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IMAGE: UNCOMMON SCENTS

Note Worthy

Lyrical, dulcet, symphonic—perfumers find harmonic convergence in musical jargon *by* DENISE HAMILTON



PHOTO: NOLA LOPEZ

Perfume and music are ancient arts that strike a deep chord in the human psyche and leave us grappling for words to describe our experience. Since the 19th century, the two worlds have cross-pollinated and, even today, use much of the same vocabulary. A well-constructed scent unfurls much like a musical composition, taking the “listener” on a journey with a beginning, middle and end.

Classic perfumes have three stages—movements, if you will. The light olfactory fanfare on first spray is the top note, which usually contains short-lived citrus, aldehydes or florals. Deeper themes emerge in the heart notes—meditations on vetiver, jasmine, rose and patchouli. Finally, we cue the bassoons, as musk, civet and base notes crescendo, ushering in the drydown to a stately finish.

Master perfumers often speak of “composing” fragrances, wherein individual ingredients are the “notes.” Perfumes can contain dissonance (État Libre d’Orange’s Encens et Bubblegum), minimalism (Jean-Claude Ellena’s recent Hermès creations), counterpoint (the jasmine and leather that play so well in Serge Lutens’ Sarrasins) or unison (the green notes Germaine Cellier unified in Balmain’s Vent Vert).

Swiss niche perfumer Andy Tauer says his recent Pentachords series was inspired by five consecutive musical notes on the diatonic scale. But the John Cage of perfumery has to be Comme des Garçons, whose quirky Odeur 71 is a random, whimsical anti-perfume that Cage would have appreciated. (Among CDG’s notes: electricity, metal, office, mineral, dust on a hot lightbulb, toner, ink, pencil shavings and the salty taste of a battery.)

Some 21st-century perfumes are virtual tone poems. Geza Schoen’s Escentric Molecules Molecule 01 is an homage to one note—the radiant, woody aroma-chemical Iso E Super. At the other end of the spectrum are the “symphonic” floral Hermès 24 Faubourg and the original Boucheron, where hundreds of notes blend as seamlessly as musicians in any world-class orchestra.

While it takes a chemist to decipher a fragrance formula, anyone can learn to “read” perfume on skin. That’s because the greats—Joy, Chanel No. 5, Diorella, Shalimar—have an intelligence that elicits memory triggers akin to a Bach Mass or Brahms concerto. Like mathematical scent theorems, once sniffed, they seem head-slappingly obvious.

In 1936, composer Harry Revel sniffed Corday’s Toujours Moi on a woman in Paris’ Hotel George V bar and vowed to set its intoxicating notes to music. He visited Grasse, tested essences and haunted Corday’s headquarters, but inspiration eluded him until he heard the soundtrack to Hitchcock’s *Spellbound*. For Revel, the eerie electronic notes of the theremin captured the otherworldliness of Corday’s scent. His 1948 album, *Perfume Set to Music: The “Sound” of Scent*, also memorialized Corday’s Fame, a rich, honeyed jasmine. Look for cheap vintage bottles of this little known but terrific perfume at online auctions.

One of the most “perfumey” of classical composers was Claude Debussy, who penned two compositions based on his love of fragrance, including “Les Parfums de la Nuit” from his



Photo: Nola Lopez

Over at Amouage, creative director Christopher Chong, who trained as an opera singer, is inspired more by music than by traditional perfume ingredients. He cites the company's Amouage's Lyric (big thumbs up for the rose, saffron, incense, woods and fruit of Lyric Woman), which was inspired by the singing of Maria Callas.

Karine Vinchon and Elisabeth Meier of L'Artisan Parfumeur created 2011's Batucada (lime, tiare flower, Caipirinha and warm skin) after being moved by samba's particular percussive essence, and the scent bears his trademark ethereal style. For a more robust essay, try Balenciaga's Rumba, a heady cocktail of sweet, spicy, boozy notes.

Electro-tech innovator Brian Eno's perfume obsession dates back to 1965, when he and a friend concocted 50 fragrances inspired by everything from juniper wood to gasoline. His 1993 *Neroli* is an ambient meditation on bitter orange blossoms. In 2008, Eno created the iTunes app Bloom, which allows users to create musical "moods" based on specific notes. To complete the circle, perfume critic Luca Turin invoked Eno's name when reviewing British designer James Heeley's niche scent Cardinal (minimalist citrus and incense). "If, as I do, you love Brian Eno's *Music for Airports*, this one's for you." *Perfumes: The A-Z Guide*, by Turin and his wife, Tania Sanchez, uses jazz and classical references to describe scents. Praising the "novel dissonance" of Lyric Woman, he says, "Thelonious Monk would have understood this fragrance instantly."

British singer-actress Jane Birkin didn't mind playing muse for Miller Harris' L'Air de Rien, even after it was said to waft of overripe fruit, stale smoke, sweaty, boozy skin and soiled panties. *Chacun à son goût*.

Still, not all musicians appreciate the nod. Guerlain arguably hadn't heard of the mega metal band when it christened a perfume *Metallica* in 2000. It was a lovely blend of jasmine, musk, metallic tang and coumarin, but the band sued, and the fragrance was renamed *Metals* in 2006, thus ensuring sky-high eBay prices for the original.

The music-perfume connection is fueled by synesthesia, in which the stimulation of one sense sparks an involuntary response in a second sense. When perfumer Mathilde Bijaoui met with natural redhead Tilda Swinton to brainstorm ideas for a perfume for État Libre d'Orange, the actress said she liked gingerbread, autumn, baby carrots, pumpkin pie and immortelle, a note that can smell of maple syrup, burnt sugar, fenugreek and bacon. Bijaoui tells the blog *Grain de Musc* that her synesthesia led her to "see" immortelle as the color orange, and not surprisingly, the perfume she created for Swinton—*Like This*—is an essay in all aspects of the color.

Christopher Brosius of CB I Hate Perfume says his synesthesia lets him know when a scent is finished, because "it assumes the correct shape, color, texture and sometimes sound."

Ever-alert promotional departments have also latched on to the perfume-music helix as a clever marketing tool. In 2009, luxury firm Clive Christian held a Sound of Perfume competition in which British Royal College of Music students vied to create a piano composition inspired by one of three Clive Christian scents. The prize: a thousand pounds, enough to buy about two bottles of the pricey fragrances.

In recent years, the industry has been swamped by a tidal wave of celebrity-singer perfumes, many motivated more by filthy lucre than art. One of the early adopters was Cher, whose musky Oriental perfume *Uninhibited* is now discontinued and fetching up to \$150 online. Today, all the up-and-coming warblers and rappers want a perfume line to maximize their income stream: Justin Bieber, Beyoncé, Usher, Rihanna, Sean John, Britney Spears, Taylor Swift...the list goes on and on.

Many are banal, almost indistinguishable tooth-decay-sweet, fruity or vanillic clones. And the men's versions are usually bland aquatics. One of the better offerings: Mariah Carey's original perfume, *M*, from 2007. Madonna's *Truth or Dare* isn't bad either, but there are better tuberose on the market, like *Fracas*, Estée Lauder *Tuberose Gardenia* and Serge Lutens' punk-rocky *Tubéreuse Criminelle*, whose mentholated rubber and gasoline top notes are guaranteed to send your nose into orbit before easing it back to earth with the greenest, juiciest tuberose wisp ever.

And that's music to my nose.

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