

Sound Thoughts on Art – Season 1, Episode 7

Vijay Iyer and I.M. Pei’s “National Gallery of Art, East Building”

National Gallery of Art

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: Welcome to *Sound Thoughts on Art*, a podcast from the National Gallery of Art. I’m your host Celeste Headlee.

Art can engage all of our senses. We hear music. We see a photo. We walk around a sculpture. We taste fine food. Standing close to a favorite painting, we can even smell the wood or oil paint. But it’s when our senses work together that things get really interesting. When we listen, what do we see in our mind’s eye? When we stand in front of a painting, what do we hear?

This podcast lives in that convergence. In every episode, you’ll learn about a work in the National Gallery’s collection from someone who knows the art and its context. You’ll also hear a musician respond to that work through sound, creating a dialogue between the visual art and music. *Sound Thoughts on Art* tells the stories of how we experience art and how it connects us.

When we asked composer and producer Vijay Iyer to choose a work in the Gallery’s collection to respond to musically, he went big. In fact, depending on how you look at it, he might well have chosen the biggest piece of art in the National Gallery’s collection.

Now if you’ve visited us in person, you probably know that the Gallery spans two buildings located across the street from each other. There’s the West Building, which opened in 1941 and was designed by architect John Russell Pope. When you think of the neoclassical style that’s associated with Washington, DC, the West Building’s marble and pillars and rotundas fit that image of the quintessential formal structure perfectly.

And then there’s the East Building, designed by I. M. Pei and opened in 1978. The East Building is starkly geometric. Its sharp angles and airy interior stand out among DC’s museums by design. It’s the East Building, a work of art containing many, many other works of art, that we’ll focus on today.

For Vijay Iyer, the East Building’s playfulness is welcoming. And it inspired him to revisit his own work, looking for echoes of that exuberant energy. Here’s Vijay with more on why he chose the East Building.

VIJAY IYER: For one thing, the collection is so vast. When I was trying to choose just one painting to settle on or one sculpture, one of anything, it didn’t really do enough for me. I think it was too—it felt too limiting to just limit myself to one piece, only because, to me, the relationship between music and space, music and design, music and the visual, the aural and the visual, or just the body’s experience of sound and of space and environment is such a rich field to explore.

I was kind of just looking at all kinds of pieces of art. And then I realized that the building itself was a piece of art that does for me something that music does, which is that it invites you in. It invites you in to inhabit, and to explore, and to participate, and be among others.

So it invites sociality. It invites interaction and encounter. And it's very open-ended. I guess my experience of music-making, composing, and listening feels more like that. It felt like how to create environments for people, how to create ambience and nuance of bodily experience.

CELESTE HEADLEE: For more on the East Building itself, we turn to Susan Wertheim. She's the Gallery's chief architect.

I wanted to talk a little bit about Pei's approach to the visitors' experience. I mean, to me, it's like a little bit of a sense of humor. He seemed to have been encouraging people to sort of get lost and wander.

SUSAN WERTHEIM: Yes, I agree. I think he definitely had a really fine sense of humor. And the highlight of having the job that I have was actually meeting him in person and spending some time talking to him about the building.

But he did have a sense of humor. And I agree that he wanted it to be fun, not so serious and off-putting, but lighthearted. He wanted the building to draw you in, welcome you. I think he really wanted to appeal to children, families, people of all ages.

There's a film about the design of the building called *A Place to Be*. And he says, we want people to come in, and we want them to stay. We wouldn't want them to come in, look around, and say, I guess I've seen everything, and walk out. We want to keep them when they come. He wanted it to be "a place to be," which is what this film is called.

And he definitely wanted it to be warm and welcoming. There are not big monumental steps as you would see in a more classical building. It's very light and airy when you get inside.

Like I said, it's not super formal or symmetrical. So you can choose your path. And sometimes, by mistake, you're going to choose your path because you aren't exactly sure where you are once you get in. But as long as you find the Calder, you know you're at the center.

The National Gallery, I would say, is incredibly lucky because we have the best of both worlds in terms of our buildings. The original National Gallery of Art building is called our West Building. It opened in 1941. It is designed as a neoclassical building, a very streamlined neoclassical building, but neoclassical. It's very substantial looking, solid looking, stone, very few visible windows, and a nicely proportioned dome with porticoes and columns.

The East Building, designed by I. M. Pei & Partners and opened in 1978, that building, the newer one, is much more modern, sleek, angular—just completely different in terms of its appearance, style, personality. I like to think of them as two siblings, or two sisters, in dialogue with each other. And they definitely work as a whole.

VIJAY IYER: Those neoclassical buildings, they have a certain kind of vastness of scale. So these spaces are alienating, these columns that seem to be scaled for gods rather than human beings. But they pin your imagination to something that already happened and that may have had nothing to do with you, whoever you might be. That's a pretty—it's a bit of a—it takes quite a number of leaps of the imagination to assert that any one of us might have something in common with ancient Greeks that is being expressed in this architecture.

So you know, why not, basically engage in our own leaps of imagination, but do it with a certain kind of discipline, a certain sense of care, and rigor, and elegance? In a way, I mean it's a very complex space, but there is a certain kind of motivic quality to it. There's a sort of patterning quality. There are these tessellations of certain shapes: triangles, and trapezoids, and so forth. And I think that sense of repetition and patterning creates a certain continuity of experience throughout the whole place.

CELESTE HEADLEE: So you're talking about imaginings. And these are your imaginings, right? I mean if you are looking across the street at the West Building, I don't want to put words in your mouth, but it sounds like that building calls up some negative reaction from you. It almost sounds like if you are standing in between the two buildings, you would have a negative reaction if you turn to the left and a positive reaction as you turn right. Is that fair?

VIJAY IYER: Well, I would probably soften it a bit, because it's not that a building immediately gives me a negative reaction. It's more about where do I feel invited to explore and to place myself. Where can I see myself as a pedestrian, as an observer, as an explorer, as a, shall we say, citizen? Where do I belong? Maybe it's as simple as that. So it's not about even negative feelings or revulsion toward one. But there's maybe a sense of attraction to another, to something that seems new and, in a way, unfamiliar and yet somehow open and inviting.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Maybe we could explore this relationship between architecture specifically or spaces and music and how you see that relationship, how you see it expressing itself. In other words, music is something that can't be touched to a certain extent. When it's performed, it's intangible. And yet architecture is so very tangible.

VIJAY IYER: Well, yes. The main difference is permanence. Architecture is more permanent than even what we think of about visual art in the sense that it's made to be there for whatever the contemporary understanding of "forever" is. A work of art, you think of it lasting across maybe centuries, if you're lucky. But buildings have a way of remaining and leaving a trace even as they wear away.

With music, it's designed with impermanence in mind, in the sense that it breezes by you. It's a space you get to inhabit temporarily, and then it evaporates, essentially. It's gone as immediately as it arrived.

Of course, we have ways of preserving and returning to pieces of music like scores and recordings. And those are ways for you to sort of send a piece of music out into the world without you, like whether it's setting it down for someone else to play—meaning for another musician to play—or just creating an acoustical experience for someone to inhabit privately or on their own terms in their homes, or in their cars, or walking with headphones, or doing whatever it is they do with music in their lives. You do have the sense of the possibility of returning to a piece of music and re-experiencing the kind of environment it creates and the emotional contours of it—and reliving it and discovering something new in it as you return to it.

CELESTE HEADLEE: How do you think music changes according to the hall or the space in which it's performed?

VIJAY IYER: Oh, well, certainly we can think of it in terms of how we use our voices. You have an inside voice and an outside voice. And even the versions of an inside voice that you have, there's the voice when you're right in front of a microphone. And there's the voice when you're trying to calm a room full

of kids or something. Or there's a voice that you use to speak to your partner, or your child, or your parent, or your boss. Those are all different kind of registers.

So the same is true with the way we play, the way we generate sound from instruments, and even the way we play together. So you're always kind of making these micro adjustments to space in the same way that you do when you're speaking. And certainly like very reverberant spaces afford certain possibilities. They give us a chance for the sound to kind of blossom, to bloom and occupy this expanse. But they also have a way of suppressing detail or washing away the more percussive elements in the music.

SUSAN WERTHEIM: I can tell you from experiencing it that the acoustics are really impressive, I guess. So the atrium's not designed for a concert hall. And it's not an easy space to have a musical performance in. But the ones that I have attended there have sounded excellent.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Why is it not an easy space? Is it because of the echo?

SUSAN WERTHEIM: That's not my area of expertise, but I think it's because of the angles and the hard surfaces. Well, actually, I do have an acoustic story but it's about designing stairs in the building in our more recent project where we really paid a lot of attention to acoustics.

And in that case, it was the geometry. In other words, some of the spaces in their angular shape or trapezoids will be like a stereo speaker or a megaphone. So they're going to—the sound's going to bounce off the walls and then carry in a certain direction. And then when it bounces back and it starts, kind of, reverberating or crossing, that's when it gets more complicated.

So we actually did do some acoustic treatment in the stairs, which worked out really well, when we designed these new hexagonal stairs. In fact, we had an architect on our staff who was deaf, not 100 percent, but had profound hearing loss. And he's the one that told us, like, you need to pay attention to this. And we did. And it made a big difference. Because we didn't want like a whole school group of kids running up these stairs and then coming into this very quiet gallery interrupting things. And so the acoustics in this stair are also very fine.

But back to the atrium and the acoustics, we have a whole group at the gallery that does the audio setups. They've done a great job.

Also one thing that helps modulate the sound in the atrium is we have these four enormous ficus trees. And so they're a soft and, sort of, irregular surface that help break up the sound.

CELESTE HEADLEE: As you chose pieces of music to respond to Pei's building, what were you looking for? Why did you land on the music you chose?

VIJAY IYER: I suppose, as we were talking earlier about trying to get into his mind as a composer of space, shall we say—as someone who creates form for people to inhabit—that's one way that I am able to make sense of the music that I make. Especially when I'm making music for improvisers or music that might feature improvisation in some way that—you're creating a form that one must navigate.

So I think, for example, this piece called "Passage," which is, it's a very simple layout, compositionally. In a way, it's kind of underspecified. There's a certain kind of patterning that I do at the piano. This piece was recorded as a duet between myself and the great trumpet player/composer Wadada Leo Smith. And it does have to do with navigating through space.

And the way he described it is that this piece describes or depicts the right of every individual, of every human being, to move freely across space and time. So it's something about our birthright as human beings to migrate, to move, to wander. And in that sense, it's also a political statement. It's an expression of a certain ideal of freedom. So that piece kind of features Mr. Smith navigating as a free spirit. I give him just a handful of notes to play and then I let him do what he wants with that. So that's one example.

I was also thinking about the sense of patterning. Like I said, these tessellations of space with shapes, with shapes that have a similarity. And that's something we do all the time as composers and as players.

So a lot of pieces of mine have that quality, I would say, a certain kind of patterning sensibility, the way that rhythms emerge through repetition, which is also the way that people talk about rhythm in visual art.

And what does the structure that's been built enable you to do? And particularly, how does it enable you to interact with one another? How does it give you new ways of seeing and hearing each other? What does it offer you as a space of possibility?

That piece called "Entrustment," which is from the new album *Uneasy* is an example of that, I think. It has a very bare hint of structure, just two chords that move back and forth. And there's a theme that's hinted at in different places and never has to be really hammered in.

And then we just kind of move as a trio through that space, and interact with it and with each other and build something with our tracks, with our steps. Each move we make is a choice. And those choices add up to something lived and intimate and yet with some sort of sense of vastness and looseness.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Inside the East Building, possibly because of my own musical background, but I notice how the architecture makes it possible to hear other people. I find that comforting to me, as though Pei specifically designed a space with clean lines but that has the warmth of community so that you don't ever feel like you're in there alone. I wanted to get your response to this idea of the way the building interacts with crowds, with groups.

SUSAN WERTHEIM: The East Building loves a crowd. Well, first of all, to me, it has this sacred space character to it. Like one of the perks of working at the National Gallery is that you can come to the building before public hours. I mean, we all arrive at work earlier than the public is allowed in. And so you can be there alone. And that's a great experience itself.

And it doesn't feel like Night at the Museum. It feels fine, but the more the better. So as it becomes more active and there's kind of that hum of people around, it makes the building much more alive. It plays better that way.

It's been interesting because as we've renovated parts of the building, and we've had to close them off and then the only people in there are construction workers. And then it's the people that activate the space.

And you're right: it's like you can be—there there are some flying bridges across the atrium—you can be up high on one and you see so much movement or you just see people doing various things. And it really—you definitely get the idea, yes, this was designed for people. It's not like, oh, these people are messing up our composition, you know?

I mean I have been at some incredibly beautiful modern buildings where you can almost feel like you're too messy to be there or your color scheme doesn't work with the palette or something. I mean the building does have a certain amount of warmth to it, I think. Even though it's stone and glass and materials that don't seem all that warm, I think it's the warmth of the light and the works of art, the color of the works of art.

CELESTE HEADLEE: If you imagined, if you chose these pieces by imagining how they would sound if you performed them in the building, what do you think about the fact that we're not going to have that experience for a while? I mean, as a musician, what do you make of this period of time in which we're not hearing live performances? We're not experiencing the music in the spaces like the East Building.

VIJAY IYER: Yeah. Yes. I mean, we've lost a lot in the past year in terms of the experience of gathering, what it means to be in a room together. And that's basically what music concentrates. Musical performance creates this ritual environment for us to remind ourselves that that is something we can do, that we're able to synchronize our actions. We're able to harmonize with each other. We're able to experience something like peace.

Even listening to this, to each other as we speak to each other through these mics, which create this sense of intimacy—like I can hear you breathing. You can hear the rasp in my throat. And so it sort of gives us the sense of what it's like to be together. But it is also going to be revelatory when we can gather again safely and we can enjoy music together again, when we can make music together again. In a way, we'll have to rediscover it, because I think there's a lot that we've forgotten about it.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Here's Vijay Iyer's "Entrustment" uninterrupted.

[MUSIC - VIJAY IYER, "ENTRUSTMENT"]

Thanks once again to Vijay Iyer for joining us. You can find more information on the East Building as well as the full playlist Vijay assembled for us at nga.gov. And one final note: Vijay performed in the Gallery's concert series on April 7, 2019. Though the Gallery remains closed to the public as of this episode's release, we, like Vijay, can't wait to rediscover live music at the Gallery as soon as we can safely.

[MUSIC - RAFIQ BHATIA, "HOODS UP"]

Right now you're hearing an excerpt from "Hoods Up" by Rafiq Bhatia. He'll join us to talk about James Turrell's *New Light*, that inspired the music we're hearing.

Sound Thoughts on Art is a production of the National Gallery of Art's Music Department. The show was created by Danielle DeSwert Hahn, the National Gallery's head of music programs, and mixed and produced by Maura Currie. You can find more information about everything in today's episode at the National Gallery's website, nga.gov/podcast.

If you enjoyed this episode of *Sound Thoughts on Art*, we would love for you to subscribe. Also, leave us a review wherever you're listening. I'm Celeste Headlee. Until next time, be well.