

## The shape of music

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*The term synesthesia describes the uncanny ability to "hear" colors and "see" sounds. In the movie Fantasia, for example, Walt Disney attempts to show us what sounds might look like. Maurice Sendak, famous children's author and illustrator, draws his illustrations with music in mind. In this instance, Sendak draws his illustrations while listening to music. Thus, he encourages synesthesia in his own creative ecology.*

Vivify, quicken, and vitalize—of these three synonyms, *quicken*, I think, best suggests the genuine spirit of animation, the breathing to life, the swing into action, that I consider an essential quality in pictures for children's books. To *quicken* means, for the illustrator, the task first of comprehending the nature of his text and then of giving life to that comprehension in his own medium, the picture.

The conventional techniques of graphic animation are related to this intention only in that they provide an instrument with which the artist can begin his work. Sequential scenes that tell a story in pictures, as in the comic strip, are an example of one form of animation. It is no difficult matter for an artist to simulate action, but it is something else to *quicken*, to create an inner life that draws breath from the artist's deepest perception.

The word *quicken* has other, more subjective associations for me. It suggests something musical, something rhythmic and impulsive. It suggests a beat—a heartbeat, a musical beat, the beginning of a dance. This association proclaims music as one source from which my own pictures take life. For me, "to conceive musically" means to quicken the life of the illustrated book.

All of my pictures are created against a background of music. More often than not, my instinctive choice of composer or musical form for the day has

the galvanizing effect of making me conscious of my direction. I find something uncanny in the way a musical phrase, a sensuous vocal line, or a patch of Wagnerian color will clarify an entire approach or style for a new work. A favorite occupation of mine, some years back, was sitting in front of the record player as though possessed by a dybbuk, and allowing the music to provoke an automatic, stream-of-consciousness kind of drawing. Sometimes the pictures that resulted were merely choreographed episodes, imagined figures dancing imagined ballets. More interesting to me, and much more useful for my work, are the childhood fantasies that were reactivated by the music and explored uninhibitedly by the pen.

Music's peculiar power of releasing fantasy has always fascinated me. An inseparable part of my memories of childhood, music was the inevitable, animating accompaniment to the make-believe. No childhood fantasy of mine was complete without the restless, ceaseless sound of impromptu humming, the din of unconscious music-making that conjured up just the right fantastical atmosphere. All children seem to know what the mysterious, the riding-fiercely-across-the-plains (accompanied by hearty, staccato thigh slaps), and the plaintive conventionally sound like; and I have no doubt that this kind of musical contribution enriches each particular fantasy. The spontaneous breaking into song and dance seems so natural and instinctive a part of childhood. It is perhaps the medium through which children best express the inexpressible; fantasy and feeling lie deeper than words—beyond the words yet available to a child—and both demand a more profound, more biological expression, the primitive expression of music. Recently I watched a mother tell her little boy a familiar, ritualistic story while he embellished the tale with an original hummed score. He kept up a swinging motion "in time" to the story, then punctuated the end with a series of sharp, imitation bugle sounds and a wild jungle jump.

My intention is not to prove music the sole enlivening force behind the creation of pictures for children. But music is the impulse that most stimulates my own work and I invariably sense a musical element in the work of the artists I admire, those artists who achieve the authentic liveliness that is the essence of the picture book, a movement that is never still, and that children, I am convinced, recognize and enjoy as something familiar to themselves.