

EKPHRASTIC VOICE: ON JOAN LA BARBARA'S SOUND PAINTINGS

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Abstract: A considerable portion of Joan La Barbara's compositional work has been concentrated in her 'sound paintings' – works that translate into sound the visual and energetic sensation La Barbara experiences when encountering art. Many of these works are 'ekphrastic' – that is, they render aurally a pre-existing work. In this article, I analyse three such sound paintings: *Klee Alee* (based on Paul Klee's *Hauptweg und Nebenwege*), *Rothko* (based on Mark Rothko's Chapel paintings), and *In solitude this fear is lived* (inspired by the early work of Agnes Martin). I argue that these works extend the mimetic impulse of her vocal practice and use translational semiosis to produce their ekphrastic effects.

The challenge of Joan La Barbara to the historian is considerable. Over five decades of multidisciplinary practice, she has created an oeuvre like few others in contemporary art. Its importance lies in at least three aspects: her rigorous technical development of voice, her extensive collaborations with other artists and her singular compositional practice. Much scholarly work on La Barbara has focused on the first of her contributions, her development of voice as an extended faculty for performance, composition and improvisation. Scholar-practitioner Gelsey Bell and musicologist Lucie Vágnerová have done important work conceptualising the stakes of La Barbara's vocal extensions and their implications for a posthumanist musicality.¹ Other scholars, including David Chapman and (in this issue) Bernard Gendron and Kerry O'Brien, have taken up the second strand of La Barbara's work, her collaborative ethos represented by her work in the Steve Reich and Philip Glass ensembles along with the New Wilderness Preservation Band. In keeping with the turn towards network historiography and relationality in music research in recent years, these scholars argue that La Barbara participated in a form of distributed creativity that deserves attention in our histories of music.²

¹ See Gelsey Bell, 'Extended Vocal Technique and Joan La Barbara: The Relational Ethics of Voice on the Edge of Intelligibility', *Journal of Interdisciplinary Voice Studies*, 1, no. 2 (2016), pp. 143–159 and Lucie Vágnerová, 'Sirens/Cyborgs: Sound Technologies and the Musical Body' (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 2016), pp. 15–58.

² David Chapman, 'Collaboration, Presence, and Community: The Philip Glass Ensemble in Downtown New York, 1966–1976' (Ph.D. dissertation, Washington University in St Louis, 2016). See also the articles of Kerry O'Brien and Bernard Gendron in this issue.

The third element of La Barbara's work – her compositional practice – still calls out for commentary. Despite extensive recorded documentation on LP, CD and the internet her compositions (*Voice Piece: One-Note Internal Resonance Investigation* and *Circular Song* excepted) have yet to garner sustained critical reflection. In what follows I partly redress the paucity of scholarly work on La Barbara's oeuvre, marking out a path through her compositional work that integrates it with her vocal extensions without reducing it to voice alone. After a brief exploration of mimesis in her vocal work I assess La Barbara's ekphrastic compositions to show how she grounds them in a rigorous conceptualism, just as she grounds her vocal etudes in a rigorous phenomenology. I focus on three 'sound paintings' from across her authorship – *Klee Alee* (1979), *Rothko* (1986) and *In solitude this fear is lived* (2011) – arguing that in each La Barbara identifies conceptual continuities between the visual and the aural domains from which she produces critical aesthetic differentials. My wager is that, building on G. Douglas Barrett's intervention into the terminological ambiguities of 'contemporary music', La Barbara's creativity exemplifies a postconceptual practice, working through mimesis, translation and ekphrasis.³

La Barbara's mimetic faculty

Ekphrasis, the translation of one artform by means of another, is grounded in an aesthetics of mimesis. It establishes relationships between things through acts of rendering. La Barbara has emphasised the role mimesis played in her early vocal experiments. That is to say, her vocalic uniqueness (to borrow a phrase from feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero) was predicated on sounding like something else – another instrument, a bird, an alien life form – thereby establishing relationships of similitude.⁴ La Barbara recognised in jazz singers like Ella Fitzgerald artists 'who had really been using the voice as an instrument', but she didn't find similar inspiration among her contemporaries in the experimental music scene. In the early 1970s she undertook extensive experimentation to make herself something other than what she had been trained to be: 'a classical singer in the bel canto tradition'.⁵

La Barbara recalled that in the early 1970s, 'I started to work with other instrumentalists, having them play long tones and I would imitate the sounds of instruments and gradually began improvising.'⁶ The WBAI Free Music Store was an important site for La Barbara's work in improvisational mimesis and the development of her compositional sensibility. She recalled improvisation sessions with Anthony Braxton, Fred Rzewski, Garrett List, Michael Sahl and Jay Clayton that helped form her mimetic abilities and developed her translational compositional ethos:

And gradually, as I began to do it more and more and more, I found that that was part of my thinking process. . . . And you stretch your own ideas, you stretch

³ G. Douglas Barrett, 'Contemporary Music and the Problem of Music: Towards a Musical Contemporary Art', *Twentieth-Century Music*, 18, no. 2 (2021), pp. 223–48. My endorsement of Barrett's framework for a 'musical contemporary art' does not extend to his view of postconceptualism as normative criterion of artistic relevancy.

⁴ Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005).

⁵ Joan La Barbara, 'Voice Is the Original Instrument', interview, *Kalvos & Damian's New Music Bazaar*, Show #448 (3 January 2004), https://econtact.ca/12_2/LaBarbaraJo_KD.html (accessed 7 February 2022).

⁶ *Ibid.*

the capacity of your instrument, just by saying, 'Well, a voice can't do that but a trumpet is doing that. Now why don't I just pretend I'm a trumpet and go with that idea?' And so I found that that was a great way of just beginning to find new sounds from my instrument. And I still wasn't thinking of myself as a composer. I was using the voice as an instrument, that was very clear. I wasn't terribly concerned about words.⁷

It was this mimetic faculty that brought her to the attention of both Glass and Reich and allowed her to find a place in their ensembles, spaces in which singing voices had heretofore been absent. She remembered Glass saying, "Ok, well, our trumpet player just left the group, how about if you come in and sing the trumpet part?" So I said "Sure, why not?" I came in and sang music that was already written for trumpet.⁸ With Reich it was a similar situation:

Michael Sahl knew that I could do all of these different things with my voice and he recommended me to Steve Reich who was looking for a singer who could imitate the sounds of an instrument. So I went and I sang for Steve. This was during the time that he was developing his work *Drumming*. Originally he thought that the voice should imitate the sound of bongo drums. Then he decided that a male voice was better imitating the sound of bongo drums, so he did that. I was hired on to imitate the sound of marimbas, and that was the development of *Drumming*.⁹

In these early explorations La Barbara worked through mimesis, molding her timbre to that of other instruments in ensemble situations. She even came to replace instruments and translated their music through her voice. These improvisatory timbral experiments were of a piece with La Barbara's phenomenological etudes such as *Voice Piece: One-Note Internal Resonance Investigation*, *Hear What I Feel*, *Performance Piece* and *Circular Song*. Her mimetic conceptualism of the 1970s explored the boundaries not only between voice and instruments but between senses and art forms, something she later developed in the compositional genre she calls 'sound painting'.¹⁰

Sound paintings, ekphrasis and energetic interpretants

La Barbara began her ongoing series of sound paintings with *Twelvesong* (1977), a multi-tracked tape work in which she built up layers of her vocally produced sounds around a constant microtonally inflected E-flat. Through her sound paintings, La Barbara explores her own perceptual ambiguities, her ability to experience phenomena cross-modally and synaesthetically. In an interview with Louise Marshall, La Barbara stated that 'I do have a tendency to see sound, I see gestures. As I make sound, I hear sound in gestures.'¹¹ In my conversation with her she elaborated further, noting that 'when I'm singing and when I do scores and do graphics, what I'm trying to get in the gesture is the energy that goes into making the sound and this kind of fluidity of the sound itself.'¹² La Barbara's sense of gestural energy is often stimulated by her own drawing at the start of the compositional process as well as the visual art of others:

⁷ Joan La Barbara, interview with Libby Van Cleve, 17 February 1998, transcript, 'Major Figures in American Music', Oral History of American Music, Yale University, pp. 15–16.

⁸ La Barbara, 'Voice Is the Original Instrument'.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ For a selection of her sound paintings, see Joan La Barbara, *Sound Paintings*. 1991, Lovely Music, LCD3001.

¹¹ Louise Marshall, 'Deep Listening: The Strategic Practice of Female Experimental Composers post 1945', vol. 2 (Ph.D. thesis, University of the Arts, 2018), p. 251.

¹² Joan La Barbara, interview with the author, 3 January 2022.

I [write at] the beginning of a piece. And sometimes I'll also do drawings, if that is part of what comes out of it – shapes, sometimes gestures – because I have a tendency sometimes to see sound before I hear it. And a lot of my pieces have come out of visual stimulants, either directly from a painting or some kind of very simple line drawing gesture that I see in my mind. And then I'll follow that, making the gesture with my voice, and see how close I come to that particular gesture.¹³

One work that was stimulated by an extant painting is *Klee Alee* (1979), another multi-tracked voice work, commissioned by RIAS in West Berlin. La Barbara recalled seeing Paul Klee's *Hauptweg und Nebenwege* (see Figure 1) in Cologne and was immediately struck by its physical presence, especially,

just seeing the thickness of the paint. And that was what was so important, which you cannot get in any kind of reproduction, you can't possibly get. And I talk to my students about this all the time. You have to see art for real. You have to see how thick the paint is or how thin the paint is – you know, what the application is. And then with Klee, as I recall, the paint was applied very thickly. And then he took this tool of some sort and carved into the thickness of the paint and created these little, tiny figures there, which is what I then tried to replicate with my voice in some way, not the figures. I didn't use the figures as a kind of graphic score. It was more, I, my analysis of the painting itself and how the paint was applied and how I could translate that into music.¹⁴

La Barbara's comments summarise her ekphrastic compositional process. Her analysis of the painting yields abstract formal structures that can be reconceptualised sonically and translated through the medium of her voice. Her work of translation fills in the gap between sound and vision, taking the idea of 'thickness' and 'carving' as portentously sonorous signs.

From the perspective of Peircean semiotics, La Barbara works with 'energetic interpretants', physical reactions caused by an encounter with a sign.¹⁵ La Barbara develops these energetic interpretants into concepts that while initiated in one medium (paint), can be reinscribed in another (sound). In the interview that became the basis for Larry Austin's computer-music portrait of her La Barbara demonstrated how the energetic interpretants she felt while looking at *Hauptweg und Nebenwege* generated musical ideas:

Austin: Your image of *Klee Alee* was visual. . .

La Barbara: Mmm hmm.

Austin: . . . but realized in sound and what was that first, what did that first sound sound like to you? Can you sing that?

La Barbara: [sings a tone, explores resonance and nasal placement, bringing out overtones, then pulses on the tone] See, it's not one sound. It's just as I think Klee didn't, I mean you, didn't take the paint right out of the tube. You mix the paint. Even with a sound block, which is a single pitch, you're blending the colors that are available by adding in those overtones, so you give a shape to that block, and you give depth to the color. [Pulses again] And as you build block on block, what you've done with the shaping and the coloring adds to the thickness of the sound that you're creating.¹⁶

Lawrence Venuti's reinterpretation of ekphrasis as translation sheds considerable light on La Barbara's compositional practice described above. Works like *Klee Alee* effect what Venuti calls 'a radical

¹³ La Barbara, interview with Van Cleve, p. 49.

¹⁴ La Barbara, interview with the author.

¹⁵ Thomas Turino, 'Signs of Imagination, Identity, and Experience: A Peircean Semiotic Theory for Music', *Ethnomusicology*, 43, no. 2 (1999), pp. 221–55, esp. p. 224.

¹⁶ Larry Austin, 'La Barbara: the name, the sounds, the music', *The Virtuoso in the Computer Age – III*. 1993, Centaur, CRC 2166.



Figure 1:
Paul Klee, *Hauptweg und Nebenwege*,
1929. Oil on stucco, on canvas,
83.7 × 67.5 cm. Inv. ML 76/3253,
photograph Rheinisches Bildarchiv
Cologne/Sabrina Walz © 2022
Artists Rights Society (ARS),
New York.

decontextualization', a process of interpretation that omits or alters salient aspects of a source image. This decontextualisation is also a strong recontextualisation effected by a shift between media. As Venuti notes,

Not only do the formal aspects of language and literature (sound and register, figure and style, genre and discourse) contribute to the construction of a different context that creates a substantially different signifying process, but they may be further inflected by affiliations to literary traditions, movements, and institutions, by the trajectory of a writer's career, and by the hierarchy of values, beliefs, and representations in the cultural situation where the text is produced.¹⁷

La Barbara's phenomenological analysis decontextualises the figurative elements of Klee's painting and homes in on texture and painterly action as points of contact between her work and his. This recontextualisation of the concept of texture from the visual to the aural is predicated upon an energetic interpretant of gesture that serves as a switching point between senses. In *Klee Alee*, La Barbara translates a skewed bird's-eye view of urban terrain into the rich spatialised soundscape of the stereo field. She emphasises concepts of painterly thickness (figured as a dense weave of sonic events in a flattened stereo

¹⁷ Lawrence Venuti, 'Ekphrasis, Translation, Critique', *Art in Translation*, 2, no. 2 (2010), p. 139.

field) and carving-in (represented by anti-aesthetic angular uses of voice that cut through sustained tones). In keeping with Venuti's analysis of ekphrasis, La Barbara's productive translation of formal interpretants establishes conceptual equivalences and correspondences between media. As Venuti argues, 'It is the translator's application of interpretants that guides the simultaneous process of decontextualizing and recontextualizing the source text, replacing intertextual relations in the source language and culture with a receiving intertext, with relations to the translating language and culture which are built into the translation.'¹⁸ La Barbara's sensory peculiarity – her tendency to see sound as physical–visual gesture – means that she can't help but feel *Hauptweg und Nebenwege* as something alive and pulsating across sensory modes. She eschews one-to-one representational correspondences between sound and image, making the painting exist as a mutable sonic entity in time.

Her propensity for analysis, abstraction and conceptualisation marks La Barbara's ekphrasis as distinct from a musical ekphrasis based on narrative models, such as that proffered by Siglund Bruhn.¹⁹ Instead, her sound paintings resonate with Thomas C. Connolly's reconfiguration of musical ekphrasis, wherein it is 'a necessary and powerful figure of creativity and criticism, [functioning] independently of its more conventional literary formulations'.²⁰ La Barbara avoids establishing equivalences based on representation and instead abstracts from works by identifying concepts that can be formalised. This marks her ekphrasis as the creative and critical kind. In our conversation La Barbara insisted that what she had tried to translate into music was Klee's action of carving-into the painting with a tool, not the little figures created by that carving. This conceptual abstraction distinguishes it from the literary form of ekphrasis we find elaborated in Bruhn. As ekphrasis-through-interpretants La Barbara's sound paintings produce aesthetic differentials that serve as critical commentary. Her emphasis on the violence of Klee's action upon the canvas undermines a reading of the painting as the titular street scene and interprets it as an informal degradation of beautiful material by painterly overworking. La Barbara achieves this sonically in *Klee Alee* by pushing up several tracks to the front of the stereo field, thereby creating a resistant aural plane. The flattened plane corresponds to the layered, pulsing multiphonics she demonstrated for Austin. They form a thick acoustic wall through which her incisive vocal gestures (animalian groans, glottal clicks, ululations and so on) try to crack and fail.

Klee Alee offers some generalisable attributes of La Barbara's compositional approach to her sound paintings. She works primarily through an initial phenomenological-energetic response that serves as a cross-modal analysis of the painting. From this analysis, she generates conceptual interpretants that allow her to ekphrastically rework elements of the source work into her vocal idiolect. In her discussion of *Klee Alee*, we can see another kind of process at work too, which develops in tandem with her analysis. La Barbara identifies with the artist-at-work. She is primarily concerned with translating Klee's painterly practice – the layering, mixing, and carving-into – rather than a sonic recreation of the painting's representable elements. We find

¹⁸ Venuti, 'Ekphrasis, Translation, Critique', p. 140.

¹⁹ Siglund Bruhn, *Musical Ekphrasis: Composers Responding to Poetry and Painting* (Hillsdale: Pendragon Press, 2000).

²⁰ Thomas C. Connolly, 'Walking in Color: Another Look at Musical Ekphrasis through Marc Chagall's Jerusalem Windows', *Mosaic*, 51, no. 1 (2018), p. 163.

both of aspects of analysis and identification at work in a subsequent ekphrastic sound painting, *Rothko*, from 1986.

Mark Rothko's depths

La Barbara premiered *Rothko* in Houston, Texas at the Rothko Chapel at the 1986 New Music America Festival. She sang live with an eight-channel spatialised tape recording of a choir of droning bowed pianos and her multi-tracked voice.²¹ The work unfolds from a G \sharp 2 in the bowed pianos expanded across registers and later sounded through La Barbara's distinct modes of vocal production. Low split-tone multiphonic drones on G \sharp 3 come to the fore of our attention around the four-minute mark and are placed in the front of the mix. A softer G \sharp 4, sung nasally to emphasise overtones, dwells further back in the mix. Like Roland Barthes' experience of the prelude to *Das Rheingold*, we sense a 'cosmic widening' as La Barbara opens up a vast vertical harmonic space rich in audible partials.²² This verticality is thickened by shifting foreground-background relationships of various timbral and registral layers within the stereo field.²³

As with *Klee Alee*, the work's genesis began with a sublime encounter with an artwork that demanded ekphrastic translation. La Barbara first experienced the Rothko Chapel (see Figure 2) in 1973, performing Steve Reich's *Drumming* there as a member of Reich's ensemble. It was a year after the premiere of Morton Feldman's *Rothko Chapel*, and ten years later, in 1983, La Barbara wrote to Feldman:

I've wanted to do a piece for that space ever since I first saw/experienced it in '73. I wrote to Dominique de Menil once and she replied that they were only doing religious works there. Sometime I will write to her again and try to explain the personal, overwhelming reaction I have to the chapel and that a private artistic experience can be as meaningful as a 'religious' one. But you've already made that statement in *Rothko Chapel*.²⁴

My own research into Feldman's *Rothko Chapel* leads me to wonder how sincere de Menil's objections were. She had allowed Reich's *Drumming* to be heard the Chapel in 1973, and this secular (or at least not overtly religious) work is indicative of music regularly performed there – US experimentalism supported by the de Menils' largesse.²⁵ Dominique de Menil seems to have relented, and La Barbara got her wish 'to do a piece for that space' during New

²¹ La Barbara frequently sang live with her taped sound paintings, sometimes removing tracks that she recreated in performance, other times adding another layer over the work. For an instance of the latter, see her performance at New Sounds San Jose in 1982, https://archive.org/details/NS_1982_05_08_1. Last accessed 6 May 2022.

²² Roland Barthes, 'Loving Schumann', in *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California, 1985), p. 297.

²³ My comments refer primarily to the recorded version La Barbara prepared for her *Shamansong* album. Joan La Barbara, *Shamansong*. 1998, New World Records, 80545-2. A radio broadcast featuring an excerpt of the premiere of *Rothko* in the Rothko Chapel can be found here: <https://soundcloud.com/giorgidimontana/joan-labarbara-rothko-at-the-rothko-chapel-excerpt-a-lapaix>. Last accessed 6 May 2022.

²⁴ Joan La Barbara, letter to Morton Feldman, 4 October 1983. Morton Feldman Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation. For more on La Barbara and Feldman's *Rothko Chapel*, see Dohoney, *Saving Abstraction*. For an exploration of her role in the composition and performance of Feldman's *Three Voices*, see Ryan Dohoney, *Morton Feldman: Friendship and Mourning in the New York Avant-Garde* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), pp. 122–36.

²⁵ Musicians supported by de Menil money include Feldman, Reich (whose *Tehillim* was commissioned for the Rothko Chapel), La Monte Young (supported by the DIA Foundation) and Philip Glass.

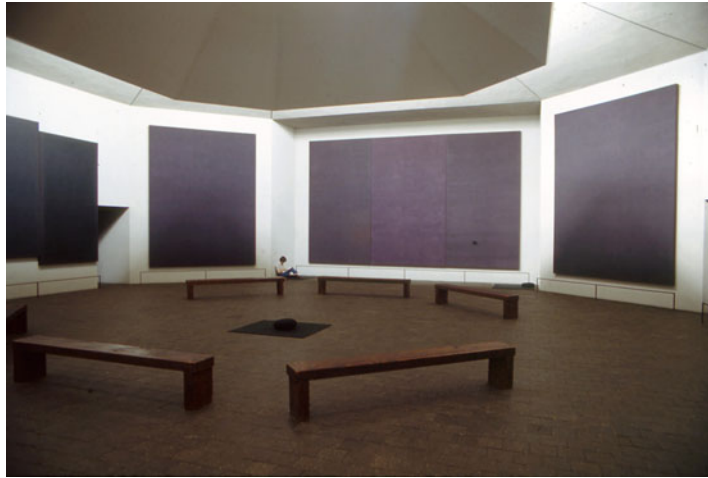


Figure 2:

Mark Rothko, The Rothko Chapel, Houston © 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Music America, thus further strengthening the relationship between the Rothko Chapel and experimental music.²⁶

La Barbara's acoustic reimagining of the Rothko Chapel began with the conceptual equivocation of physical and acoustic space. In the preparatory *A Rothko Study* (1985), La Barbara used the octagonal logic of the chapel as an organising scheme and dispersed eight musicians throughout the Bing Auditorium at the Los Angeles County Museum. This allowed her 'to create the same spatial effect as the placement of panels in the octagon of the Rothko Chapel'.²⁷ She carried this spatialised conception over into *Rothko* proper and arranged eight speakers along the walls of the chapel. Each projected a different mix, 'so that where you were sitting in the space, you would get a slightly different version of the piece'.²⁸

In our interview, I asked her to elaborate on her compositional ideas in *Rothko* beyond the correspondences of visual and aural space:

La Barbara: When I was working on [*Rothko*], I was also doing a collaboration with Judy Chicago [*Prologue to the Book of Knowing... (and) of Overthrowing*] and we had these long conversations about how Rothko would mix the paint and put all this crap put into it. The paintings have to be revitalised every once in a while, because they start to grow. He used raw egg and God knows what, but, especially in Houston where it's so moist and you know...

Dohoney: [interjecting] They were starting to bloom.

La Barbara: and I was just blown away by the painting... I mean, you could just sit there for hours and the longer you would sit there – they would move, things just began to move, and it had nothing to do with things blooming, I don't think, but the layers and layers and layers that went into those paintings. I try to reflect that, in my work... There are no electronics in it. It's just voice and bowed piano. And what the bowed piano can do, depending on how much tension you put on the rosined fishing line that make the bows and where you're playing on the string determines how much metallic quality is part of the piano sound. So, it was really my way of creating these layers that reflected what I understood about the way Mark Rothko was working.²⁹

²⁶ Dohoney, *Saving Abstraction*, pp. 219–32.

²⁷ Joan La Barbara, programme note for *Rothko* for the concert 'Meditations', New Music America, 5 April 1986. The programme also featured works by Wim Mertens, Tom Plesk and John Celona. Personal collection of George Dupuis.

²⁸ La Barbara, interview with the author.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

La Barbara elaborated her initial architectural conception of *Rothko* with a textural concern for layering. The illusionistic depths produced by Rothko's deft handling of paint served as a powerful impulse to sonic construction. Again, as with *Klee Alee*, La Barbara identified with the artist-at-work ('the way Mark Rothko was working') and translated her conception of the painter's process into her own, mediated as it was by her phenomenological analysis of the Chapel:

I wanted in some way to make sound that would approximate what my experience was as I looked at the paintings, as I meditated on the paintings. Obviously, there are 14 paintings, and so you have a lot of material to look at and they're all very different. The experience of being in that space when I was there, with just the wooden benches. . . was very austere. I think it needed to be. What I was trying to do was to reflect the layers, to reflect going into the painting, moving into the painting. And so, in those layers, as I'm working with the vocal sound and mixing the bowed piano sounds, I'm trying to replicate the kind of journey that you take into the painting and not imposing my will necessarily on to the sound, but letting the sound be and letting the layers of the sound be so that you can enter that.³⁰

The watchword of *Rothko*, in contradistinction to *Klee Alee*, is acoustic permeability. Whereas the stereo field of the earlier sound painting translated the dense thickness of Klee's paint-handling into a flat, shallow depth of field, *Rothko* opens itself up to the listener. The distribution of La Barbara's split-tone multiphonics and the variable timbres of the bowed pianos make the piece navigable as acoustic space. Despite a near constant emphasis on the pitch G# across octaves, the variety of sounds prevents harmonic fusion and leads to a soundworld rich in harmonies built up from varied spectra.

La Barbara is especially concerned with conceptual clarity – her own, naturally, but also that of the artists whose work she encounters. She noted that 'when you walk into a museum or walk into the Rothko Chapel, you enter into a space and you have an immediate reaction to that space because it's one person's idea as, as opposed to [a] museum's, which can be really daunting as you're getting bombarded by so many different people's ideas'.³¹ Such specificity of an artistic environment affords her what I've come to think of as ekphrastic empathy. Her analysis and translation of artworks into music leads her to a deep identification with the creator of the source material: as she wrote in her programme note for *Rothko*, 'It happens sometimes that an artist is confronted with the work of another artist and feels a profound connection/communication, a resonance'.³² Given the tragic life story of Rothko following the completion of the chapel, La Barbara was reticent about identifying too strongly with him: 'I didn't try to get into Rothko's mindset when he was painting those paintings. I, I don't think I wanted to.' Yet she ultimately couldn't avoid it:

I get a personal relationship with the artwork that I'm looking at. . . . So, I allowed myself to get into the paintings as much as I could or wanted to, and respectfully tried to create this sound painting. But I didn't call it *Rothko Chapel*. I called it *Rothko*. And I think that's, that is important because, much, as I say, I didn't want to get into his mindset, I did, you couldn't help it.³³

Such ekphrastic empathy is the hard-won result of a rigorous compositional process through which La Barbara builds on her sublime

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² La Barbara, programme note for *Rothko*.

³³ La Barbara, interview with the author.

experiences (being ‘blown away’) and then conceptualises points of contact between painting and music, largely realised through shared senses of energy and form. With *Rothko* this was a translation of ‘layers and layers and layers’ into a vertical space through which her listeners might move and sense the void that the chapel contains. To borrow an insight from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, it is as if ‘The music insinuates a new dimension across visible space where it unfurls just as, for persons suffering hallucinations, the clear space of perceived things is mysteriously doubled with a “dark space” where other presences are possible.’³⁴ The aesthetic differential between *Rothko* and the Rothko Chapel troubles a redemptive interpretation of the chapel, and other acoustic presences haunt the periphery of the chapel in La Barbara’s *Rothko*, troubling, too, the notion that, as Dominique de Menil put it, the paintings ‘embrace us without enclosing us’.³⁵ Even though we can move among *Rothko*’s layers, we can’t quite find a way out.

Agnes Martin’s lines

By way of conclusion, let us move from Rothko’s vertical depths, which La Barbara explored in the 1980s, to Agnes Martin’s horizontal lines, reimagined in the 1990s and beyond. La Barbara encountered Martin’s work in 1976 when she was performing at Salvatore Ala’s gallery in Milan. She was invited to Ala’s home, where he had some small works of Martin’s on the wall. Her experience was, as with that of the chapel, a moment of intense aesthetic response that became a powerful need to create:

I saw these [Martin works] just hanging on the wall and I was just totally blown away because of the simplicity as well as the rigidity of those works. They were just so astonishing. And just as with Kenny Goldsmith’s work [the drawing for *73 Poems*, which La Barbara turned into sound paintings], you could see the differences of the application of the paint on to the canvas. And they’re small, they’re really small... I had that bolt of lightning effect. And I just thought, my God, I’ve got to somehow do these paintings, do something, of these paintings.³⁶

And she did, first in 1991 with *Sound Painting No. 1 for Orchestra (done as an Agnes Martin Painting circa 1977)*, premiered by the Bay Area Women’s Philharmonic on 9 February 1991 (see [Example 1](#)). Her next Martin project was realised in 2011 as *In solitude this fear is lived*, written for the American Composers Orchestra and premiered in Carnegie’s Zankel Hall.³⁷ Both of these works depart from *Rothko* and *Klee Alee* as they are intended for live instrumental ensembles instead of La Barbara’s multi-tracked voice. La Barbara’s voice is entirely absent from *Sound Painting No. 1* and dwells largely in the background of *In solitude*.³⁸

Returning to the matter of energetic interpretants, discussed above, La Barbara responded to Martin’s ‘rigidity’, the sheer formal

³⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 231.

³⁵ Dominique de Menil, ‘Inaugural Address at the Rothko Chapel’, in *The Rothko Chapel: Writing on Art and the Threshold of the Divine* (Houston: Rothko Chapel, 2010), p. 18.

³⁶ La Barbara, interview with the author.

³⁷ The title is borrowed from Agnes Martin’s lecture ‘The Perfection Underlying Life’. La Barbara came to know the lecture in the catalogue *Agnes Martin* (Munich: Kunstraum München, 20 November–22 December 1973), pp. 33–60.

³⁸ A recording of the premiere of *In solitude this fear is lived* is available at <https://soundcloud.com/foundationforcontemporaryarts/in-solitude-this-fear-is-lived>. Last accessed 6 May 2022.

Example 1:

Joan La Barbara, *Sound Painting No. 1 for Orchestra* (done as an Agnes Martin painting circa 1977), 1991 © Joan La Barbara/ASCAP.

Sound Painting No.1 for Orchestra
(done as an Agnes Martin painting circa 1977)

Joan La Barbara
January 31, 1991

BRUSH TROMBONE HEAD WITH BRUSH BRUSH EVENLY AND SLOWLY
TO CREATE "SHINE AND GLOSS" EFFECT

copyright © 1991 Joan La Barbara

constraint of the grid to which the artist submitted herself, evident in a drawing like *Tremolo* (see Figure 3). Musically, La Barbara in both of her Martin works translated the idea of a prepared ground, a wash that Martin applied before painting. La Barbara described it like this:

That first *Sound Painting for Orchestra* is really different than what I eventually came up with but there are still elements from that that are in the new piece, *In solitude* – the whole idea of prepping the canvas. Unless you prep the canvas, the material sucks up the paint. Prepping the canvas is what allows the paint to adhere in a particular way. The whole idea of creating this wash in space, that's the first thing that happens. In the work *In solitude*, it's done with breath, with bowed harp and bowed piano and some wind sounds [from a pre-recorded 'sonic atmosphere', as La Barbara calls it].³⁹

From there, La Barbara took the grid as kind of spatial logic and, as with *Rothko*, surrounded the audience with music:

I knew I was going to be performing that work in Zankel Hall and I had gotten permission to place the musicians around the hall. I could get this bird's-eye view of the audience and the audience was sort of inside the painting and this wash was going to go over them. And then as the strings start one by

³⁹ La Barbara, interview with the author.

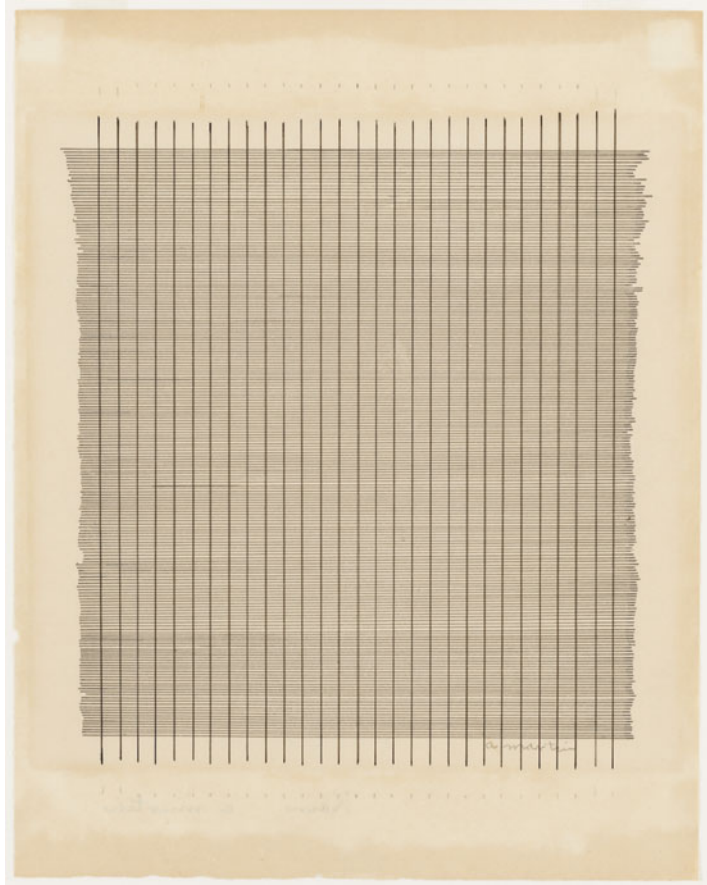


Figure 3:

Agnes Martin, *Tremolo*, 1962. Ink on paper, 25.5 × 28 cm. The Riklis Collection of McCrory Corporation. The Museum of Modern Art/ New York © 2022 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

one to introduce the pitches it's on one side and then it's responded on the other. And so, it gradually note by note applies the pitch material, as you're, as if it were, paint on the canvas.⁴⁰

Even if the spatialisation is similar to *Rothko*, the musical material – a series of hesitant, pulsing lines and contrapuntal ascents – creates a wholly different sound world out of Martin's 'rigidity'. As we might expect, La Barbara expressed a strong personal identification with the artist, one complicated by La Barbara's dislike of the painter's late large-striped paintings: "There's a purity about those drawings that gets to a kind of focus, of an aesthetic. . . I feel her in these drawings. I didn't feel her in the stripes."⁴¹

To some extent, La Barbara identifies in other artists that which she values in her own work: an almost ascetic focus on the clarity of the idea and of the process at work in a piece. Even as she is drawn to painting and visual abstraction, what undergirds La Barbara's work is a rigorous conceptualism. Her ekphrastic works are one instantiation of that conceptualism. When taken with the phenomenological etudes of the 1970s, we can see her debt not only to experimental music and abstract painting but also to the conceptual art she encountered on her

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

travels to Europe with Reich's ensembles in the early 1970s. There she was exposed to a number of US conceptual artists, including Vito Acconci and Dennis Oppenheim, who taught her that 'It's not just notes. It's why you're doing this.'⁴² *Here What I Feel*, a cross-modal sensory-deprivation experience works with a similar translational, if not ekphrastic, logic to the sound paintings and points to this broader conceptualism in La Barbara's work. In keeping with G. Douglas Barrett's call for new music to become a postconceptual art that critically interrogates contemporary life, we might do well to honour the ways in which La Barbara has honed a postconceptual practice that, between senses, between artforms, makes worlds out of 'brains and breath'.⁴³

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ La Barbara, in her vocal warm-ups, enjoins us to 'Remember, singing is just a matter of brains and breath.'