anxious reality, inevitable for the speaker. So – has he really woken up? Actually no; he is still on the mysterious ship, and a storm is coming. Eventually he discovers that his father is trying to control the boat in the face of this mighty storm (Gable, 61-62):

*For the ship has turned into the wind  
Against the storm to brace  
And underneath the sailor's hat  
I saw my father's face... (Sting, 1991)*

The remarkable feature of the final stanza is the difference between its emotional mood and the meter to write it, which is iambic tetrameter alternating with iambic trimeter.

Therefore, the analyzed song in versification can be defined as oriented on Old English patterns **ballad** with dolnyk meter (dolnyk is any form of three-syllable foot with at least one syllable missing) and rhyming like *abxb*, where *x* is a verse unrhymed with the initial one; as for genre form, it is a verse **novella** based on the fable of a dream, with the Wendepunkt in the tenth stanza. The imagery of a poem is determined by alternation of archetypal motifs with those **coloristic** as predominant.

As a conclusion, it is possible to say that the synthesis of the poetic word and the sonic emanations in solo singing can make a lyrical or lyro-epic image more emotional, evoke in a listener the associative impressions and the remembrances of some events from one's life, and give them some certain colors.

All the eight songs in Sting's *The Soul Cages*, dense with images of dead fathers and trapped sons, of bitter weather, of moonlight and oceans that threaten oblivion or tempt with release, seldom waver from a deep fatalism that, no matter how romantic its guise, is almost unbearably tense. This is also evident in coloristics of the songs themselves and the colors to be evoked in a listener's soul. In other words, the musical arrangement of any song brings back some associations with visual pictures (in the case of *The Wild Wild Sea*, they are nightfall, night, sea storm, and the endangered ship) and, furthermore, allows embodying them in color hues one's own way.

Literary critics used to say that Sting's poetic language presented in *The Soul Cages* 'makes for a sort of sensory theatre – darkly lit, almost Gothic,' and this dark light may be exposed in a certain musical key – mostly minor and sometimes flat. However, despite quite simple (yet not simplified) language the poem is written in, the recipient should have the powerful imagination to apprehend and interpret well the sensory images setting up and developing the situation, particularly with a help of 'color hearing.'

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