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“Ravel. It’s a masterpiece, but it’s not a ballet. It’s a painting of a ballet.”

Diaghilev describing “La Valse” in 1920

## A SYNESTHETIC EXPERIENCE: A COLORED MUSICAL SCORE OF MAURICE RAVEL'S "LA VALSE"

**Gabrielle Thierry**

I would first of all like to thank the Université de Bourgogne, in association with the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass., and Université Paris-Diderot for their invitation, as well as the entire team at Centre Interlangues TIL Texte-Image-Langage. As part of the conference on synesthesia held in Dijon in June 2014, I presented my work as a "Musicalist" painter. I specifically wanted to illustrate this personal process of transposing music to the canvas by using Maurice Ravel's "La Valse" as an example. This piece of music has a very particular connection to European history. Ravel wanted to write a hymn for Strauss' waltzes. The beginning of WWI delayed this project and also impacted its creation. This hymn has a very particular meaning in the context of the 100-year anniversary of WWI. "I conceived this work as a kind of apotheosis of the Viennese waltz, which my mind tinged with the impression of a fantastic and fatal swirling," Ravel wrote<sup>1</sup>.

### **In the beginning: landscape, music, painting**

I wanted to begin by saying that landscape for me has its own inherent music. To paint a landscape means to represent its space by depicting its rhythms and its music. Representing music is a complex act: is it a representation of the color of sounds, or is it a re-transcription, through the interplay of colors and forms, of the emotions one experiences when listening to music? What are the real, imaginary, or emotional connections between music and the landscape? Can a landscape be the subject of a musical representation? Composers have long been inspired by their surrounding landscape; consider Liszt, or Schubert crossing the Alps. But what role does the landscape play in the composition? Is there really a way to transpose it?

We know that when certain people hear music, they see images, colors, or forms in movement. So, can one evoke or imagine a piece of music, a sound, or a melody when looking at a landscape? We are all to varying degrees aware of the associations to be formed between music, colors, and forms. This ability, known as synesthesia, appears to wane quickly as we grow,

<sup>1</sup> Maurice RAVEL, *Une Esquisse autobiographique* [dictated to Roland-Manuel, October 1928], *La Revue musicale*, Dec. 1938, pgs. 17-33.

except in certain individuals. It is also worth noting that depending on the historical era, schools, the development of knowledge, education, cultural codes and practices manage to grant more or less space or importance to this universal sensibility, one which can lead to a wealth of esthetic experiences.

The process of expressing music in the image of a landscape is the result of an esthetic and artistic quest. The visual reproduction of the rhythm of a landscape is certainly the most obvious stage, especially because of the repetition of the forms and the range of colors.



Figure 1: "Andrésy Flamboyant," Oil on Canvas

In the painting "Andrésy Flamboyant" (Figure 1), the early fall colors along the banks of the Seine <sup>2</sup> and the rhythms are naturally present in the reflections. The musical emotion is the result of this light and its bright colors. In this case, I find the color to be "musical data" that asserts itself almost implicitly.

This painting was a revelation to me, and it prompted me to try to represent music in landscape paintings. In a series of paintings titled "Colored Scores,"

<sup>2</sup> This painting was made somewhat in the style of Paul Sérusier's "Talisman," a painting that was made at Gauguin's instructions, the goal of which was to conjure the magic of color and line, regardless of any sense of representation. "How do you see this tree?" Gauguin asked Sérusier while pointing to an area of the Bois d'Amour. "Is it nice and green? Well, then use green, the most beautiful green on your palette. And is this shadow quite blue? Don't be afraid of making it as blue as possible." It was in this way, in a paradoxical and unforgettable form, that the fertile notion of the "flat surface covered with colors arranged in a certain order" was first presented to us (1888). This was how we learned that any work of art is a transposition, a caricature, the impassioned equivalent of a felt sensation. (Maurice Denis, quoted by Jean-Pierre Guillermin in *Des Mots et des couleurs*, pg. 197).

I was able to define a pictorial vocabulary for describing musical space. This "vocabulary" is above all based on emotion, not a mechanism of direct correspondences, as in "pure" synesthesia. My search for colors and forms is guided mostly by an emotion similar to what one may experience when listening to music. Emotion cements the correspondence between landscape and music, and between image and sound.

The structure and composition of music also play a fundamental role in the composition of the painting. This is when the issue of time emerges. The pictorial representation of notes in space may, for example, take the form of chromatic circles that represent sound waves. The colors vary in function of their propagation on the colored-sonorous backgrounds.

Thus, the series of paintings titled "Variations" includes representations of landscapes and their music.

For example, the "Matinales" (Figure 2) consist of a sequence of landscapes of the banks of the Seine covered in snow. In the first painting in this series, the elements remain figurative. Two other, smaller paintings testify to the search for forms within this landscape, a process of synthesis that may constitute the beginning of a language for forms and their composition. The motion of the Canada geese along the riverbanks gives birth to a melody, that of the violin in a J.S. Bach sonata. The last composition of three blue circles represents a new stage where the sonata's musical elements are equated in the canvas with the image of the balancing of the geese. The piano notes structure the canvas into rectangular elements. This commonly felt emotion generates these varying colored interpretations, and my approach relies on a progressive sense of abstraction<sup>3</sup>.

What concerns us here is the use of this pictorial vocabulary of music to transpose a work of sound onto the canvas, similarly to the use of any language to describe a work, with its sensory and emotional particularities.

I will illustrate this approach using the painting "La Valse."

<sup>3</sup> A few of the paintings in the series *Variations* can be heard as music at [www.mgbook.com](http://www.mgbook.com), under the "Painting" tab: In "Les Matinales," Canada geese fly along the banks of the Seine to a J.S. Bach sonata, and "Le Parc" is based on an Anton Bruckner quartet (published in Florence Collin, ed., *Musique et Arts plastiques: Hommage offert à Michèle Barbe par ses étudiants et amis*, Paris, Observatoire musical français, as part of the series "Musique et arts plastiques," no. 7, 2011).



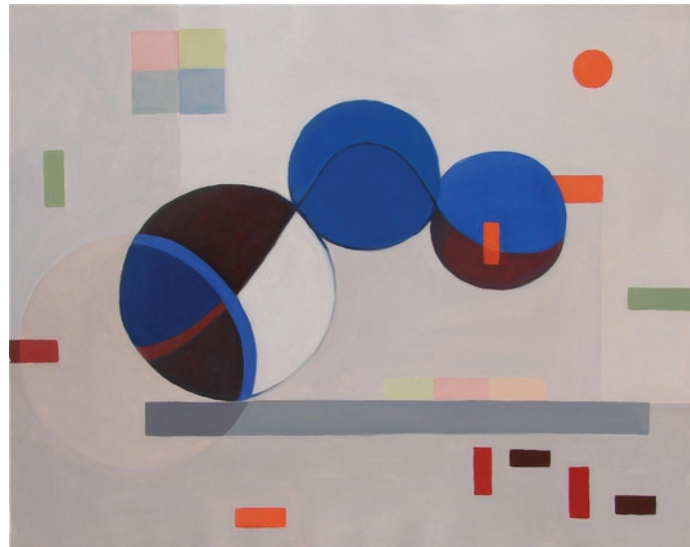
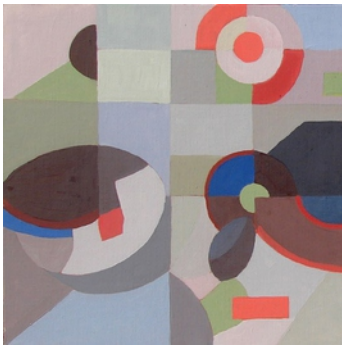


Figure 2: "Les Matinales"  
Polyptych of oil on canvas

## La Valse

This painting consists of three 100x100cm canvases painted in oil between January and April 2013. Ravel's "La Valse" was performed by the Radio France Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Myung-Whun Chung, at the Salle Pleyel<sup>4</sup>. It is a 12 minute-long "choreographic poem."

Hearing this orchestral piece in such an auditorium accentuated the material and structural dimensions of Ravel's work for me. The harmony of sounds and its entire composition are allied with a dense, colorful construction. One might refer to a kind of architecture, and it is precisely in that context that the density of the oil paint plays a role: the thickness of the layers, the matte finish of the colors, and how they then resonate under the varnish provide tools to sharpen the sound and grant it its proper presence. It is not merely a question of working with colors and forms, but also representing the piece's solid architecture. The representation must also account for the poetry and fury that Ravel's work expresses. "Ravel sought to create a synthesis and apotheosis of the Viennese Waltz. You can't play this waltz as a series of impressions, rather as one overall impression. Within it, forms appear, as if surfacing from the past," the Swiss conductor Ernest Ansermet explained during a television program about "La Valse."<sup>5</sup>

The main difficulty in this enterprise was imagining how to represent all the instruments. I had to listen to and feel an orchestra to grasp the sense of space and color, and to subdue the forms that they release. Synesthetes perceive the color of sound in different ways. I used colors here that evoke each of the instruments in the orchestra (Figure 3: The color of the orchestra instruments). This synesthetic component is quite well known in painting (perhaps more than in music, except in rare cases, such as Messiaen). The subject merits further experimentation and more in-depth research. I think this is what provides the keys to understanding the colored composition: green for the sounds of the violin, mauve for the harp, yellow for the woodwinds, red for the brass, brown for the cellos and basses, and so on. This represents the truly synesthetic component of my approach.

In his work *Le Peintre des sons. Sons et Couleurs*,<sup>6</sup> Charles Blanc-Gatti, a painter of sound and a founding member of the Musicalist movement, compared the views and ideas of

<sup>4</sup> An excerpt of the concert is available online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TMSgWhIENSk>.

<sup>5</sup> "Ernest Ansermet and the OSR: Ravel's La Valse" (January 30, 1958) <http://www.rts.ch/video/emissions/archives/50/3428043-ernest-ansermet-et-l-osr-la-valse-de-ravel.html>

<sup>6</sup> Charles Blanc-Gatti, *Le Peintre des Sons. Sons et Couleurs*, Paris, Victor Attinger, 1934.



Figure 3: The orchestra's colors



painters, musicians, poets, philosophers, and scientists who grappled with the interaction of the various arts, specifically the color of music. Among the painters we should mention Louise Janin, American, also a theoretician of esthetics, Franck Kupka, Czech, a virtuoso of abstract forms and colored harmonies, one of the creators of Orphism along with Robert Delaunay<sup>7</sup>, and Paul Klee and his visual representation of musical notation, which gave rise to a new representation of musical writing. Many other artists belonging to various movements have treated music as an essential element of abstraction in painting. August Macke said that "the same thing that makes music so mysteriously beautiful also makes painting so bewitching." Morgan Russell sought to "create a pure, abstract succession of forms made of colors that move to a tempo set by the sound that dances, like beings in a more visual world." Vladimir B. Rossiné used his magical piano to project colors and infinitely varied moving forms into a space or onto a screen, ones that depended fully, as on a piano, on the workings of the keys. Many others followed, such as Hans Richter, who explored the possibilities of sound in abstract film<sup>8</sup>.

One of the precursors of this representation of music was Vassily Kandinsky, whose teachings at the Bauhaus became the theoretical foundation for total art, of which painting and music each formed a component. Rereading *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* is, to this end, very revealing. Any synesthetic perception of music is first and foremost a personal one. We do not all perceive music in the same way. Some see mostly the color of the notes, while others see forms or colored images in movement, for example. For Kandinsky, "musically, light blue is comparable to the flute, a darker blue, to the cello, and when even darker, to the bass. In its deepest, most majestic tones, blue is comparable to the grave sounds of the organ."<sup>9</sup> Thus, instrument by instrument, he provides his musical impression of colors,

<sup>7</sup> Robert Delaunay's Orphism did not focus on the representation of music. The "goal" of his chromatic circles was the suggestion of a pathway for examining the surface of the canvas. "Struck by a color, the eye glides across the surface of the canvas looking for something complementary." Robert Delaunay seemed to be searching for the scene's movement, thus offering a path through the represented landscape. Even though Delaunay spoke in 1912 of a "search for the transparency of colors to compare them to musical notes," this does not take away from the retinal specificity of a kind of painting based on its own "optical laws," regardless of its affinities with music. Nevertheless, he introduced the question of rhythms in the space of representation. (Pascal Rousseau, J.P. Ameline, ed., *Robert Delaunay 1906-1914: De l'impressionnisme à l'abstraction*, Paris, Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1999, pg. 87).

<sup>8</sup> Marcella Lista, Sophie Duplaix, ed., *Sons et Lumière: Une histoire du son dans l'art du XXème siècle*, Paris, Editions du Centre Pompidou, 2004, respectively pgs. 21, 136, 148, and 158.

<sup>9</sup> Vassily Kandinsky, *Du spirituel dans l'art et dans la peinture en particulier*, Paris, Gallimard (Folio-Essais), 1996, pg. 150.

all the while expressing the difficulty of explaining this in words. “The tone of colors, like those in music, are of a much finer nature, and provoke vibrations within one’s soul that are much more subtle than what words can describe.”<sup>10</sup> I myself do not see the colors. I look in my palette for the color that provokes the same emotion as this or that instrument. The complexity of Ravel’s “La Valse” lies in its composition, in the interweaving of the different musical parts that the work repeats throughout its 12, very intense minutes. The canvas seeks to represent and heighten this complexity for the sake of the pleasure of mixing the senses.

The initial sketches for the composition already appropriate the work (Figure 4). As I was creating the structure of the work while listening to “La Valse” (Figure 6), I was looking for exact forms, the connections and transitions in each group of instruments in this complex piece of music (Figure 7). The music is represented in a space. The notes develop here against an acoustic background tied to the instruments in function of their presence on the different levels that can be evoked. Thus, an instrument that provides the melody appears in the foreground. The coloring is done in subsequent layers. The greens represent the violins (Figure 8). Then, all the instruments are played-painted in colors at the moment of their playing in a new, musically nuanced form.

The fact that certain passages are played and replayed during the orchestra’s rehearsals with different modulations to the rhythm, the harmony, and the intensity – as demanded by the conductor – supported me in my notion that music and painting are made the same way. I work on a canvas the way a musician strives for the right sound with his or her instrument. I search for rhythms, sonorous forms, and their interweaving. Thus, propagating waves can be represented as colored concentric circles, while acoustic backgrounds construct a “musical past.” This distinction creates a sense of temporality, which is both one of seeing and hearing. The development of the note in its space, its representation, may therefore be associated with its movement within the musical space. This decision explains how the pictorial transposition of “La Valse” reproduces the linear movement of reading from left to right and thus mimics time.

Olivier Messiaen, who granted huge importance to the relationship between music and color, once said: “I realized that I too connected colors to sounds in my mind, not in my eyes. In fact, whenever I hear or read music (hearing it within me), I have always seen colors in my mind that move and shift along with the sounds. Based on what I observed within myself, I came up with a law.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 164.

<sup>11</sup> Claude Samuel, Anik Lesure, ed, *Olivier Messiaen : Le Livre du Centenaire*, Paris, Symétrie, 2008, pg. 147.



The rough watercolor outlines allowed me to work on the composition, the structure, and the colors. I made them while listening to rehearsals at the Salle Pleyel.

The final attempt before undertaking the painting itself involved a watercolor made at my studio (Figure 5). Like a musical score, this represents a musical phrase that will be played several times. Over time, this musical phrase will contribute to the intensity and tension of the playing of the piece. The tension mounts until the final, apocalyptic drama, which signals the death of the waltz through an evocation of a final suffocation.

After completing these multiple layers of colors and formal compositions, I made the final version of oil paint on a larger scale (100x300cm). Its construction is based on the notion that each excerpt of the piece has its own place within the painting: the waltz played by the violins, its correspondence with the woodwinds and then the brass in disarray, followed by the strident rise of the violins that terminates in the final, deafening suffocation. The painting describes a space whose dimensions allow one to perceive time. I place myself within the space that the composer created and I try to re-transcribe it onto the canvas.

To evoke our physical immersion in the music, I sometimes depict leaves in the air. They evoke our presence, our “whirling” in the music as it frees our emotions. Here, three leaves dance to this waltz according to three “imagined” tempos “visualized” as a triptych. Just as a composer may provide keys for interpretation in the score and sometimes the texts, painters can also explain their own works.



Figure 5: First watercolor of “La Valse”



Birth-creation  
of the world of  
music and its  
elements.

"La Valse"  
awakens with  
the violins.

The woodwind  
instruments then  
bring light.

Percussion and  
the three beats of a  
waltz.

Rise of the violins  
and the progression  
towards the  
culminating point.

These strident sounds  
evoke the coming  
drama.

The fundamental  
rhythm of the waltz  
enters the spotlight  
and is magnified (cf.  
Ernest Ansermet)

I find this to be a  
cataclysm and, in  
view of the global  
conflict that WWI  
represented, the end  
of the world as Ravel  
knew it, which  
suffocated to death.



### **In conclusion**

The landscape as a point of departure allowed me to re-transcribe a musical space of correspondences that began with a specific perception based on a “synesthetic feeling.” The transposition of music into painting is a constant esthetic quest, and the presentation of Maurice Ravel’s “La Valse” is one such attempt. The invention of a “pictorial vocabulary” of music allowed me to depict it as an image. The ways in which the music and the painting were recomposed were inspired mostly by an experiencing of emotions and a search for correspondences. An image could give rise to a rhythmic emotion colored by the music, a totally musical feeling. Although this fusion is not new, its importance remains relatively ignored, especially as regards the emergence of abstraction in painting. I think that we should reconsider the relationship between music and painting, or between music and visual representation. To exhibit “La Valse” above an orchestra during a concert would make this project fully successful, in my mind. It would provide the audience with a visual interpretation of the music, a particular emotion that follows the flow of art history. “One day, we will simultaneously perform symphonies and show beautiful paintings to heighten our impressions,” Eugène Delacroix wrote in his Journal on April 9, 1856<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Eugène Delacroix quoted by Jean d’Elbée in “Le Sourd et le muet (Notes parallèles sur Goya et Delacroix),” *La Revue hebdomadaire*, Paris, Plon, Vol. 30, 1930, pg. 452.

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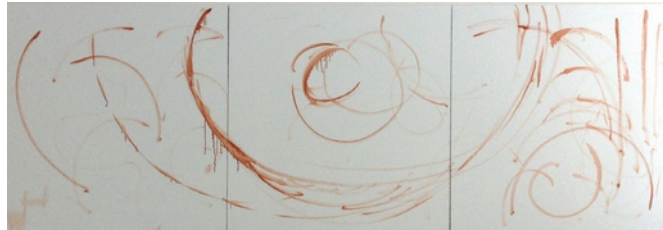


Figure 6: The underlying structure, the gesture



Figure 7: The painting's composition



Figure 8: First colors: the violins

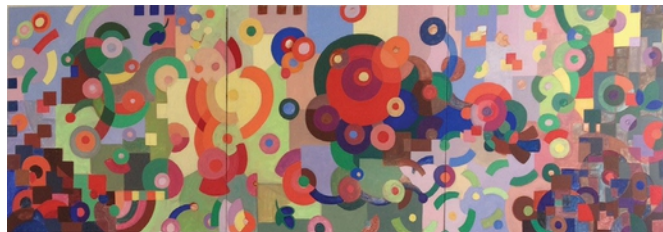


Figure 9: A harmony of sounds and colors

## **Two additional notes**

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### **A brief history of "La Valse"**

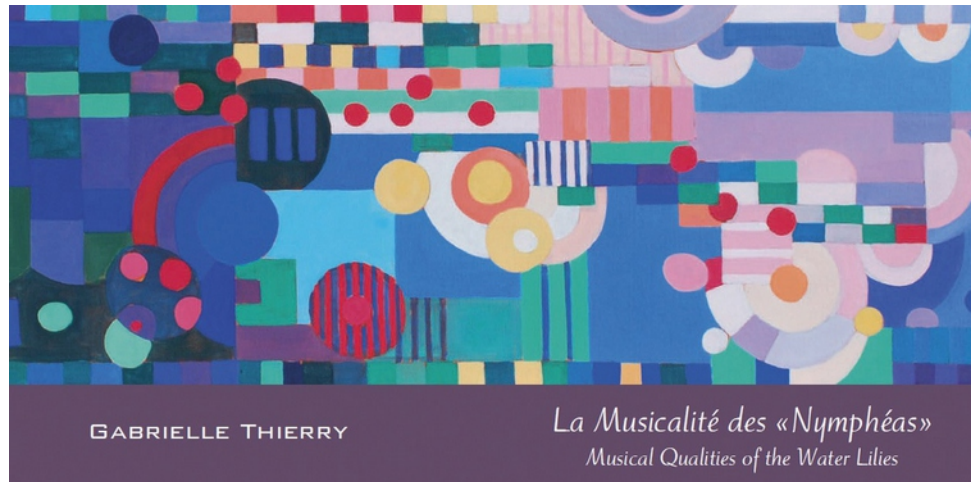
In collaboration with Serge de Diaghilev, Maurice Ravel began in 1906 to imagine composing an apotheosis of the waltz for a ballet in homage to Johann Strauss, but WWI forced him to delay his work. Ravel experienced the war as the destruction of civilization, and it in fact changed the order of the world. The sumptuous, Romantic image of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Viennese court that Johann Strauss II's waltzes depicted so well was replaced by an vision of a decadent world threatened by barbarism.

It is for this reason that Ravel's work exceeds his initial ambitions for it. He composed, to use his expression, a "fantastical and fatal whirl," a sumptuous evocation of grandeur, decadence, and finally, the destruction of Western civilization.

"La Valse" was presented to Diaghilev in April 1920 at Misia's apartment in the presence of a number of musician, choreographer, and writer friends. Francis Poulenc described the event in this way: "Diaghilev was supposed to produce 'La Valse' for the Russian Ballet... Ravel came as he was, with his music in arm, and Diaghilev told him: 'So, my dear Ravel, what a joy to hear 'La Valse'...' I knew Diaghilev very well at that point. I watched his dentures move, his monocle move. I saw he was embarrassed, that he didn't like it, that he was on the verge of saying, 'No.'" When Ravel finished, Diaghilev told him something that I think was very fair. He said, "Ravel, it's a masterpiece, but it's not a ballet. It's a painting of a ballet." What was extraordinary, though, was that Stravinsky didn't say a word – nothing! I was dumbstruck. This was in 1921, and I was twenty-two years old, but it gave me a lesson in modesty that has lasted me my whole life. Ravel took his music back very calmly, without caring what anyone might think of him, and he left in all tranquillity."

Gerald Larner, *Maurice Ravel*, London, Phaidon, 1996, pgs. 172-173. Francis Poulenc also recounted this event in *Moi et mes amis* (Paris, La Palatine, 1963).

### The Colored Scores of the Water Lilies







*"Musicalité des Nymphéas, Les Deux Saules," 2011, Oil on canvas, diptych, 50x 424 cm*

Among my pictorial efforts at highlighting the relationship between landscape and music, I would like to mention a series titled "The Colored Scores of Claude Monet's Water Lilies." This musical sensation manifested itself to me during a visit to the Musée de l'Orangerie in 2010.

I received a special authorization to paint for 18 months in front of Claude Monet's aqueous landscapes at the Musée de l'Orangerie. The 300 or so hours I spent studying the Water Lilies allowed me to grasp the colors and the forms, and to comprehend and experience the composition that emanated from this series.

Eight canvases, some of them in diptych form, and twenty gouaches made on site form the corpus of this series.

The composition came almost naturally to me by "listening" to Monet's painting, by reading the landscape. The eye follows a path that I wanted to reproduce on my canvas. The composition underlying Claude Monet's work became increasingly legible. The canvases revealed themselves to me as highly constructed for their sense of verticality as well as the movement of the reflections. The positioning of the water lilies often form circles and even "rhythmic checkerboards." The viewer's gaze is led through the landscape, across the canvas. My musical-pictorial composition based itself on this structure.

Each panel of the Water Lilies has its own music specific to it: for example, in the "Matin aux Saules," I see Franz Liszt's "La Vallée d'Obermann" as played by Roger Muraro, and in "Les Deux Saules," the 3<sup>rd</sup> Opus of Franz Schubert's "Moments Musicaux," as played by David Fray.

There is a website for the project on the musicality of Monet's Water Lilies: [www.waterliliespaintingmusic.com](http://www.waterliliespaintingmusic.com), and a video shows my working sessions at the Musée de l'Orangerie at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=3fkq\\_TXKeZ0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3fkq_TXKeZ0)

