This paper sets forth my argument that the perceptual experience of sonic hues and timbre in a piece of music is informed by residual traits of synaesthesia. In the first of the paper’s three parts, recent scientific findings on synaesthesia and the philosophical implications thereof are brought to bear on the philosophy of music. Developmental synaesthesia is a non-pathological if infrequent occurrence, widespread in babies, and “vestigial” in grown-ups (CYTOWIC, 2002). Sinke and colleagues’ (2013) Kantian hypothesis is that conceptual categories regulate non-synaesthetic and synaesthetic percepta similarly, though through exacerbated neurobiological processes in the latter. Evidence of synaesthetic traits in universal cross-modal “brightness-loudness” metaphors (CYTOWIC, 2002, p. 284) bears out the stable spatial equivalence in words contrasting sound frequencies (as high-and-low) across the languages which Stephen Davies (1994, p. 232) philosophically describes as “synaesthetic equations”. Andrew Kania (2015, p. 163) suggests that “each note in a scale” might be perceived “as a different (sonic) hue” with octave-related “saturation”. The premises to my argument are: 1) metaphorical traits universally connected with chromaesthesia inform the non-synaesthete listener’s understanding of the perceptual experience of sonic hue; namely, a piece’s tonally, rhythmically or otherwise contrastive musical-sound clusters; 2) perception is both of tones and of a quality (secondarily expressed as the synaesthetic metaphor of sonic hue) which elicits but fails to yield a visual concurrent (the particular tone-induced colour for a chromaesthete with perfect pitch); 3) individual hues in each chromaesthetic concurrent (e.g. white or red for A) are themselves secondary to, and metaphorical of, the universal category of colour as induced by tone; 4) and perceptual traits of chromaesthesia that shape musical metaphors may allow a better grasp of the perceptual experience of music than the degrees of literalness in metaphor implied in Davies’ (1994) theory of music’s expressiveness. I shall argue that chords (e.g. a B minor triad against which tonal centre E is persistently played) are universally perceived as evocative of colour features (other than timbre) which materialise only as metaphor for the non-synaesthete listener (E spotted in the B-minor backdrop);
whereas fully gelling into the chromaesthete’s sound-to-colour perceptual experience (say, a glossy E-red line on a woollen textured, teal-B mental screen).

The paper’s second part claims that the understanding non-synaesthete listener’s perception of the tone-colour features which define timbre against tone is one both of an auditory property and (to a lesser extent) of a metaphorical visual quality. Richard Cytowic (2002, p. 70) discusses evidence that the ‘louder’ the inducing sound, the ‘brighter’ both the metaphorical colour and the concurrent colour respectively in the synaesthetic and the non-synaesthetic perceptual experience of sound. Brightness (a universal) is itself a quality of more aurally pronounced sound (intensified upper partials) as added (e.g. electronically) to tones (particulars) without note, volume or octave change (e.g. on a bass guitar). Chromaesthetic features of ‘brightness’, I argue, instantiate the perceptual experience of timbre as a property of sound and as evoking a visual concurrent unavailable to the non-synaesthete unless as a metaphor (of colour intensity). Hence, in contrast to a trumpet sounding shiny olive-green to a synaesthete regardless of the notes played out on it. Davies’ (2011) argument that the perception of timbre as sound colours hinges on the listener’s awareness of the instruments being played is rejected herein as a condition to the understanding listener’s perceptual experience of timbre through a visual quality (brightness).

In the paper’s last section Christopher Peacocke’s (2009) philosophical explanation of non-verbal metaphors in the perceptual experience of music is partially accepted. But my concluding proposition contrasts with the isomorphic traits grounding Peacocke’s (2009) philosophical theory of a listener’s perceptual experience of music. I shall argue that the understanding non-synaesthete’s perception of sonic hue and timbral features as (metaphorically) visual is one of analogous substitution: the chromaesthetic visual concurrent is replaced with a colour metaphor which is analogous to it in the non-synaesthete’s perception thereof.

References


