

An orchestration of art

*‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty, —that is all
ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.’*

—John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”

by Jennifer Piurek

Jacobs School of Music Professor Thomas Robertello is a successful art gallery owner with an international career as a flutist and an extensive private art collection, but he’ll never forget his first art purchase.

When he was a 20-something art enthusiast, Robertello fell in love with a \$1,500 painting in a gallery, but at the time, he couldn’t afford to buy it. “I thought I could make it myself,” he admits. “Making amateurish abstract paintings gave me a sense of what to look for in other artists’ work.”

As he began his art-collecting career, Robertello bought small, inexpensive paintings, works on paper, and prints. Soon, he got hooked on finding emerging artists. During concert tours, he took to visiting as many galleries and museums as possible, buying directly from artists and their galleries—and gradually, trusting his instincts.

“I found that I had a really good instinct for choosing younger artists,” he says. “I was able to make purchases of some major works before high-powered collectors were collecting the work. Over the course of a number of years, those purchases have gained in value considerably. It gave me confidence that I knew what I was doing.”

Eventually, Robertello decided to support a group of emerging artists who needed exhibition space by opening his own gallery.

He spent months exploring the formation of a corporation, tax and accounting requirements, and press and museum contacts, all the while meeting with artists to see whose work would be a good fit for the gallery.

Within three years, he had created Thomas Robertello

Gallery in Chicago. The gallery has been reviewed locally, nationally, and internationally for its exhibitions, and Chicago museums including the Museum of Contemporary Art and the Museum of Contemporary Photography have acquired work from it. On the Indiana University Bloomington campus, Robertello has collaborated with the IU Kinsey Institute and the School of Fine Arts Gallery as a curator.

THE MAGIC FLUTE

Robertello, the musician, began playing the flute at age 10 when he was growing up in New Jersey. “I immediately enjoyed the sound, the physical nature of an emotional release through the breath, and the way seeing musical notation engaged my mind,” he says. “As a child and adult, music saved my life in many ways. I’m grateful that it was available to me in the public school system.”

As a teen, Robertello became aware that some people actually played in orchestras for a living; he saw the life of a professional flutist as the ideal career. One year, his late brother, Gary, presented Robertello with Boston Symphony tickets for Christmas.

“We went to the concert in Brooklyn and from the top balcony, I saw for the first time that the flutist was in the center of the orchestra. This thrilled me.”

A sudden off-stage drama left the teenage Robertello spellbound: An audience member leaving during the performance had a near-fatal accident. “The dramatic shift between fantasy and reality—I absorbed that stark contrast as a tool of expression at that moment.”

Robertello joined the faculty at IU's Jacobs School of Music about 13 years ago, at age 30. His pre-IU career includes membership in the Pittsburgh Symphony, the Cleveland Orchestra, and the National Symphony. He is a guest flutist with the San Francisco Symphony and the Houston Grand Opera, as well as a former faculty member of Carnegie Mellon University and the Cleveland Institute of Music.

Robertello's teaching and performing have taken him throughout the United States, Japan, South Korea, China, and South America. He has made many solo recordings, including Telemann's 12 Fantasies for solo flute, released by Delos in July 2009.

"I have been fortunate to work with very good orchestras, soloists, conductors, recording engineers, and students," he says. Robertello says it's especially gratifying to attend a student recital and witness a new level of achievement. "To be on the inside and have a personal connection to someone on the cusp of having a career, hear the recital, and know that it turned out a certain way in part because our paths have crossed, is enormously satisfying," he says.

Noting that both his music and gallery careers give him the opportunity to work with up-and-coming artists, Robertello says, "My music students and the gallery's artists both need support, direction, information, and an intrinsic belief in their work and how it relates to the current template that exists in each business."

SEEKING BEAUTY EVERYWHERE

Robertello's own musical inspiration is interconnected with current events, politics, and social issues. Recently, he was practicing his transcription of the Chopin Cello Sonata when his mind began to drift toward the passengers of Air France Flight 447. That's the plane that crashed into the Atlantic Ocean on May 31, 2009, carrying more than 200 people, including Turkish harpist Fatma Ceren Necipoğlu, a 2001 graduate of IU's Jacobs School of Music.

"Thoughts of the horror they endured entered my mind, and my imagination took over. The horrific reality of their journey is not something easily understood. There's nothing in my life to draw on for inspiration to help render this music, and thoughts about current events often are intertwined with my interpretations," he says.

As he thought of the plane crash, the lines of music turned to waves, he recalls. (Elsewhere, Robertello has described his flute performances as "live drawings" in which the flute sound is the pencil or paintbrush and the recital hall is "the canvas on which I make my mark.") As Robertello contemplated "ocean waves and images from the media and past disasters," he says, "suddenly the music was moving to a different place. Fatma was someone I coached in a few chamber music sessions several years ago. It is deeply saddening to know that anyone would suffer in such a way, and especially so after she had just played concerts in Rio at a harp conference.

Does this apple taste blue?

Thomas Robertello will never forget the first time he heard a painting. He was at an exhibition of works by Agnes Martin in Taos, New Mexico, in which all of the paintings featured horizontal bands of color. Everyone at the gallery was viewing the paintings; Robertello alone heard a low-pitched, droning hum emanating from the lines where the colors met.

"I asked someone else in the room if they heard it too, and they looked a little scared," says Robertello. A couple of months later, Robertello happened to see a TV program about synesthesia, a neurological condition in which one sensory or cognitive pathway automatically leads to another, and he realized he had a unique gift. (In Greek, the word "synesthesia" loosely translates to "mixing of the senses.")

For some "synesthetes," hearing a certain word triggers a taste response in their mouths; some see a certain color when eating specific foods. In the memoir *Born on a Blue Day*, synesthete Daniel Tammet describes how he sees numbers and words — the number one is "brilliant and bright white," for example, while five is a "clap of thunder or the sound of waves crashing," 37 is "lumpy like porridge," and 89 is "falling snow."

Carol Steen, co-founder of the American Synesthesia Association, says ASA research has identified 54 types of synesthesia — from the rare cases of those who see speech as scrolling ticker tape in different fonts to the more common inclination to see days, numbers, or months as having a certain hue. Still, the association hesitates to put a number on the percentage of the population who have it.

"Researchers vary in their estimates that between 1 to 4 percent of the population have synesthesia," Steen says, adding that widespread Internet use has enabled synesthetes and researchers to connect more than ever before.

Famous synesthetes include composer and conductor Leonard Bernstein; composer and pianist Duke Ellington; hip-hop producer and artist Pharell Williams; performers Tori Amos, Stevie Wonder, and John Mayer; and the author Vladimir Nabokov who, as a toddler, reportedly told his mother that the colors on his alphabet blocks were "all wrong."

"The private joke with Lolita is that Vladimir Nabokov saw the letter 'L' as a limp noodle," notes Steen.

Scientists in at least 15 countries are studying synesthesia and its implications for how the brain works. In the book *Wednesday Is Indigo Blue: Discovering the Brain of Synesthesia*, authors Richard Cytowic and David Eagleman argue that perception is inherently multisensory, but that most people aren't aware of the connections between senses.

Robertello hears humming sounds when looking at certain patterns. "One thing that stimulates a reaction in the brain will trigger something else, in addition to the usual response," he explains. "For me, geometric abstract paintings and Op art [art intended to fool the eye, simulating movement through shapes and patterns] will trigger a sound response, usually in the form of a hum or buzz.

"When I play my flute," adds Robertello, a professor of music at the IU Jacobs School of Music, "I see lines of sound traveling

“One has to be open to being moved by the work and lives of others in order to grow,” Robertello continues. “It heightens my sense of responsibility to uphold standards in music after the life of this young woman was cut short in such a tragic way.”

Whether in music or in visual art, Robertello finds that real beauty resonates as “a deep and hidden truth,” an idea of perfection that people lose gradually after birth. He conjures beauty daily by listening to recordings such as those of violinist Hilary Hahn and by surrounding himself with photographs and paintings that he loves.

“To be in the presence of true beauty feels like a memory,” he says, “something that reminds us of a rapturous truth we long for.”

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from me to the space in front of me. The lines take on various speeds, forms, colors, densities, and textures.”

Shehira Davezac, an associate professor of art history in the College of Arts and Sciences at IU Bloomington, traces this sensory linkage between different art forms back to mid-19th century artist, poet, and art critic Charles Baudelaire. His poem “Correspondences,” first published in 1857, had an enormous influence on art and literature, she says. “Baudelaire considered the theory of correspondences to be the foundation of art by the artistic possibility of suggesting one sense by the use of another,” says Davezac.

In the poem, Baudelaire forms connections between objects in the world and their resonances to ideas and emotions. The poem ends with these verses:

There are perfumes as cool as the flesh of children,
sweet as oboes, green as meadows
—and others are corrupt, rich, and triumphant,

with power to expand into infinity
like amber and incense, musk, benzoin,
that sing the ecstasy of the soul and senses.



Thomas Robertello is an associate professor of flute in the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University Bloomington.

“Perfumes like the flesh of children, sweet as oboes!” Davezac echoes. “People often refer to emotions in color: you’re ‘feeling blue,’ someone is ‘black with rage,’ or a person has a ‘green thumb.’”

Robertello says his synesthesia does not inform his artistic opinions. He doesn’t use his condition like a metal detector for selecting the right art, for example. He just involuntarily sees or hears things that most of us don’t.

“Synesthesia is just a random misfiring of signals in the brain; for me, has nothing to do with aesthetics or conceptual relevance in art or music,” he says.

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