

WINE AS LIQUID MUSIC, CHAOS THEORY AND CULTURE

BY KEN PAYTON

The question is surprisingly simple: what is the relationship between wine and music? More accurately, what happens to the experience of tasting a specific wine, of its flavors, mouthfeel and aromas, when the sense of hearing, normally a negligible participant, is fully activated? How does a wine change when listening is given direction, a starring role? This was the question put to us at Monday's gathering at the magnificent Hess Collection Winery. The group, assembled by Jo and Jose Diaz under the title Scoring the Scores, included Steve Heimoff, Clark Smith, Dan Berger, Laura Ness, and yours truly. All the wines, 19 in total, were Petite Sirahs. The music? All the tunes are found on Alacia Van's superb CD Beautiful Thought. We'll get to the music in a moment.

Now, it would be easy to dismiss this playful experiment as much ado about nothing. Music is music, wine is wine. But we, on the other hand, experience miraculous, unexpected intersections of physics and pleasure, art and science everyday. So routine are these encounters that the brilliance of the natural world, the complexity of a simple experiences, often go unnoticed. Take the run of a small stream, its flow over rocks, its eddies. A stream taken as an open system, the mathematical modeling of its movement is bewildering complex. But it does have a math. Or cloud formation, as it interacts with air pressure and temperature. There is math there, too. Better known is Johann Sebastian Bach's prodigious mathematical play subtending many of his prodigious compositions. A particularly favorite example of mine occurs near the close of Gleik's book, Chaos when he sits with mathematician Mitchell Feigenbaum on the floor of the latter's empty apartment. As smoke rises from Dr. Feigenbaum's cigarette, initially a laminar flow, it finally breaks into turbulence at precisely the point

worked out by the Dr. Feigenbaum himself.

Our group's question at Hess was essentially about missing information. To take one more illustrative example, that of weather prediction. Years ago a humble meteorologist by the name of Edward Lorenz was crunching numbers on a computer, a computer primitive by our standards. Approaching a deadline for a weather prediction, he was forced (for various reasons) to rerun his results. To speed things long, he clipped a few decimal numbers off of the very ends of his weather station data, things like wind speed, air pressure, temperature, all the inputs one normally associates with weather prediction. To his surprise, and ours, he came up with an entirely different forecast. Most puzzling was the fact that the decimal values clipped so as to shorten the numbers were seemingly insignificant, equalling the turbulent effect of a butterfly's wings. This discovery led to the oft misunderstood 'Butterfly Effect', the idea that information missing from a calculation may have staggering real-world consequences.

Revolutionary ideas were soon to follow or to be loosely united under the mathematical science of Complexity Theory. Chaos, Poincare, Topology, Catastrophe Theory, Fractals, to name but a few, became the buzz words of an invigorated, visually informed math. And this latter concept is doubly important. Sight had been abandoned from math more than a century ago. It was all a matter of the brain. Every school child knows the pain of Algebra, the college student, of quadratic equations. The only bit of the world remaining before the student's eyes was the dreaded text book and test paper. But through Fractals, the pioneering contribution of Benoit Mandelbrot, the natural world was reintroduced. The stunningly beautiful visual modelings of missing information has changed mathematics forever. The sense of sight was



finally restored to the mathematical sciences, and aesthetics given its rightful seat at the banquet table of creation. Art became an expression of science. And a science may now find art as a source of primary information. For the natural world expresses both simultaneously.

So who was I to prejudge the Hess Collection Winery Petite Sirah tasting? Perhaps the sense of hearing might prove to be a treasured source, once stimulated, of something like wine's missing information? First a word about our cast of characters. Clark Smith is arguably at the origin of the meditation on the wine/music intersection. An ebullient individual, overflowing with curiosity, crackling with the energy of a man half his age, Mr. Smith has researched this topic for some time. Dan Berger, Mr. Smith's co-theoretician on this day, is himself a deep pool of knowledge. He, too, is an innovator of sorts, and bursts his banks with unanticipated gifts of insight. Noted wine writer Steve Heimoff played the part of the responsible skeptic, laboring to understand and explain the wines in ways everyone might appreciate. For Mr. Heimoff hyper-specialized wine knowledge can limit or interfere with what should proper be the simple pleasure of drinking. Laura Ness, champion of the Santa Cruz Mountains AVA, she is up for anything! Open to the world, she was a fountain of play and inspiration. Jo and Jose Diaz, as organizers, were responsible for setting this *comédie humaine* in motion, though both clearly enjoyed moments of shared bliss as the afternoon proceeded. Myself? In such august company I felt it best not to speak unless spoken to. It is enough to say that watching these extremely diverse professionals in action was its own reward.

The wines:

2007 Artein, Mendocino County
2005 Clayhouse Estate, Paso Robles
2007 Concannon, Conservancy, Livermore Valley
2006 EOS Estate, Paso Robles
2005 Langtry, Guenoc Valley, Serpentine Meadow
2005 Lava Cap, Granite Hill, El Dorado, Reserve
2007 Line 39, Lake County
2004 Mettler Family Vineyards, Lodi
2007 Miro Petite Sirah, Dry Creek Valley, Sonoma County
2005 True Grit from Parducci, Mendocino County
2006 Pedroncelli Dry Creek Valley, Family Vineyards
2007 Silkwood, Stanislaus County
2006 Twisted Oak, Calaveras County
2005 Ursa, Sierra Foothills
2006 Vina Robles, Paso Robles
2006 Hess, Allomi Vineyard, Napa Valley

2008 Diamond Ridge
2005 Quixote
(1 missing)

For the musical offerings please see Jo Diaz's web site Juicy Tales for the list.

The method was simple. After an exhaustive introduction to the basics by Mr. Smith, we were first to taste the wines and then write a few notes. Next we were exposed to a variety of tunes, jazzy in the main. The task was to both pair a wine to a musical offering and, more importantly, to see whether our appreciation (or denigration) of a wine was substantially altered. An overarching question was whether we might find areas of collective agreement beyond tasting alone. By turns sultry, energetic, atonal, and novel, each tune was distinctive and rich. As we all listened, some of us perplexed, Mr. Smith and Mr. Berger went about their research with all the joy of latter day Archimedes. Exclamations not unlike that of 'Eureka!' rang out between the two. Mr. Heimoff offered a Mona Lisa smile as he sat listening next to the computer speakers. At one point Jo Diaz burst into laughter at his expression, and never fully recovered!

By fits and starts we next turned to lunch. Time, a sadistic task master, was moving quickly. A beautiful meal had been prepared by Executive Chef Chad Hendrickson, all the ingredients of which were sourced, with few exceptions, from local organic and sustainably farmed products. So beautiful was the food that, indeed, it crossed my mind that its preparation is itself among the highest cultural expressions of the twining of science and art. Ironically, we did not discuss the food and wine pairings before us. The designated music played over our conversations. We continued to entertain the question well into a dessert of Bitter Chocolate Terrine, Crème Fraiche Ice Cream with Banana Caramel Sauce.

What was learned? Well, that the people assembled were great intellectual adventurers. That the sympathy of music to wine demands greater research. That no miracle of everyday life should go unthought, however transitory and discrete. Such as our gathering.

COMMENTS

7 Responses to ' Wine As Liquid Music, Chaos Theory And Culture '

1. Jo Diaz said, on April 21st, 2010 at 10:19 am

Ken, the 19th wine was the 2007 Arzezin Garzini Ranch Mendocino County. A second PS was slipped into OUR brown bag tasting, and so wasn't on my pre wine-blog listing. (It will be in my post one.)

Bravo for a beautiful story. This isn't one I could have written myself... in any stretch of the imagination, but I do also attribute everything in life to math.

I'll just never see water dribbling across pebbles in a pond the same way again. Interestingly, when I want to put myself into a meditative rest, I use my memory of going to the point. (I grew up on Sabattus Lake in the summers in Maine, and "the point" was the left hand arc of our small bay.) I'd stare into the water, absorbing the ripples washing over the pebbled floor of this part of the lake (now I want to know the mathematical equations). I'd also absorb the sunlight's reflections off the water's surface... Another equation.

I think I need a glass of wine...

2. Admin, Ken Payton said, on April 21st, 2010 at 12:16 pm

Thank you, Jo. I well remember the moment when I realized the world and all of its processes, were simultaneously crunching numbers. With our mathematics we essentially try to imitate, poorly, Earth's computing capacity. Think of the 'bionic' arm. It will finally be perfected when a human arm is at last replicated! Missing information will always be with us. As Mandelbrot teaches, to accurately measure a coastline is a function of the measuring device. Once one begins measuring at the level of fractal dimensions all coastlines are, in fact, infinite.

BTW, a picture of Mitchell Feigenbaum hangs on my wall.

3. Steve Heimoff said, on April 21st, 2010 at 3:35 pm

Hey Ken, nice spending some time with you. Looks like we're gonna share a panel up at the bloggers conference with Mr. Wark!

4. Admin, Ken Payton said, on April 21st, 2010 at 3:38 pm

You, me, and Tom? What has world come to? It was a pleasure to hang out with you yesterday. You

are a far more reasonable man than I had been led to believe. I hope our paths cross again soon.

5. Dan Berger said, on April 21st, 2010 at 6:52 pm
Lovely!

6. Laura Ness said, on April 21st, 2010 at 10:43 pm
Math, music, mayhem: finally, a realization that wine is its own score.
Thanks, Ken!

7. Katie said, on May 3rd, 2010 at 6:27 am
It's nice to see this getting more and more attention. When I was asked to host Wine Blogging Wednesday quite a while back, I chose this very topic, and while some bloggers simply didn't "get it," others really got turned on to the connection between wine and music. Here are the two links to the event:

<http://bit.ly/VgpL7>

<http://bit.ly/8fnmT>