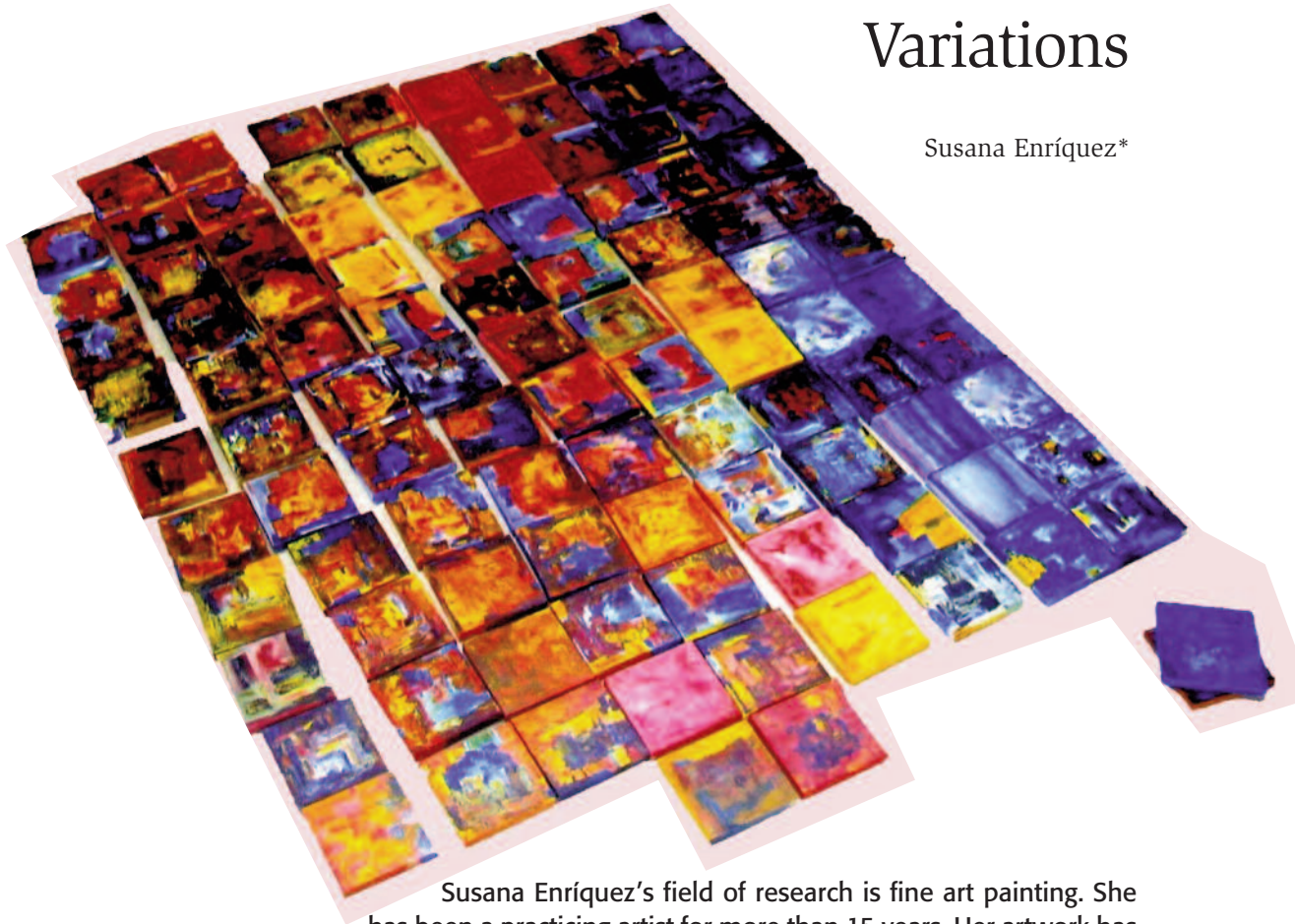


# *Creating an “Aleatory” Visual Orchestra Piece*

## Theme and Variations

Susana Enríquez\*



Susana Enríquez’s field of research is fine art painting. She has been a practicing artist for more than 15 years. Her artwork has been based on the relationships of music and color and notions of sense of space and movement. She’s had many exhibitions in Mexico and abroad of paintings, drawings and digital art and collaborated with musicians and composers. In the last five years, her work has been a response to personal experiences with classical and modern music. Experimentation has been an important element in twentieth-century music and, similarly, she has endeavored to create pieces that move away from the traditional, still canvas. Visually, at first glance her work could be linked to abstract expressionism with its strong, raw colors, gesture and anonymous forms within the plane of the picture. These forms are open to interpretation and any resemblance to landscapes or architectural skylines of manmade cityscapes is completely unintentional.

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\* Mexican visual artist resident in Newcastle, Australia.

In search of a visual idiom adequate to the new world view, many artists at the beginning of the twentieth century turned to music and its independence of sources to create images. With music as an ideal, they separated their imagery from the objective context, by means of liberating colors and forms creating what we know as abstract painting. Wassily Kandinsky is a good example. They found a model in the new sound language developed by contemporary composers, especially after World War II.

The elements of a musical composition are far different from those of a painting, although both share qualities such as harmony, contrast and rhythm. Nevertheless that did not stop artists from experimenting and expanding their horizon using any muse in the long and lonely path of creation.

*Ekphrasis* by association does not render exactly what the eyes see in a visual image or on the printed page of a literary work but is inspired by a primary work of art, spinning off new or familiar thoughts and mental or emotional connections.<sup>1</sup> In this instance, it is the music that is transformed into a visual image using a personal code of color, with no previous references, created in accordance with the sections of a symphonic orchestra.

The borderline between this kind of association and an *ekphrastic* interpretation is blurred. In the latter, the artist uses not only associations of a personal nature, but rather, implications known to and shared by all three parties; the creator of the original work, the responding artist and the community of viewers.

From the very outset of this project, it was my intention to produce a body of work that was based on an interpretation or translation into paint (color) of sound (music).

The sounds I speak of are not experimental; they are scored musical compositions. To achieve my goal it was imperative for me to establish a code or a foundation of structured meanings of particular colors that were relevant to me and that related to particular instrumental sections found in an orchestra.

In the early stages of this project I compiled a list of orchestral instruments and the colors they represented. My colors representing sections of the orchestra are as follows:

Red: percussions

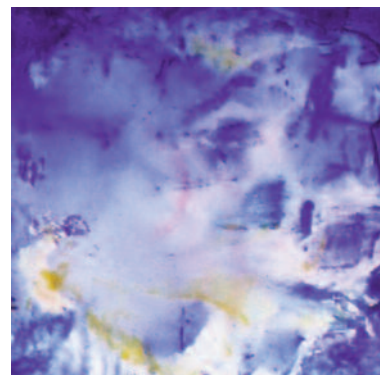
Blue: strings

Yellow: brass and woodwinds.

I am familiar with the meaning of colors as represented in theoretical and symbolical ways; for example, John Gage's *Color and Meaning, Art, Science and Symbolism*, and also various established interpretations of color. Red equals blood, warmth, aggression, and blue may be interpreted as distance, water and cold.

It was essential to create my own personal visual vocabulary that would form the foundation of my studio works as this vocabulary would allow me to listen, interpret and produce works not directly attached to any other artist, movement or theory.

My work would sit comfortably within the context of sound and color theory and contempo-



*Theme and Variations*, three out of one hundred pieces, 30 x 30 cm each, 2004 (acrylic on canvas).



rary art, but not be attached to or bound by any established movement. The dream of creating a visual music comparable to auditory music found its fulfillment in animated abstract films by artists like Oskar Fischinger, Len Lye and Norman McLaren; but long before them, many people built instruments, usually called color organs, that displayed modulated colored light in some kind of fluid fashion comparable to music.<sup>2</sup>

I could not see the point in rehashing or redoing old themes, theories or work done over quite a long period of time throughout the history of art, particularly the relationship of color and music, which has a long history. In 1927, 1930, 1933 and 1936 the University of Hamburg hosted an international "Color-Music Congress," which brought together artists including those in music, dance, film and painting, perceptual psychologists, and critics to explore issues of synaesthesia and multidisciplinary art forms.<sup>3</sup>

The music I selected to use as a reference came from twentieth-century composers like Manuel Enríquez, Igor Stravinsky, Bela Bartok, Pierre Boulez, Olivier Messiaen, Györgi Ligeti, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Claude Debussy and John Cage. These composers provided a strong formal structure and a parameter or boundary that I would be aware of, but not frightened to cross over if necessary. In the production of the work one other aspect became crucial. This was gesture; sponta-

*Theme and Variations is not a group of paintings; it is one piece consisting of 100 pieces, considered as a polyptych. Metaphorically, it is a polyphony of color.*

neous movements that, although not recorded or listed like the color or the instruments, were connected closely to the immediate translation of music into color at the moment of executing the work, thus recreating from time (music) to space (the white canvas).

For me, translating the sounds into color creates a different way of working within the parameter of the canvas or paper to recreate my interpretation of the sounds into color. I moved in two directions: firstly, emotions and mood, then the rigor of composition and bearing in mind the formal elements that occur in music as they do in painting.

A piece of canvas was not enough for my purposes to re-create music, considering I wanted to work with symphonic and chamber music. Since there are many instruments producing different sounds at the same time, I did not have enough space to create the entire atmosphere and textures and other elements involved in the complexity of a musical piece. My experience as a musician is that the same piece could sound slightly different every time you play it because, since music is a perform-

ing art, the results depend on the human element as well as the place where it is performed.

The music does not stay the same. The notes in the score do not change, but the sonorous result can be different depending on the conductor's interpretation, the acoustic quality of the place where the concert was played, the number of rehearsals, the musicians' skill, and other factors. Although visual art is not a performance, I wanted to have the same results with the painting; the same piece could look different but the composition would be the same.

These aims prompted the idea of a work made up of an indeterminate number of pieces.

Looking at musical scores, I found that in the modern writing of music the composers use geometric forms where they enclosed some passages of the piece. The most common are geometric or irregular shapes like we can see in the scores by Manuel Enríquez (*Tzicuri*) or Stockhausen (*Zyklus*) just to mention two examples.

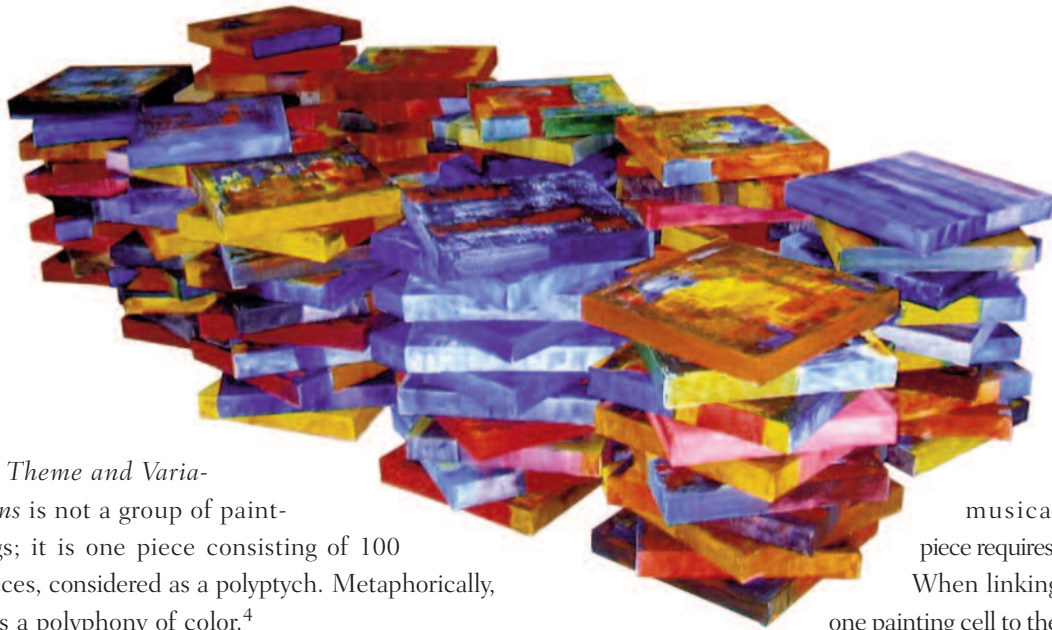
*The decision about how to display the piece does not remain with the artist, but the curator, and also depends on the characteristics of the space where it is going to be shown.*



Other traditional compositions use bars as well, the vertical lines that separate each unit of music time, such as  $\frac{3}{4}$ ,  $\frac{4}{4}$ ,  $\frac{1}{2}$ , but also the study letters in a musical score are always enclosed in a square. I decided that this project of painting had to be made of squares, which would be like cells that would develop in different spaces, using primary colors to create secondary and tertiary colors according to my color code. Each painting would be a variation, not a repetition. The square canvas would be a bar that encloses a unit of musical time from a composition by an orchestra and the link between them would be primary colors.

To explain more about how the music corresponds to the colors in an orchestral piece, according to my coding system, I will give an example:

The percussions (red) start the piece, followed immediately by the string instruments (blue) which come together, *tutti*, from *mezzo forte* to *fortissimo*, with the percussions still playing (blue and red = purple). Then one trumpet (yellow) appears in the background. At the beginning it mixes with strings and percussions (purple and yellow) but slowly it starts to be the predominant sound and separates from the other instruments, and more trumpets and English horns (yellows) sound together. Now the strings seem to disappear, but they are in the background (very light blue); they did not become completely silent, but just decreased in volume.



*Theme and Variations* is not a group of paintings; it is one piece consisting of 100 pieces, considered as a polyptych. Metaphorically, it is a polyphony of color.<sup>4</sup>

I conceived this artwork as the conversion of a random orchestral piece into a painting, which means that once the piece is in the hands of the conductor/curator, they will make the decision about how to start the performance of the musical/art/piece. The idea behind a random piece is that every time it is performed, it will sound different because of the participation of a third criteria. In this case, the decision about how to display the piece does not remain with the artist, but the curator, and also depends on the characteristics of the space where it is going to be shown. Like in a concert, the sound can change depending on the acoustic conditions of the concert hall.

One of the concepts I have considered for recreating the music into color in this artwork is movement; not in the sense of the musical concept: "several self-contained sections that make up a large-scale musical work, often differentiated from one another by different tempos and characters." My idea is about motion, because sound is not static, it is fleeting. With this concept in mind I was looking to change the concept of a painting as a static object. I had to play with motion and give all the possible variations to a small canvas using it as a cell that would develop to form a second, then a third, continuing but still giving each cell its own balance as an individual painting. Using the analogy of music, it would be possible to link one painting to the next, echoing a bar of music and following the dynamics that the whole

musical piece requires. When linking one painting cell to the other, the color that represents the sections of an orchestra gives the clue that connects them, strings with strings or joining the continuation of the sound of percussions represented by the color red: red with red and so on. With my color code as a guide, it is possible with this piece to create a string chamber orchestra using all the blue canvases.

My idea with this aleatory piece was tested at the University of Newcastle Visual Arts Building in 2004, as well as in an exhibition in Canberra (2005) where the curator of the show organized the canvases in a different way than the previous showing, and finally at the University of Newcastle at my final exhibition and doctoral examination (2006).<sup>5</sup>

Personally, the importance of my painting music is that it has kept me breathing. I combine my two passions in solitude. Music is my past and painting, my present, and it is showing me that I still have a long journey, a future. **MM**



#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *Ekphrasis*: from the Greek words *ek* (out) and *phrazein* (tell, declare, pronounce), *ekphrasis* originally means "telling in full." An *Ekphrasis* is a poem written about another form of art. This other form of art is most often painting.
- <sup>2</sup> William Moritz, "The Dream of Color Music," *Animation World Magazine* (Berkeley, California), April 1997.
- <sup>3</sup> *Idem*.
- <sup>4</sup> Polyphony is a musical composition that uses simultaneous, largely independent melodic parts, lines or voices.
- <sup>5</sup> "Aleatory": having the sequence of given notes or passages in a piece of music chosen at random by the performer.