

Music for Mondrian: Part 2. With Emilie Conway

Introduction:

Welcome to the National Gallery of Ireland's podcast series inspired by our temporary exhibition Mondrian. In this second episode resulting from jazz musician Emilie Conway's exploration of Mondrian and his links to music, Emilie delves into Jazz, neoplasticism and Mondrian's essential relationship to both.

Emilie Conway:

Hello, and welcome to part two of *Music for Mondrian*. In part one of this podcast, I looked at some of the influential music and musical movements, some of the pioneering composers of modernism that surrounded Mondrian, his work and its development. We saw how Mondrian's move to Paris sparked a relationship with music that grew in parallel with his artistic development and division. No music sparked his passion or inspired him though, as much as jazz. So in this episode, I'm going to delve into jazz and Mondrian's relationship with jazz. In order to do that, I do also need to go back and look a little more at Mondrian's pioneering neoplasticism. Neoplasticism is so many things or theory or style or technique or philosophy, a vision for the future and art movement and ultimately, Mondrian's every day, our practice and way of life way of thinking. Neoplasticism is so many things, just as jazz is so many things. And I'm delighted to let you know that in reflecting Mondrian's deeper relationship with music, there will be more musical interludes or interruptions on this podcast, and they will be played by my musical collaborators, Johnny Taylor on piano and Barry Donohue on double bass. Also of interest is the playlist which I made to accompany these podcasts called Music for Mondrian, and you can find that on Spotify under my name, Emilie Conway. And you can also find it listed on my website. That's emilieconway.ie. EMILIE, is about the French way. And also on my website, you will find a page dedicated to this podcast with all the notes and I guess the bibliography.

Jazz, Josephine, Gershwin and the City.

Paris did not forget the impact of the war-time jazz bands or their dances. There was no appetite for heavy, serious music. Stravinsky even acknowledged the desire for the new "musical ideal, music spontaneous and useless, music that wishes to express nothing." He believed to have heard this in the music of Jelly Roll Morton. So in 1925 Josephine Baker along with Sidney Bechet and a troupe of 25 black musicians were brought from Harlem to Paris to perform a new show called La Revue Negra and in this show Baker danced The Charleston and the show was a hit.

(Musical interlude)

The Charleston

With its anticipatory syncopated rhythm, the Charleston became the anthem and embodiment of the postwar energy and movement: a solid and steady dismissal of the old for a hurried step, ahead of the beat, to embrace the new with devil may care speed! The dance was named after the harbour city of Charleston, where the sound of the dockworkers inspired James P. Johnson to write the tune and it became a hit in dance halls across America. Its composer, James P. Johnson, was also a founder of the stride piano idiom, and a crucial figure in the transition from ragtime to jazz, a major influence on Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Art Tatum, and Fats Waller, who was his student.

So in bringing the Charleston to Paris, Baker was also bringing Harlem Stride piano, as a development from those early war time Jazz bands and further validation from Europe for Black music and musicians in America.

The Théâtre des Champs Élysées continued its run of American successes with the first French performance of George Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue by the Paul Whiteman Orchestra in 1926. Gershwin was enchanted by the Parisian welcome, the city itself and he returned immediately to write the city in his music. From his hotel balcony, looking out over the Étoile, he composed An American in Paris saying: "My purpose here is to portray the impressions of an American visitor in Paris as he strolls about the city, listens to the various street noises, and absorbs the French atmosphere."

Echoing Gershwin, and convinced that the city was the only possible epicentre for his new Neo Plastic vision Mondrian wrote: "In the metropolis, unconsciously and in answer to the needs of the new age, there has been a liberation from form leading to the open rhythm that pervades the great city. All manner of construction, lighting and advertisements contribute. Although its rhythm is disequibrated the metropolis gives the illusion of universal rhythm, which is strong enough to displace the old rhythm. Cathedrals, palaces and towers no longer constitute the city's rhythm. Unconsciously the new culture is being built here."

Rhythm and the city, jazz and the city, modernism and the city and Mondrian in the city; all becoming at this point quite synonymous. And I think in that excerpt there from Mondrian's essay, Jazz and the Neoplastic, which he wrote in 1927, we can clearly hear Mondrian's broad embrace of all that the city brings, the new unnatural ebb and flow, the fits and starts of movement, the cacophony of new cities sounds and roar, screech and hiss, that oppose, compete and combine to compose a new rhythm for a new age. Cities do have their own rhythm, and Paris pulsed to the rhythm of modernism. And Mondrian picked up on this. As jazz and dancing were all the rage and new dance halls and cabarets like Bricktop's, the Boeuf sur le toit began to spring up throughout Paris, and Mondrian loved to dance. He loves to go and see Josephine Baker. On hearing that the Charleston might be banned in Holland he said, "If the ban on the Charleston is

enforced, it will be reason for me never to return". And I have found no evidence that he ever did return. I don't know if the ban was enforced or not but...

Paralleling Holland's distrust of the Charleston, there was a similar suspicion of jazz in the new Irish Republic, which culminated in a march through Mohill, County Leitrim on New Year's Day 1934. The march was led by local parish priest father Confrey, and demonstrators shouted such edified protests as "Down with jazz" and "Out with paganism", and they called on the Irish government to close the dancehalls and ban all foreign dances in Ireland. Not one of our nation's proudest moments. But I think in our more, relatively more, permissive, progressive societies today, we can lose sight of how rebellious dance has been through the ages and can be. Looking back over the decades we can see how societies and cultures have often struggled to accept dances and various dance forms. And it seems to me that this is because dancing is the art form that's most about the body. So our relationship with dance speaks volumes about our relationship with the body and probably, or even more specifically our relationship, with women's bodies. But that's a discussion for another day. So nevertheless, we can look back through the decades and see this suspicion of dance. Even America struggles to accept some of the early Ragtime dances, dances known as "The Bunny Hug" or "The Turkey Trot", class names! Those dances sound like lots of fun, like they'd be nice dances to learn in lockdown.

Anyhow, the Charleston didn't exactly help its case when in 1925. It was judged to be the cause of the collapse of a building in Boston. Newspapers reported, "The vigour with which a hundred dancers kept time to the Charleston's peculiar and strongly accented rhythm, was the direct cause of the five storey building's collapse. If some far less strenuous dance had taken the Charleston's place, the disaster would never have occurred." But comparatively, it does seem like of many cities of that time, Paris was particularly accepting of the various forms and expressions of modernism. The Charleston itself is an interesting one, because referring back to the Rite of Spring in part one of this podcast, and how it caused uproar for many reasons, but from a dance point of view, there was no point work whatsoever and all the dancers' feet were turned in. Similarly the Charleston is a dance in which the feet are explicitly turned in. So this is almost like an explicit rejection of dance training and technique that might seek to aestheticize the body with prettily turned out feet. Also communicating that this dance was for everyone, not just trained dancers.

The fact that Mondrian was such an ardent fan of dancing, and particularly the rebellious and boisterous Charleston, I think attest to his striving for the new. A striving for the new that was not restrained to his canvas alone, he actually embodied it. It became a physical expression for him through dance. So there may have been lots of lines in his painting. But contrary to some perception, he was no straight laced ascetic. Well, you couldn't be really, if you're going out in the evenings dancing the Charleston, it's too much fun! That said, his dancing was often observed to be pretty unique. I don't know if it was him or one of his friends who described it as "vertical dancing". But then

that could also suggest that he was actually embodying the expression of his paintings. Very clever, very integrated. So in Jazz and in the city, Mondrian was actually perceiving a joyful expression of his neoplastic vision. He wrote, "Strangers amid the melody and form that surrounds us, jazz and neoplasticism appear as expressions of a new life. They express at once the joy and seriousness that are largely missing from our exhausted form culture. They are trying to break with individual form and subjective emotion. They appear no longer as beauty, but as life realized through pure rhythm, which expresses unity because it is not closed."

Neoplasticism shows rhythm free of form as universal rhythm. Jazz music epitomized for Mondrian the primacy of rhythm and beat, as opposed to the so called decorative emptiness of the dusty old form music. So basically, what he's saying is you can stuff your songs and sonatas, Mahler, Debussy, Beethoven and Co. Which is slightly too hefty a relegation of all that beautiful music for me. But, you know, it's not entirely like that either. I think it's more about Mondrian was such an innovator and he just believed so much in the scope of what could lie ahead in creating anew.

So back to Mondrian and jazz, apart from the new open rhythm that Mondrian heard in jazz, he also heard some of the sound and non-sound, which he had written about in his essay about the Futurists, and I refer to that essay in part one of this podcast. The sound and non-sound heralded for Mondrian the music of the future. In that previous essay, he does also acknowledge the achievements of Schoenberg but slightly slap him on the wrist as he doesn't achieve non-sound. Again, I'm not really sure that Schoenberg was interested in achieving non-sound, but this is Mondrian's vision. So Mondrian writes, "In the jazz band, by their tambour and attack, there are more or less opposed to traditional harmonious sounds. And this clearly demonstrates that it is possible to construct non-sound". So, in the 20s and early 30s, in Paris, Mondrian is essentially having a great time. He's full of hope, in his paintings and in his writings, his excitement is palpable. It really does seem that it is quite possible that in the city, and in this new jazz music, and in art, even as Mondrian gathers his neoplastic followers, that the neoplastic vision for the future was really imminent, was hovering liminally.

In the late 30s, though, the cold caustic air that carried the fear and threat of World War two began to blow through Paris. Mondrian's work like that of his artist friends, suddenly became known as Entartete Kunst, that is degenerate art, so labelled by the Nazis. A young American ingenue, Peggy Guggenheim, whose passion for art had brought her to live in Paris, luckily had the presence of mind to buy up all this so called Entartete Kunst, quite cheaply too, and ship it back to America. The European art world itself, and its artists, would soon move to follow suit and move the European art worlds westward to safety.

Jazz in Paris before World War Two, then ultimately had a limited development. It was mainly staged for entertainment purposes. And there did not exist the critical mass of musicians to develop it as an art form in its own right. In New York, it was a different story. So it is little wonder that when Mondrian moves there, he would say, "I have

never been so happy as I am here". But before we follow Mondrian to New York, let's circle back a little to look at Mondrian vision as it is pertinent to our discussion on jazz.

Neoplasticism

Mondrian wrote, "Jazz above all creates the bars open rhythm, it annihilates. This frees rhythm from form and from so much that is form without ever being recognized as such. Thus, a haven is created for those who would be free of form". Mondrian wrote a lot; he was very passionate about communicating his ideas, vision and responses throughout his life. And from reading some of it I understand his neoplasticism as this: Abstract artists in the main challenge to traditional figurative representation of forms, and Mondrian did too but for different reasons. For Mondrian, as I understand it, form obscured what this new painting could be about. As far as he was concerned, other abstractionists we're still making paintings about something and this something was not far away enough from form. By being not far enough away from form, their vision was still too individualistic, too static, too subjective. If we look at Kandinsky, for all his abstraction, as far as Mondrian was concerned, was still too personal; his painting still being about expressing himself, his emotions, his spirituality, through abstract form. Dali's painting you know, could be seen to be about his dreams and subconscious. And even the Cubists Mondrian said, "One can never appreciate enough the splendid effort of Cubism, which broke with the natural appearance of things and partially with limited form. Cubism's determination of space by the exact constructions of volumes is prodigious". But Mondrian also said of the Cubists, "the Cubist's, work perfect in itself, clearly could not be perfected further after its applique. Two solutions remained, either to retreat from the naturalistic, or to continue Cubist plastic towards the abstract, that is become neoplastic". In short, looking at all the painting around him, Mondrian felt painting needed to take the next step, beyond form and beyond being about something. It seems to me Mondrian came to the point that he asked, What about if painting is not about anything? What if painting is about nothing other than its self? What is it then? What does it reveal? And stripped back to its purest and most absolutely necessary components to exist, painting is, as it always has been, lines and space. And those lines at their most essential and differentiated are horizontal and vertical. Mondrian wrote, "The plastic art reveals that their essential plastic means our only line, plane, surface and colour. Although they produce forms these forms are far from being the essential plastic means of art. These forms exist only as secondary or auxiliary".

So in those lines and spaces then, Mondrian saw something fundamental and universal; relationships; strip back to its pure necessity, painting showed something universal: relationships. And it always had done, but they had been obscured by their concentration and ornamentation of form throughout the years. And this stripping away of superfluity and ornamentation and obfuscation, had nothing to do with sort of an ascetic self-denial or deprivation. Mondrian was quite annoyed once to be called a disciplinarian. He protested, "But I am against discipline, I am for necessity". And so

quite the contrary, I think what Mondrian's painting, what he was uncovering and trying to do is to actually be as altruistically inclusive as possible, as universal as possible. But not imposing that, that just was the natural state of what appeared on the canvas. So Mondrian saw that the lines as much as the spaces then became very important for their ability to express relationships and express something universal. Van Doesburg wrote, "Mondrian realizes the importance of line. The line has almost become a work of art in itself. One cannot play with it, on the representation of objects perceived was all important. The white canvas almost becomes solemn, every superfluous line, each wrongly placed line, any colour placed without veneration or care, can spoil everything. That is the spiritual".

Mondrian did not use rulers in his lines. In fact, it's very interesting to see his paintings for real, as I was lucky enough to do with the National Gallery exhibition, as opposed to seeing them online. It's a very different experience. He did not use rulers but he took fastidious care with his lines. They are living things, seeming to breathe and vibrate. Some run to the end of the canvas, others stop short, suddenly, others fray into the grey. Spaces are textured and shimmer and dissolve into greys, blues and whites. And this was all very intentional, a way of leaving the paintings to seem as though they were in motion, not static and fixed, but in ever present and open engagement with their environment. And this liveliness and openness, Mondrian called "dynamic equilibrium".

There are two other concepts that are interesting to me when we look at Mondrian's vision, philosophy is "equivalence" and "equilibrium". Mondrian said that his intention was to establish dynamic equilibrium through equivalent relationship of the plastic means: line, plane and colour. He did not say equal, he said equivalent. And I think this distinction is interesting because equivalence allows for difference in unity or difference in commonality. So in maths, if we think of sets, it's like ABC and 123 are equivalent. They're not equal. And I also read in Mondrian's writings that he said people should look for equivalence and not equality. So the very fine sensitivity at work there. He wrote, "It is therefore of great importance for humanity that art manifests itself in an exact way. The concept but varying rhythm of opposites are the two principal aspects of life. The rhythm of the straight line in rectangular opposition indicates the need for equivalence of these two aspects of life. The material and spiritual, the masculine and the feminine, the collective and the individual". And Mondrian wrote that in "The New art, the New Life - The Culture of Pure Relationships". There is indeed a deep spirituality in Mondrian's work centred around this achieving unity in diversity through equivalent relationships. Equivalence allows for respect, he wrote in an essay "Down With Traditional Harmony" in which he defined neoplastic harmony in art "is a plastic and aesthetic expression of pure unity", so this deep spirituality found expression through the plastic means of line playing and colour. It's like each painting might behave like a pattern or a fractal, of intention, that might sort of fractalise and go out into the world, ripple or vibrate out into our towns and cities, to create rhythms of equivalence. So unity in in diversity and peace, which is very beautiful, I think. And Mondrian did all this,

absolutely, through the work. I think that's the thing that's really interesting, it was absolutely through his painting. And we see that process.

Now, freed from the form and the old traditional forms, then there is just rhythm. And that's the rhythm of the lines that we see and the spaces in Mondrian paintings. He did not hear this rhythm in European classical music or modern music, but he did hear it in jazz, and it is the rhythms, polyrhythms improvisation, swing and syncopation that sets jazz apart from other forms of music. I remember my first workshop with Sheila Jordan, the jazz singer, and the first thing that she said to all the singers was you got to have good rhythm for jazz. As time went on, I began to understand it more and more that having a good time feel and sharing that time feel gives the freedom to explore melodically and harmonically. As a jazz singer, it's also interesting to me to look at how Mondrian's neoplastic vision relates to jazz, in terms of relationships. So in my experience among jazz musicians, there is an equivalence in relationships, each musician brings something different, and is encouraged to develop their unique voice to the fullest, because it's the difference and the articulation of uniqueness that benefits and elevates the whole band and the music. So unlike in other genres, also in jazz, and in the jazz band, there isn't, I don't think the same kind of hierarchy. So the drummer is just as important as the singer, the bass is as important as the piano. It's the health of the whole that elevates the music. And it's interesting to recall the quality and the equivalence in the call and response origins of jazz. And in fact, I think this dynamic could equally be compared to Mondrian plus minus paintings. In thinking about the origins of jazz and jazz practice and performance, it seems to me that from both of these aspects, so both intrinsically and extrinsically, jazz fits with Mondrian's very positive beliefs that were of course the basis for his neoplasticism. Beliefs like that life is always right, that its obstacles are there to be opposed creatively, particularly by art, to reveal a deeper truth, a unity and beauty and provide a vision for a better future. Mondrian absolutely believed in the transformative power of creative response. He wrote, "In life, every sincere effort leads to human evolution and it is the same in art". He also wrote that "life shows us that its beauty resides in the fact that precisely these inevitable disequilibrium opposition's compel us to seek equivalent opposition's and these alone can create unity". He wrote also, "The artist composes art, and life composes life. Even despite ourselves we are part of the great composition of life, which when clearly seen, establishes itself in accord with the development of art."

Jazz Music developed in response to oppression. It was a soul cry from deep in the body, and deep in the body of the black community, and the rhythm of its collective experience. It was not individualistic. The call was as important as the response to raise the collective voice and the spirit of the community. Coming to this music myself, I have always strongly felt the values of jazz. Values of authenticity, respect, equality, and particularly that of being part of a community. Again, the health of the whole elevating the music and the community. It seems to me that these values and their expressions are uniquely explicit in jazz music as an art form, and most likely because of how it developed. Jazz Music endlessly embraces the new without ever disrespecting the old.

From Billie Holiday's *Strange Fruit*, to the development of Bebop, there is the triumph of eloquence over brutality and the transcendence of oppression with authenticity that is joyful and free, free as Charlie Parker's horn and confirmation.

(Musical interlude)

Why not a little flicker of "Blues for Alice" with me and Barry Donahoe on bass, just to give you a sense of the harmonic and melodic joy in Charlie Parker's music. Like all black musicians of his time, he did not have an easy life and suffered endless injustice and discrimination. But wow, what an alternative vision he gives us through his music. Into it he distilled such joy such freedom and such fierce brilliance.

A jazz performance works equally, or perhaps better said, equivalently, horizontally and vertically. The horizontal is the relationship, your sensitivity and attuning to your fellow musicians and their playing. And the vertical is your musicianship, your sensitivity and connection to the music. I think this paradigm could also be applied to the harmony and rhythm of the music. It's like the horizontal is the melody and voice leading across chords, while the vertical is the harmonic universe of each chord, knowledge of which brings the freedom to explore and improvise rhythmically to reveal new relationships. And it's the interplay of all of these relationships, horizontally and vertically, that bring the freedom to improvise, to play and to have a good time. And this all could be said to comprise the lines and spaces of a good jazz performance, just as it does on Mondrian's paintings. I recall our own pianist Phil Ware saying that there was nothing worse than listening to what he called parallel jazz, oh, the horror! Where it's all there in theory, but there's no relationships. The horizontal is not relating to the vertical. It's not swinging. Let me add quickly I'm still learning. Jazz is a lifelong condition.

Boogie Woogie Bebop, Monk and Mondrian

When we listened to the Boogie Woogie there, I think we got a sense of how astonishing that must have been for Mondrian, that first night in a dark October of 1940, when he landed in New York. And Mondrian had come from war torn Europe, where he was called a degenerate artist. Artwork was being confiscated by the Nazis. Peggy Guggenheim had rescued a lot of it and Mondrian had come over on an ocean liner with 500 child evacuees, and by all accounts, they had to black out the ship even to survive being bombed across the Atlantic. So to come through all that and to arrive in New York, where it was peaceful and life was going on to such a joyous degree, must have been stunning.

Anyway, the story goes that when he was met by his friend Harry Holtzman and brought to the studio, Harry played Boogie Woogie for Mondrian and he clapped his hands and cried "Énorme!" Boogie Woogie had just exploded onto the New York scene with a concert two years prior to Mondrian's arrival. Albert Ammons, Pete Johnson and Meade "Lux" Lewis were there, all discovered in Chicago by impresario of the day, John

Hammond, who also had discovered and launched Billie Holiday's career at much the same time. The story goes, that Lux Lewis and Ammons In fact shared a house with one of the major exponents of Boogie Woogie, Mr. Pine Top Smith himself. Unfortunately, Mr. Smith was shot in a dancehall brawl, so he never quite made it to Carnegie Hall.

I can't resist sharing an article that I found in the New Yorker of December 1938, reporting on the Carnegie Hall concert. This reporter meets with John Hammond to go up to Harlem to interview Lux and Ammons, and on the way Hammond informs the reporter they haven't heard of Carnegie Hall because they are primitive artists, uninterested in worldly affairs. Hmm. He also goes on to say, "Well, you can't intellectualize Boogie Woogie". The article continues, on arriving at the house we heard Ammons and Lux pound away at an upright piano in the house that they are boarding in 936 St. Nicholas Avenue. When they go inside, they see the two musicians. "Man, oh man!", said Lux, softly watching Albert's flying right hand. It gives the sense, the New Yorker goes on to explain one of the sources for the term Boogie Woogie comes from "to pitch a Boogie", which was to throw a party or throw a rent party. And house rent parties were frequently thrown during Prohibition times literally to raise the rent. Crowds would gather around the Boogie Woogie men, which were the musicians, and as they played, and according to Lux Lewis, everyone would get roaring drunk. Lux recalls how it took him two whole days to wake up after the revelry of one such party, and when he did, he was still drunk.

And whenever parties were raided, which, according to Lux seem to happen whenever he played his Honky Tonk train blues, he and Ammons would hide out on the window sill until the cops were gone, and then they'd go right back inside and finish off all the unempty jugs. Sounds like a howl!

I discovered a beautiful, rare independent film called "Dream of Boogie Woogie", which shows Ammons and Lux playing together. And this film gives an idea of the virtuosic exuberance of their playing and how exciting it must have been to attend a live performance, or a cutting session, when one tries to outdo the other. The movie also shows a young Lena Horne. Boogie Woogie comes from the blues, it's typically based on the same kind of chord progression. But while standard blues traditionally expresses a variety of emotions with a range of subtlety, Boogie Woogie tends not to be so subtle. Boogie Woogie is dance music, it's not music for talking about feelings of dance music and making the rent music, the louder, the faster, the better. And there's also included in my playlist there, Pine Tops Boogie Woogie, which consists of instructions to dancers. "Now when I tell you to hold yourself, don't you move a peg. And when I tell you to get it, I want you to Boogie Woogie".

By all accounts, the first time the modern day spelling of Boogie Woogie was used was in a title of a published audio recording, it was for Pine Tops Boogie Woogie. In Boogie Woogie we hear a joyful dominance of rhythm carried by the bass and the left hand, and then with the ornamentation and catchy riffs by the right. And there's a lot of freedom, that is it follows a blues form but basically a Boogie Woogie musician is free to

extend or curtail the form and play as long or as briefly as he likes. I found another article from a New Yorker of 1941 that I can't resist sharing. Deliciously delighting in Mondrian's eccentricities, with the aspect of a quizzically raised eyebrow behind horn rimmed glasses, the reporter introduces Mondrian to New York as another Paris artist who the war has expatriated here. "Piet Mondrian, probably the only painter in the world who hasn't drawn a curved line in twenty years". Continuing with the same sort of very New Yorker bemused curiosity, the reporter relates how "when war broke out, friends begged him to move to the country with them, to which he replied, he'd rather be bombed in town! And he was bombed in town". It says that Mondrian "likes oranges and often sucks one while he dances" to his records, but that he "is sorry records and oranges are circular!" It goes on to report, he is "delighted by his Manhattan quarters, which look out to First Avenue, where there isn't a piece of greenery in sight, or much that is round".

Often a critic of the serious, although quite the culprit himself using words like "annihilation" to describe competing sounds in a city, and cutting friendship with van Doesburg when all van Doesburg wanted to do was include the diagonal line in his work, I'm tempted to think that Mondrian might have liked this new American attitude of light hearted irreverence towards him and his work. The impact of New York City on Mondrian I think is best understood by the radical change we see in his work. It seems to me looking at *Broadway Boogie Woogie* that Mondrian realized more might be going on with the lines themselves, that they might participate in and be affected by the relationships they create and the resulting equivalences. As Carl Jung said, "The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances. If there's any reaction both are transformed".

In *Broadway Boogie Woogie* gone are the black lines and the uniform planes of colour. This painting is dancing and joyful! It's the colours of notes played on the boogie-woogie piano: the yellow is the repetitive figures and rhythm of the driving bass line played by the left hand, overlaid by runs and flirtations in multicoloured segments by the right hand. It's the flashing footwork of dancers in *Cafe Society*. It's the grid of Manhattan's streetlights, of the City that never sleeps! It's the sight and sound of traffic, horns bouncing off buildings, tiny, blinking blocks of colour, like tail lights jumping from intersection to intersection, the vital and pulsing rhythm of the streets of New York City.

I might refer to a description of the city, also beautifully, from *Jazz* by Toni Morrison. The narrator says, "I'm crazy about this City. Daylight slants like a razor cutting the buildings in half. In the top half I see looking faces and it's not easy to tell which are people, which the work of stonemasons. Below is shadow where any blasé thing takes place: clarinets and lovemaking, fists and the voices of sorrowful women. A city like this one makes me dream tall and feel in on things. Hep. It's the bright steel rocking above the shade below that does it." This is where Mondrian was in the 1940s. We know he used to go down to *Café Society*, one of the few integrated clubs of New York. The Carnegie Hall concert was not only a musical milestone but also a social and political

one and led to engagements for Ammons, Lux and Johnston down at *Cafe Society*. At the same time, singers like Billie Holiday was also on the bill. But Mondrian was not too fond of singers or melody. The story goes that when music became too melodic and he was dancing to it, he'd want to sit down. And I'm not sure how I feel about that as a singer but never the less, that was the way. So, chances are when someone like Billie Holiday was singing in Café Society, Mondrian was more likely to go up to Minton's Playhouse, in Harlem. Up there a new pianist had come to his attention, one who, like Mondrian had his own eccentric style of dance. And that pianist was Thelonious Monk!

Monk was the house pianist at Minton's. He was a hard swinging player with a solid foundation in stride and runs in the style of Art Tatum. As if that wasn't enough to recommend him, like Mondrian, though he generously acknowledged his influences, Monk was in a league of his own and one of the most original players ever. It's small wonder then something new was going down around Monk. Those late night jams, drew likeminded cats: Dizzy Gillespie, Joe Guy, Charlie Christian, Kenny Clarke, Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, and as they played late into the morning, a new sound was being found: Bebop!

I'm going to refer again to an article from *the New Yorker* to give a sense of the time. This reporter interviews Dizzy Gillespie, and Dizzy said:

"That old stuff was like Mother Goose rhymes. It was all right for its time but it was a childish time. We couldn't really blow on our jobs — not the way we wanted to. They made us do that two beat stuff. They made us play that syrupy stuff. We began saying, man, this is getting awful sticky. We began getting together after-hours at Minton's playhouse on 108th St."

The article goes on: "Modern life is fast and complicated and modern music should be fast and complicated. It was at Mintons that the word bebop came into being. Dizzy was trying to show a bass player how the last 2 notes of the phrase should sound. The bass player tried it again and again but he couldn't get the 2 notes. Bebop! "Bebop!" Bebop!" Dizzy finally sang!"

This same article introduces Monk at the time as "a sombre, scholarly, 21 year old Negro with a bebop beard, who played the piano with a sacerdotal air as if the keyboard were an altar and he an acolyte. We liked Ravel, Stravinsky, Debussy, Prokofiev, Schoenberg, he says and maybe we were a little influenced by them."

As an aside, digging through those old New Yorkers, I also saw where our own Maeve Brennan was writing her columns, so, it was quite a happening place to be.

Monk was one of the most original exponents of the music. His compositions and improvisations featured dissonances and angular melodic twists, consistent with his unorthodox approach to the piano, which combined a highly percussive attack with abrupt, dramatic use of switched key releases, silences, and hesitations.

So, it's little wonder why Mondrian was attracted to the sound of this new music, knowing what we know about Mondrian. And his also dualities in unity in diversity, because it's all happening there. Bebop is provocative, fast and unscripted. It requires virtuosic technique and lightning speed harmonic intuition. It's characterised by fast tempi, asymmetrical phrasings, complex syncopation, advanced harmonies, intricate melodies, altered chords and chord substitutions. The role of the rhythm section is expanded with more emphasis on freedom. Bebop was a manifestation of revolt and yet, it was also, like all of these movements, "the next logical step", and it was not developed in any deliberate way. It absolutely came out of the playing, like Mondrian's painting.

So, by going down to Minton's and Café Society, Mondrian was literally hearing sort of alternately, bebop and Boogie Woogie, and it seems to me the confluence of both of these styles come out in Victory Boogie Woogie, which looks to me like Boogie Woogie dazzled by bebop.

In Victory Boogie Woogie we see the squares of colour are much more frequent. The orderly grid present in Broadway Boogie Woogie is barely discernible. Just like the rhythm section in bebop, it's fully participating in the music. The yellow horizontal and vertical lines are dotted with more colours, and there are even more rectangles of colour.

There's something else going on too. It seems to me, influenced by such rhythm and improvisation, in a city like nothing Mondrian had ever experienced before, it changed how he composed his paintings. In New York Mondrian started working by applying coloured tape onto the canvas so he could move it round and around until he was eventually satisfied. And this is a much more immediate, responsive and improvisatory way of working. It's much more like a jazz performance, composition, improvisation in the moment. And then, it's gone. Every time it's different. But at least Mondrian would have a painting.

Notably in New York, Mondrian reverts to giving his painting titles. I would say this is less a return to a narrative description so much as it was a literal acknowledgement of the place and the music that so expressed his ideals and wishes of his Neo-Plastic vision. To me it feels like in these last paintings, the rhythm and openness he had searched for, and an art of pure relationships, he was finding it. And it was actually in a music and of a place.

So there we will leave Mondrian, listening to Monk and Budd and Bird and Dizzy and all the cats up at Minton's, and maybe visualising how he'll change things around on his Victory Boogie Woogie when he gets home. It's worth adding that of course the word bebop was barely in use before 1944...so maybe the title Victory Boogie Woogie was in fact Mondrian's attempt to describe this new hybrid music that he was hearing... maybe... Anyway there we will leave him, where, as he said himself, he has never been happier in the only city in the world where he said modern art could flourish, New York.

It's been quite a trip from Mondrian's relatively conservative beginnings to pioneering a new abstract modern art movement, surrounded by music, minimalist, classical, atonal, futurist, serialist to jazz. And within that musical surround, there has also been Mondrian's musical journey from relative detachment to interest and, finally, immersion in the last years.

I hope you've enjoyed this podcast. I've absolutely enjoyed and delighted in discovering so much about Mondrian. If you'd like to visit my website, emilieconway.ie, there's a page there Music for Mondrian, where you can find these notes and also a playlist on Spotify, Music for Mondrian, and it's under my name Emilie Conway again. There's also a link on my website, where I've also included links to some videos and content that was also put out by the National Gallery that relate to the exhibition. Thank you also to the National Gallery for supporting me and this podcast and, I suppose, all that remains to be said is take care and hope to see you in the future when we're all allowed to meet in person...and boogie woogie woogie!