

Do Most Musicians Have Synesthesia?

Interrelationships between music and the visual arts have always fascinated me.

As a music major at the High School of Music and Art, (Now LaGuardia School of the Arts) and then an Art Major in college; and, finally, an art historian, I thought of synesthesia as a metaphor - a way to connect the two art forms which I loved. Only later did I learn that synesthesia was a real and verifiable neurological phenomenon.

My interests and major studies culminated in my unusual career at Juilliard - teaching art history to musicians, dancers, and actors, which I did for nearly 45 years. During that time, I encountered numerous composers and performers, who not only have synesthesia, but whose compositions and performances have been strongly informed by it.

Interestingly, when I first mentioned synesthesia in class, during the 1990s, almost none of the students had even heard the word. But by the time I retired in December 2023, nearly everyone knew of it, and many revealed that they thought that they might have it.

Reasons for this shift are many: Increased scholarship and publicity have no longer defined it as a "condition," but, rather, as a phenomenon, a trait, or even a gift. And definitions have greatly expanded, including all the senses, as well as personification and mirror-touch. This has encouraged people to be aware, to reveal it, and investigate their synesthesia, rather than see it as a stigma.

The earliest investigations into synesthesia of which I was aware involved only chromesthesia or colored sound. Most researchers ignored the senses outside of vision and hearing.

For this presentation, I shall concentrate on the synesthetic perceptions of three musicians, pianist Joyce Yang, Soprano (and visual artist and teacher) Tharanga Goonetilleke, and composer Aaron Jay Kernis. I shall share some examples of visual art as well as fragments of music.

Joyce Yang has made several videos discussing her synesthesia; and Kernis has written extensively about his composing methods. I have listened to their music and interviewed each of them.

Tharanga Goonetilleke, an internationally acclaimed opera singer, and the first woman from Sri Lanka to be accepted to Juilliard, is also a gifted visual artist.

She has said, "Anything I tend to visualize has motion. That's what I always try to capture.

I have tried doing still lifes, but I don't enjoy that at all. I feel like I want to shake them.

They are just not in me, and do not give me the same satisfaction."

Although these three musicians reveal strong synesthetic traits, I am beginning to think that all musicians, whether classical, jazz, or Pop, possess synesthesia to some degree. We know that all dancers have kinesthesia; they move their bodies in response to sounds. Indeed, all performers move to sounds, and many appear to visualize something that only they see while performing.