

# Roy De Maistre's COLOUR MUSIC

Roy De Maistre made four easel paintings of colour music in the 1930s. Two are housed in the Australian National Gallery in Canberra, one is in a private collection in the UK and the other is at the Ian Potter Gallery in Melbourne. Three of these are derived from an extensive painting on a piano roll, kept at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

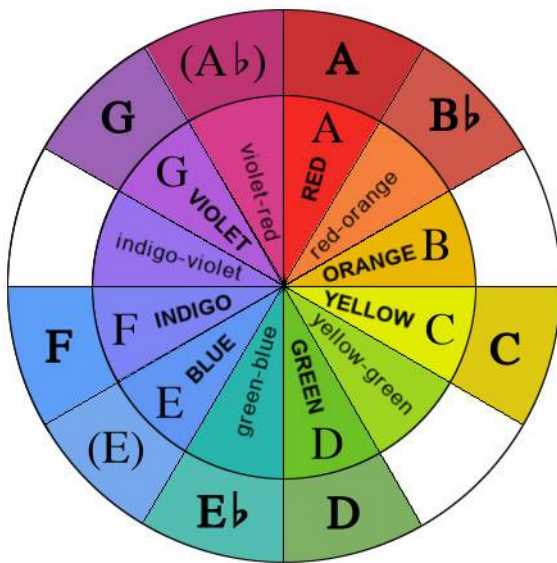


De Maistre divided the piano roll along its length with evenly-spaced vertical lines. They suggest time intervals so his painting could be read left to right, like a musical manuscript. The space between vertical divisions would represent duration; repeating patterns along the roll imply common time, corresponding to four beats (or crotchets) to a bar.

Horizontal and oblique lines further subdivide De Maistre's design into a chequerboard of shapes, individually coloured. Each shape represents a note (crotchet, quaver, etc.). In places, multicoloured groups of small shapes run up and down the picture plane as they travel across its vertical divisions. They are scales, progressive musical notes which rapidly ascend and descend in pitch. De Maistre positioned higher pitches towards the top of the picture, similar to the way written notes climb ledger lines and staves in musical notation. Additionally, De Maistre's coded his colours to indicate exactly which pitch was intended for every note.

Notes were colour-coded according to musical pitch in De Maistre's colour music. Most often he used the colour sequence of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet. The scheme originated in Isaac Newton's "Opticks" of 1704 where he described a coloured spectrum of light. Newton divided the colours with the same measures that divided the notes in a diatonic scale of music.

Others would follow suit, applying ROYGBIV – a common acronym for the colours – to the white notes found on a keyboard. Frequently, they started with red on the note C with the spectrum ascending the white keys of a C scale. De Maistre was a little unusual in starting on the note A, as shown in the centre of the colour disk (left). The black keys, the sharps and flats, are given intermediate hues.



I discovered the musical source of the piano roll in 2012 by reversing De Maistre's process. Each patch of colour was translated back into its note, according to the colour-music code. The notes are displayed around the outside of the disk above, and are muted variants of the idealized colours coded in the centre. Together, the notes make up the key of B flat major with its B flat and E flat; a couple of accidentals (E natural and A flat) are thrown in, to account for modulations in the music. Each note was also given a duration, according to the width of its colour patch.

De Maistre had chosen a Haydn Trio in B flat (Hoboken XV.20), depicting the first page of its score along the length of the piano roll. He ended at a pause in the music, near the bottom of the page. The piano roll and Haydn's music are shown in parallel, below. They both progress from left to right, and are linked by grey lines at every numbered bar.

## The PIANO ROLL and its MUSIC

The words 'violin', 'piano', 'piano', and 'cello' are pencilled, one above the other, at the start of De Maistre's roll. It is the first clue to its source in an instrumental trio. The piano occupies two rows, indicating right and left hands are mapped separately. Colours at the beginning of the roll are less faithful to his colour-music code, and vary in tone more than the rest. The surface is also more worn, suggesting greater use by the artist. From these first few bars, De Maistre drew material for three separate paintings of Haydn's music (Plates 1 to 3).

The geometry of his easel paintings is readily detected in bars 2 to 5, with locations marked in grey below the piano roll. Immediately after, in bars 5 and 7, ramps of finely divided spectral colours indicate rapid rises of many quick notes. On a musical manuscript they would appear as ascending runs of demi-semi-quavers. These dense clusters of black notes were found on one score, near the start of a Haydn trio. De Maistre's music source was first identified by eye.

### TRIO 9 in B flat: Hob. XV-20

Joseph Haydn

Allegro.

Violino.

Pianoforte.

Violoncello.

① ② ③ ④

piano  
violin  
piano  
cello

PLATE 2 PLATE 1 PLATE 3

⑤ ⑥ ⑦

C F G F B D G  
Bb Light Light Light  
Bb Bb Light Light Light  
Bb Light Light Light

PLATE 1

Converted to notes, bars 10 & 11 give repeated figures in the treble punctuated by rhythmic chords in the base. The distinctive musical motif was immediately recognised by ear when Haydn's music was played. Its repeating pattern is not so evident in the painting.

De Maistre's colour-coding became more precise as he progressed along the roll. But the last chord of bar 12, before the final pause, has the wrong colours (corrected at the right). A mistake? Perhaps he did it deliberately, an 'easter egg' left for any who followed him thus far.

At the very end, De Maistre was no longer emulating Haydn's music; his colours become distinctly non-musical when transformed into notes, and large shapes start to emerge –



De Maistre's colour music is not always clear; the orange-red keynote of B flat takes many shades of russet (as at the bottom of bars 5 to 9) and the red of A is often simply a darker version. Blues of E flat to F are hard to distinguish, often of similar sky blues. Reconstructing music from De Maistre's paintings was difficult, but the reverse process – from written notes to colour names – was simpler. His method becomes more intelligible and precise when known notes are matched to colours. A personalized colour-music code was working for him. The piano roll is usually more true to the code than De Maistre's easel paintings (Plates 1 to 3), which are aligned below with the fragments of Haydn's trio that provided their subjects.

### Roy De Maistre's paintings of Haydn

**TRIO 9 in B flat: Hob. XV-20** Joseph Haydn

*Allegro.*

Violin.

Piano.

Violoncello.

Bar numbers ② ③ ④ ⑤

**PLATE 1 –**



**PLATE 2 –**



## TRIO 9 in B flat: Hob. XV-20

Joseph Haydn

Allegro. ④ ⑤

Violin.

Piano.

Violincello.



PIANO ROLL (bar 4)



PLATE 3



from PLATE 1



from PLATE 2



Bar 4 of Haydn's trio is shown above; the painting to the right shows how De Maistre depicted it on the piano roll. Four major divisions at the bottom of the picture mark crotchets in the bass; above them, eight vertical strips represent quavers. The right hand of the piano appears on the top left. The indigo of high F appears as a lozenge of dark purplish blue; next comes the dark red A, lower down; the following F is a grey-blue; the fourth note, a B flat below, is bright red and almost obscured on a red background. And so on.

Below is the Hayden painting in Canberra (Plate 3), which magnifies the drawn shapes on the piano roll almost exactly. Colours, although similar, are muted and most are darkened dramatically. As a result, the work seems more calm, less frenetic than the original. The dark purple lozenge of G, on the central gold stripe, is probably more true to the colour-music code than its brown on the piano roll.

As a comparison, to the right, details of bar 4 are extracted from Plates 1 and 2. Expanded here to three times their widths, vertical divisions match up with the piano roll and Plate 1. Greens and blue-greens (D and E flat) have disappeared from Plate 1, to be reinstated for Plate 2. The central violet G on yellow becomes, first, blue then red. Shapes at the top left are reworked so little apparent connection remains between treble notes of the piano, though black lines border some in Plate 1. In Plate 2, other black lines form symbols that De Maistre once used – arcs for B, chevrons for B flat, circles for E. But most are on the wrong note, or have no note at all.

The geometry and placement of shapes was as important as their colouring. De Maistre usually gave the most rapid notes more room than they warranted. Thin stripes of dark blue (an indigo F) and blue-green (E flat) in bar 3, also in Plates 1 and 2, are almost twice as wide as demi-semi-quavers should be. The same is true of the stripes at the beginning of bar 4; those in the first half of bar 12 are even wider, and treated as semiquavers. The rapid fall of the violin at the start of bar 5 is also stretched out, allowing no pause before the piano begins its equally rapid rise. Only then is there an attempt to squeeze thirteen quick notes into the space allotted by the grid. This pattern is repeated in bar 7.

De Maistre paid attention to instrumentation. When the violin falls silent in bars 5 and 7, spectral colours of the piano's right hand are allowed to extend in narrow strips to the top of the picture plan. Below, the constant B flats of the cello and the left hand of the piano form a horizontal bass of orange-red. This points up an interesting trait of Haydn trios; his cello always reinforces the piano bass, rarely departing from unison with it. (Mozart and Beethoven, however, gave their cellos more independent voices, and even solo passages.)

In bar 3, the violin forms a foil for rising arpeggios on the piano, which are the foci of Plates 1 and 2. The blue and green strips and stripes of the violin are allowed to stretch to the top of the picture, even though the notes are lower in pitch than the piano. Roles are reversed in bars 8 and 9, where violin notes dance across a background of *sforzando* chords on the piano. The notes of the first chord are unpacked and spread out in a checkerboard of different colours; the second chord had to be broken up as well, so its colours could fill the remaining space.

De Maistre used his discretion as to how shapes and colours should be disposed. In one region it did not work out too well in my view – bars 10 and 11. Violin notes are placed in front of figures played on the piano, concealing their distinctive patterns. Beneath them, emphatic bass chords from the piano and cello repeat at regular intervals. The violin part shares their rhythm and could well be grouped with them, lower down (shown at right).

Strangely, it was precisely here that the colour-music code worked the best. When translated from colours into notes, patterns did emerge on the staves. The result, when played, sounded like a typical passage of classical music. The notes uncovered were eventually found to corresponded almost exactly to Haydn's score. Immediately, that part of the music could be recognized aurally in recordings of Haydn's trio. So Roy De Maistre's colour music, in spite of any limitations, worked effectively in translating music to painting.

**A NOTE on Titles of the Paintings:** Here, De Maistre's paintings of music by Haydn are referred to as Plates 1, 2 and 3. These correspond to plate numbers on my web site.

Current address: <https://colourmusic.x10host.com/plates.htm>

They are often misnamed as their musical subjects were unknown. The preferred titles are –

**Plate 1:** Study for Arrested Movement from a Trio

**Plate 2:** Arrested Movement from a Trio

**Plate 3:** Arrested Phrase from a Haydn Trio in Orange-Red

The piano roll could, in places, be rearranged to provide a more convincing visual metaphor.



(with apologies to Roy De Maistre)



Ludwig van Beethoven: Symphony No. 9 in D Minor, Op. 125 4th movement: - Prestissimo

902

Piccolo  
Flute  
Oboe  
Clarinet in A  
Bassoon  
Contrabassoon  
Horns in D  
Horns in D  
Trumpets in D  
Timpani in D-A  
Alto, Tenor  
Trombones Bass  
Triangle  
Cymbals  
Bass drum  
Violin I  
Violin II  
Viola  
Soprano: **C**  
Alto: **H**  
Tenor: **O**  
Bass: **I**  
**R**  
Violincello  
Double bass

zen Welt! Freude, Freude, schöner Göt - ter - funken! schöner  
zen Welt! Freude, Freude, schöner Göt - ter - funken! schöner  
zen Welt! Freude, Freude, schöner Göt - ter - funken! schöner  
zen Welt! Freude, Freude, schöner Göt - ter - funken! schöner

**BARS 55 56 57 of prestissimo section**

**A NOTE on Title of the Painting:** Here, De Maistre's painting of Beethoven's music is referred to as Plate 4. This corresponds to its plate number on my web site –

Current address: <https://colourmusic.x10host.com/plates.htm>

It is often misnamed as being in the key of red. It is not; it is green. The preferred title is –

**Plate 4: Arrested Phrase from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony In the Key of Green**

Niels Hutchison, 2024



## Some problems with provenance

**WHITECHAPEL GALLERY, LONDON, 1960**

At his retrospective at Whitechapel, De Maistre exhibited three colour-music works with catalogue numbers 35, 165 and 166, as follows —

- **"35. Arrested Movement from a Trio 1934"**,

oil on canvas, 30 x 41"

Trustees of the New Atlantis foundation; from the collection of the late Mr. Dimitri Mitrinovic

Here it is identified as Plate 2, "Arrested Movement from a Trio".

Listed under "Oils" in the catalogue, it is De Maistre's only known colour-music painting on canvas. I assume it is the same work illustrated as Plate 33 in Heather Johnson's "Roy De Maistre: The English Years, 1930 to 1968", shown as Plate 2 above. Her dimensions differ: 70 x 91.5 cm [27.6 x 36"]. The present owner of Exhibit 35 (Plate 2) is unknown to me and lives in England, so I have been unable to verify the work's dimensions and its location prior to 1960.

The same painting of music is depicted on an easel in "Studio interior", 1959, in the NGA. Medium, dimensions, title and date agree with Exhibit 125 at Whitechapel, though the date may be questionable.

At the very end of Whitechapel's catalogue, after the entries for "Gouaches and Drawings", exhibits 156 to 166 form a discrete section on colour music. These entries are styled differently: titles are in lower-case italics (rather than the bold capitals of all previous entries) and no owners are given. The first nine are colour disks and scales in oils, dated 1917-18. The final entries, 165 and 166, are oils on board.

They are both listed as Colour Compositions with rather technical attributes that describe their musical subjects precisely. This allows me to identify them as Plates 1 and 4. Their media and dimensions are in accord with present descriptions of the Haydn and Beethoven paintings in the NGV and NGA respectively. Titles I give them are modifications of those currently supplied by the Melbourne and Canberra galleries.

- **"165. Colour composition derived from 3 bars of music in the key of orange-red 1918-1933"**

oil on board, 28 x 39"

Here it is identified as Plate 1, Study for "Arrested Movement from a Trio".

Exhibit 165 (Plate 1, in the NGV) seems to be an earlier version of Exhibit 35 (Plate 2). Both paintings deal with the same musical selection, but Plate 2 places the main subject (bar 3) centrally. There it is neatly enclosed within bar lines whereas Plate 1 has partial bars on each side. The colours of this work (Plate 1) are also closer to those on the piano roll, and more correct according to the colour-music code than those of Plate 2.

I surmise that rescaling of the piano roll's geometry first occurred in Plate 1, and the design was adopted with little variation for Plate 2. Stylistically, the surface embellishment of Plate 2 with drawn symbols could indicate the work is a later version of Plate 1. (Heather Johnson traces a similar progression in her book, where De Maistre elaborated successive versions of "The Carol Singers".) For these reasons, I consider Plate 1 to be a preliminary work, a study for Plate 2.

According to John MacDermot, grandson of the original owner Gladys MacDermot, this work was known by the title "Arrested Movement from a Trio". It is a generic title that could apply to any one of the three paintings based on Haydn's trio, all originating from the piano roll. At Whitechapel, the title was applied to Exhibit 35 (Plate 2), an oil on canvas. De Maistre gave Exhibit 165 a more descriptive title for the occasion, stipulating the colour-key and the number of bars depicted. It may have arrived at the gallery bearing its common name, because a handler confused it with Exhibit 35 and wrote the number "35" on the back in chalk. The problem would have quickly been resolved; a panel painting is necessarily much heavier than any similar painting on canvas, and De Maistre was on hand to supervise.

John MacDermot described Exhibit 165 (Plate 1) as he saw it in situ, hanging above the piano in the music room of the New Atlantis Foundation in Surrey. From 1948, the Foundation was home to Dimitri Mitrinovic, a utopian philosopher, and Gladys MacDermot was one of his ardent supporters. She had long been a significant patron of De Maistre's, but had stopped buying paintings by the end of the War. Gladys was in a Dublin nursing home in 1960, and unable to assert ownership at Whitechapel. Her name appears as 'Mrs H MacDermot' beside one item.

Some paintings Whitechapel sourced from Surrey came with labels bearing the Foundation's stamp, with titles and De Maistre's name typed on them. Works were expected to be returned after the show, it seems, but no owner was shown. Heather Johnson tells us such a label adhered to an "Arrested Movement from a Trio", most likely Exhibit 35. (At right is a label on Exhibit 34, "Annunciation", courtesy Deutscher and Hackett.)

Whitechapel's catalogue lists six works with Mitinovic as the unlikely owner. Though he had died in 1953, his prominent identity could still overshadow that of others in his vicinity. The true owners, such as MacDermots, may have simply lent or stored their paintings at the Foundation.

