

**Music** An American Composer's invention makes the structure of compositions visible

# Animation technology deepens the listening experience

**Stephen Malinowski designed software for music animation, which has attracted millions of viewers on YouTube. Now it comes to the concert hall.**

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It all began back in 1974 with an LSD trip. Stephen Malinowski, American composer, pianist, inventor and software engineer was listening to the *Siciliano* from the Bach *Unaccompanied Violin Sonata No. 1*. He was high as a kite and the notes began to dance before his eyes. Later, while listening to Bach's *Fourth Brandenburg Concerto* while reading the score, frustrated because the music was so hard to understand, he had the idea which would determine the course of the rest of his life. He began to wonder if there was a way to present this complex music graphically so people could understand what was going on. And behold: in 1985 the Music Animation Machine (MAM) was born, an idea that Malinowski has continued to improve and modify. MAM has gone viral on the Internet. His animation of Bach's *Tocatta and Fugue in D minor* has been seen by 20 million people and Debussy's *Claire de lune* by one million more.

MAM was recently shown in the Concertgebouw's small concert hall as part of a highly entertaining program put together by UploadCinema during the Robeco Nights concert series. Malinowski's animation of the *Tocatta and Fugue* was projected onto a screen. This was followed by a live performance of a Handel suite by pianist Daria van den Bercken. The animation that went with this music was synchronized



A few bars of *The Rite of Spring* by Stravinsky on the Music Animation Machine

live by Swiss violinist Étienne Abelin, who operated a little wheel to synchronize the images with the music. The result was more than just beautiful; it was quite instructive. Unquestionably, Malinowski's colorful geometric representation of Bach's notes adds depth to the experience of listening, because everyone can now easily understand the structure of the music.

Abelin discovered the animations in 2010. "I could hardly believe my eyes, especially when I heard that he's been doing this sort of thing for 30 years, in relative isolation. What bothered me was the quality of the recordings. He used royalty-free recordings which were often not very good, and that was a pity,

because a lot of people saw his films. At that time he had many millions of viewers thanks to his *Tocatta and Fugue* and *Clair de Lune*. I sent him a flattering email and some chamber music that I had recorded myself. I had his answer within an hour." "Wow, I'm really touched. This means that I have really achieved something when an artist such as yourself wants to be in touch with me. This is a first." I wrote back right away to say that I, too, was touched, and that he should be proud of what he'd already achieved: The number of viewers, the reactions, and how people felt about his work. It was incredible to me and even weird that he hadn't long ago been approached by the big recording labels."

The two started working together as a result. Things started going even faster when Björk expressed interest in Malinowski's animations. She used them for a clip of *Biophilia*.

Abelin: "That meant that we were doing the right thing because she's always ahead of her time. After that we got a call from Carnegie Hall. They wanted to do something live. That drew Malinowski out of his self-imposed isolation."

Abelin and Malinowski met for the first time in person 2012, after a virtual friendship and partnership of two years. "We traveled together to Nürnberg, where the orchestra was going to use Stephen's animations in a performance of the *Allegretto* from Beethoven's *Seventh Symphony*." Abelin and Malinowski took turns operating the *synchronator crank*, the wheel which drives the computer. "We stood next to the timpani. In the future we want to be next to the conductor, like a soloist."

The *crank* is essential, Abelin says. "You could make it fully automatic, but Stephen doesn't want that and I'm beginning to see why. With a living person to operate the crank, the whole thing becomes more organic. It becomes in fact a new musical instrument."

Abelin believes that MAM makes possible a new type of experience of classical music, at home or in the concert hall. "The way classical music is performed is unbelievably old-fashioned: it's hardly changed since around 1870. There's not much visual stimulation, which can be a problem for a younger audience. Even for me it's a problem. The clothing and the

social context make the whole experience something that I can't identify with. It makes me uncomfortable the way it is now, too exclusive and elite."

**"The way we do concerts is from 1870; visual stimuli draw a younger audience"**

It was for this reason that he began the concert series Ynights in Zürich. Chamber music, not in the concert hall, but in a club. "Malinowski was the first artist we invited. And look at what happened: the music has nothing to fear. In a dark nightclub you also play differently. Andreas Scholl and the other musicians we had invited confirmed this. It made the music richer. And the audience, a young audience, listened with unbelievable attention."

Malinowski's latest triumph is an amazing animation of *Le sacre du printemps*, that everyone must see. The best thing would be to perform it live in the Concertgebouw with the Netherlands Philharmonic or the Concertgebouw Orchestra, with the animations on a giant screen. Huge public success is guaranteed.

Abelin: "And it would also be a world premiere."

On [www.musanim.com](http://www.musanim.com) Sacre may already be viewed, like all other films Malinowski made.

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