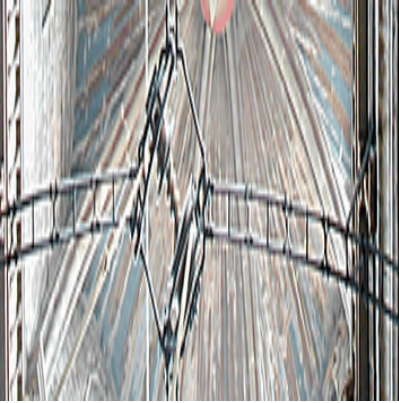




Spem in Alium

Description

Thanks to Kindles and e-readers you can read anything at home, at work, on the train, or the bus without embarrassment. No one need ever see the book's cover. Paper books can be left lying around the house for others to pick up. Not so with electronic books. Reading really has become a private affair.

July this year recorded a significant spike in sales of Thomas Tallis's musical work *Spem in Alium* (Hope in Any Other) ([Telegraph](#)). The timing corresponded to the rapid rise in popularity of the erotic novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E.L. James, in which the music sets the mood for the climactic love scene. The music doesn't play while you are reading of course, but the author describes its effects on the characters.

The use of music in a fictional erotic context reminds us of how music can set the mood, ie provide a setting.

Abruptly, the soft silent hiss and pop of the iPod springs into life. From inside my head, a lone angelic voice sings unaccompanied a long sweet note, and it's joined almost immediately by another voice, and then more voices – holy cow, a celestial choir – singing a capella in my head, an ancient, ancient hymnal. *What in heaven's name is this?* I have never heard anything like it.

Several exhausting pages later the music is explained:

“What was that Music?” I mumble almost inarticulately. “It's called *Spem in Alium*, a forty-part motet by Thomas Tallis.” “It was!” overwhelming.” etc



Music can claim emotion, in full intensity, as its own. In his

book *The Singing Neanderthal* Steven Mithen insists, “If music is about anything, it is about expressing and inducing emotion.” Think of how readily listeners describe a piece of music as happy (eg Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy*) or sad (eg Mozart’s *Requiem*). Sometimes they mean simply that the music makes them feel happy or sad, or has the potential to induce that feeling in someone.

By way of contrast, we would be less inclined to describe a building as happy or sad. A similar reluctance applies to fine art. Is Frans Hals’ (1580-1666) painting *The Laughing Cavalier* a happy picture? Are we as comfortable with so classifying a painting as we are with the pop song *I Gotta Feeling* by Black Eyed Peas?

Emotions don’t feature prominently in architectural thinking – at least not traditionally. Form and function are important, and ornament. On a more abstract level, there’s aesthetic experience, significance, memories, and even something called the “spirit of a place.” But raw, unsophisticated emotions such as feeling happy, sad, angry, frightened, contented or aroused are too transient and vague when designing long-lasting functional edifices that populate the cityscapes and landscapes of the built environment.

Of course, the harmonies of *Spem in Alium* were composed for churches. Architecture has a stake in ethereal ambiances, under the powerful assistance of music. Architecture shares the category of *the sublime* with music.

Does listening through an iPod change the music-architecture relationship? One difference is that the listening-inhabiting experience becomes very personal and private, like reading to oneself on an e-reader. It’s interesting to carry your own sound track with you, and not to disturb others with it, but sharing is important – not just sharing a playlist, but the simultaneous enjoyment that comes from being in an audience, part of the crowd, or otherwise in sociable company.

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Also see: [Architecture and music](#), [The sublime indifference of waves](#).

Category

1. Music

Tags

1. architecture
2. body
3. emotion
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