Soundscapes: The National Gallery, until September 6

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"All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music": for Walter Pater it is the perfect self-containment of music that makes it the envy of the other arts. But what of music which seeks to leave its transcendent unity and to engage with the world of matter; and can music and visual art unite to produce something greater than the sum of their parts? The National Gallery has put these questions to six contemporary composers and sound artists, asking each to select and respond to a painting from their permanent collections.

The aim of Soundscapes is more than a form of musical ekphrasis: the compositions have been specifically designed to be heard in the presence of the artwork, and so the emphasis is on how these meetings can change our experience of art; it helps in gauging our changing perceptions that some of the chosen paintings are so well-known. The results can't exactly be called collaborative, and the show's slogan, "hear the painting, see the sound" promises too easy an equivalence. Rather, the wide range of strategies employed by the composers for evoking and engaging with the paintings testifies to the hugely subjective nature of such inter-artistic enquiry; and the sense of enhancement of, or detraction from, the experience of the paintings will doubtless be different for every viewer-auditor.

Above all, the exhibition breaks down the notion that visual art is best understood as existing in space, and music in time. All the music plays on a loop, and some of the pieces take the idea of non-linearity further, being structured as perfectly enclosed cycles, and eschewing notions of development or of tension and resolution. In rooms of pitch black, with the paintings shown under an intense light, there is a dynamic use of speakers so it feels as if sound is an active presence, varying greatly as we move about.

Chris Watson, best known for his sound work on natural history films, has put together recordings of the wildlife of northern Scandinavia to accompany Akseli Gallen-Kallela's "Lake Keitele", the only Finnish work in the National Gallery's collections. The concept might seem to respond to the painting's subject too literally, and to be better suited to a work of photographic realism; but over the course of its fifty minutes Watson's piece reveals itself to be a work of artistry. Gallen-Kallela chose his subject for its mythic resonances: Finnish folklore has it that the natural phenomena of bands of unsettled waters on the otherwise calm lake were left by the god Vainamoinen when he sailed across it. As a counterpart to the painting's bands of silver grey, the "yoik" of the native Sami people, a call to their ancestors, cuts in to the natural sounds in Watson's recording. Both works have a symbolic dimension in their concern with the essence of a place, and are united by more than the tradition of working en plein air.

Turner Prize-winner Susan Philipsz has produced the most abstracted and minimalist work here, "Air on a Broken String", as a surprising response to one of the most symbolically rich and mysterious paintings of all time, Hans Holbein the Younger's "The Ambassadors". Three speakers play one long violin note each; as they overlap and break apart in changing combinations, gradually a connection becomes clear: both the painting and the music work to unsettle us. The greater mismatch comes with the artist's statement. Philipsz says her inspiration came from the broken lute string as a symbol of discord: this discord is claimed to be magnified, "perceptible throughout the gallery space"; yet the three notes, played within the same octave, combine to form a major second, a minor third, and a perfect fourth: all

perfectly concordant; it is their unpredictable coincidence that renders the time out of joint. It's also difficult to understand how these pitches signify “removing one string from a violin”; perhaps each is played on a different string, and certainly all are played as finger notes, full of changing tone and texture. What these drawn-out and plaintive tones more effectively correspond with is the memento mori, the anamorphic skull, stretched out in the foreground.

The difficulty of reconciling the catalogue descriptions with the actual experience of the rooms further increases the complexities of cross-disciplinary communication. It would be unfair to judge the experiences by the articulated aims, and the rooms themselves are happily language-free; but the gap that opens up here might be a subject for study in its own right. Nico Muhly, the New York-based classical composer, teasingly refers to his response to “The Wilton Diptych”, “Long Phrases for the Wilton Diptych”, as a “slow look at all four panels”, that is supposed to “guide us round”: but where should we start? The work is far more nuanced and affective than his programmatic approach would suggest. The gradually changing motifs and swelling ostinati above a drone of a perfect fifth, played with exquisite richness of tone by Liam Byrne on the viola da gamba, produce a meditative state that is entirely conducive to viewing the panels at a slow pace, while occasional stabbing chords, leaping up and down, perhaps suggest a structural parallel with the altarpiece's central subject, King Richard II kneeling before the Virgin and Child.

The DJ Jamie xx produces a mesmeric state of a different kind in response to Theo van Rysselberghe's divisionist “Coastal Scene”. His electronic trance track, with its vibrating repetitions, draws a technical parallel with the painting's shimmering dots, and he has ingeniously rigged the speakers so that they match its optical effects: both music and painting disintegrate into their component parts close up, coming into focus only from afar. The effect is even matched by a faintly-visible disco dance floor, with its white squares decreasing in size towards the painting.

The installation artists Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller continue this extension of the artwork into physical space in their response to Antonello da Messina's “Saint Jerome in his Study”. They have built a 3D model that translates the immaculate finish of the painting into something resembling a wonky doll's house. It is emphatically not the “transcendent” experience promised: the interest lies in the sense of the subject's descent into the physical world, an impression which is enhanced by changing lighting to signify the passing of time, and an audio track in which horses neigh and footsteps fall. There is an engaging play with insides and outsides, as a singer can be heard moving from an inner space out into the open, and we can walk around the model to explore at close range the countryside that is just glimpsed in the painting's background; the installation's chief contribution to the debate is this translation of the workings of perspective into acoustic form.

Gabriel Yared, the film composer, has chosen Cézanne's “Les Grandes Baigneuses”, and makes a geographic and historical parallel in alluding to the music of Poulenc and Les Six. The tango rhythms and the “ah”s of the singers serve a decorative function, but offer nothing original and as such the work rings false, most of all in the context of Cézanne, who insisted that "to paint from nature is not to copy an object". In producing pastiche, Yared has confined his response to mood-music.

All the composed music here is bound by tonal or modal conventions; while this can forge historical connections, the inclusion of an atonal work might have offered greater originality and perspective on the question of limitations. Being further removed from the pre-existent

systems in one medium might in fact allow for greater connection with the principles of another. Nonetheless, this is an inspiring show, serious and good fun in equal measure, and it is pioneering for the National Gallery in its contemporary and conceptual edge.