

The colorlight music (Farblichtmusik) of Alexander László

by Jörg Jewanski

In the 1920s, a multitude of artistic experiments were carried out involving various boundary-crossing combinations of music, painting and film. One of the most important experimenters in this area was the Hungarian Alexander László, who is known especially for his *Colorlight music – Farblichtmusik* is the original term in German. His new art was first performed in 1925 in Kiel, Germany.



Archive Jörg Jewanski, Münster, Germany

As you see on this drawing from around 1925, during a performance of László's colorlight music, the auditorium was divided into three parts: the foreground, with the audience; the stage, with the pianist; and a screen in the back, used for projection. There were a total of four large projectors and four smaller ones, with the latter mounted in front of the stage. László's goal was to mix music with colors and forms, in a new type of artistic synthesis, for which he coined the term *Farblichtmusik*.

The pianist during the concerts was László himself. He was born in 1895 in Budapest as Sándor László, and he studied piano, composition and conducting at this city's conservatory. In 1915, he went to Berlin, Germany, where he changed his surname to Alexander, gave many piano concerts and seemed to be heading for a great career as a concert pianist. László was a very virtuoso pianist: From 1920 to 22, he recorded 31 Welte-Mignon-rolls, mostly with transcriptions of symphonies of Beethoven and Schubert. László also conducted the *Dresden Philharmonic Orchestra*, and he toured with that orchestra through Sweden in 1921.

But then, around 1920, László conceived the idea of combining music and painting in a way that would subordinate neither art nor music. Since childhood, he had a learned association that he used intentionally to make his piano playing more 'beautiful'. Now he wanted to show his associations to the public.

To this end, he began collaborating with the German painter Matthias Holl. Acting on László's ideas, Holl painted watercolor pictures, which were based closely on László's associations he had while playing the piano. Each of these pictures is correlated with one of László's compositions. These paintings were transferred onto slides, for projection onto a screen. Four projectors were used, along with a sort of mixer, from which the projection was coordinated. Significantly, the projectors were specially modified. László added mechanical innovations in front of them, such as color-modulating filters and special wheels that could integrate images of rotating geometric figures with the projections. These features made possible additional types of color and form changes.

During the concerts, he normally played the piano on stage, while his staff operated the slide projectors. László published a total of three compositions in 1925 and 26. All of them were for *piano with colored light*: *Dreams* op. 9, with five movements; op. 10: eleven *Preludes*, each named after a color; op. 11: *A Sonatina*, in three movements. Above the score, László added instructions for how the colors were to be *played*. The colored light was projected onto a tripartite screen and onto a special construction mounted at the top of the screen. László's music often consists of triadic and tonal arpeggios with chromatic alterations, along with an accompanying melody. It is in the style of virtuoso romantic salon music with impressionistic elements.

László developed three different kinds of colorlight music:

1. *Light-ornaments*. The idea here was to link music and light within the same mood. A colored ornament, similar to the images produced by a kaleidoscope, was projected onto a screen or the ceiling of the hall, while the music played. The picture was not changed during the performance, and a special color was chosen for each composition.
2. *Russian color music*. Here, the intention was for the light to support the overall effect. Music was the important art, while light and colors had to be subordinate. For example, László would play an etude by Scriabin or some pieces by Rachmaninoff. After a while, the whole room would be filled with colored light. Within a few minutes the color of the light would change.
3. *The real Farblichtmusik*. This we might compare to a film screening, since only the screen (and not, for example, the ceiling) was used for projection of light. The idea was to get a synthesis in which music and painting would each appear as equally important arts. For this type of colorlight music, László played his own compositions, while showing paintings that Holl had produced especially for this art form.

Between 1925 and 27 László gave more than 1000 performances of his colorlight music throughout all of Germany. The public popularity was huge, for example, during the 6-month exhibition *GeSoLei* in Duesseldorf, more than 40,000 persons attended performances of his art. Hundreds of reviews of these events appeared in newspapers and magazines in many different countries. It is important to remember that movies in 1925 were in black and white and were still silent.

Listening to music while seeing moving, colored pictures on a screen was a totally new experience for audiences.

While the reviews exhibited a wide spectrum of opinions, from *Birth of a new art form* to *Kitsch*, the negative reviews predominated. They advanced that the picture-music combinations were not understandable, that they were purely subjective and exchangeable. Some wrote, that the colorlight music was not art, but decorative arts.

At the end of 1927, László turned away from his colorlight music and began to conduct and compose film music. Because he was half Jewish, he had to flee from the Nazis in 1933. He went first to Budapest, and from there, in 1938, with the help of László Moholy-Nagy, he emigrated to New York. There he returned to his colorlight music and worked to develop it further. Together with the composer John W. Hausermann Junior, a wealthy heir, he founded the *American Colorlight-Music Society*. He worked again at his colorlight music, but no performance can be proved to have taken place. But in 1939, he worked out two lectures about the history of colorlight music.

In 1943, László got an offer to go to Hollywood, where he composed the music for some 35 films and for numerous TV series. His music for the cinema - mostly for low-budget productions - encompasses several genres: melodrama, crime, children's entertainment, adventure, science fiction. Although colorlight music was now a closed chapter in his life, with his film music he still worked at combining pictures with music. László died in Los Angeles in 1970, just a few days before his 75th birthday.

His colorlight music is a typical avantgarde project from the 1920s in the context of abstract film. With his new art form László became a pioneer of what we today name *Visual music*.

Appendix: In 2006, a book in German language *Farbe – Licht – Musik. Synästhesie und Farblichtmusik* (Color – Light – Music. Synesthesia and Colorlight music) (see References) was published. It was the result of a combined artistic-scientific project at the conservatory in Zürich, Switzerland. One part of this project was an actual new version of László's colorlight music. For this, the pianist Oliver Schnyder recorded several of László's compositions; and the digital artist Jan Schacher created his own actual version, inspired by historical documents. In addition to this book, in 2009, a DVD *Color • Light • Music. Synesthesia & Color-Light-Music* (Art Adventures) was edited by Natalia Sidler.

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