

Synesthesia impacts the music composition process through automatic and deliberate means.

Eloise M. Whitehead¹, Solange Glasser¹, Gary E. McPherson¹

¹Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, The University of Melbourne, Australia
eloise.whitehead@unimelb.edu.au
solange.glasser@unimelb.edu.au
g.mcpherson@unimelb.edu.au

ABSTRACT

People with synesthesia are more likely to be involved in the creative arts, and there is evidence to suggest that synesthetes may display heightened levels of creativity (Lunke & Meier, 2022; Rothen & Meier, 2010), however the extent to which synesthesia affects creative practices and processes remains under-researched. Case studies (Collins, 2005; Reitman, 1965) and computer-based methodologies (Bamberger, 1977; Seddon & O'Neill, 2003) have been used to map the creative processes of music composers, yet despite evidence that synesthesia impacts the compositional process (Bernard, 1986; Peacock, 1985), the specific nature of this impact remains unknown. The present study aims to address this knowledge gap by investigating how, and in what ways, synesthesia impacts the creative process of music composers. Five music composers with synesthesia completed the Synesthesia Battery (Eagleman et al., 2007), a collection of online tests designed to measure and categorise synesthesia. A pre-interview questionnaire was used to gather music background and demographic information. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand the impact of synesthesia on each individual synesthete's creative process. Using one of their own compositions as an example, participants discussed the impact of their synesthesia at eight stages of the creative process, as outlined by Schuler and Görlich (2007). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2021) was used to analyse the lived experiences of these composers. Five key themes were identified: 1) Collaboration with synesthesia, 2) Using synesthesia as a writing tool, 3) Automatic cuing through synesthesia, 4) Music-colour associations guide musical choices, and 5) Synesthesia-mediated communication through music. As all five participants possess musical pitch-colour and musical chords-colour synesthesia, music-colour associations were particularly important for guiding the composition process at various stages. Participants nominated all but Stage 1 of Schuler and Görlich's (2007) eight stage creative process framework as being important phases for the use of their synesthesia. This research has the potential to further understanding of the extent to which synesthesia can impact creative processes and the means through which this is achieved.