

**Impressum**

Klaus Bung: Chromaticism

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e: klaus.bung@rochdalewriters.org.uk

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## Klaus Bung: Chromaticism

**A surrealist tale  
set in the landscape of the European cultural heritage  
and beset with anachronisms**

On my travels by train and tram, I sometimes see students who mark their books and lecture notes and underline virtually everything in them. That testifies to the quality of the lecture notes or the credulity of the students. They follow Mephistopheles' advice to the pupil in Goethe's Faust (01):

Doch Euch des Schreibens ja befließt Als diktiert' Euch der Heilig' Geist.	And take down every single word As if the Holy Ghost were dictating to you.
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However, handled like this, the underlining becomes meaningless since the underlined words are no longer conspicuous and therefore can no longer be found. Therefore the underlining now can at best mean: 'I have read this far' or 'I am in total agreement with this'. This is good for the manufacturers of luminous marker pens but bad for the students.

The archetype of the student addicted to luminous markers is Daudet's Uncle Baptiste (02), who had the 'passion du coloriage' (03) and had been wasting his money for the last forty years in order to buy illustrated magazines for the sole purpose of colouring them:

<p>"Quand la tante lui refusait de l'argent pour acheter des journaux à images, il arrivait à mon oncle de colorier des livres. Ceci est historique: j'ai tenu dans mes mains une grammaire espagnole que mon oncle avait mis en couleurs d'un bout à l'autre, les adjectifs en bleu, les substantifs en rose, etc." (Daudet: Le petit chose)</p>	<p>When my aunt stopped giving him money for buying illustrated magazines, my uncle fell on the idea of colouring books. That's a historical fact: I have held in my own hands a Spanish grammar which my uncle had coloured from cover to cover, the adjectives blue, the nouns pink, etc. (translated by Klaus Bung)</p>
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I can vouch for the truth of this story because I have known Uncle Baptiste personally. He became famous later in life because he was the first to put the Rimbaud Code (04) into practice by colouring letter by letter first Rimbaud's Collected Works (which thank Rimbaud are not extensive) and later, in advanced age, Sartre's novels.

The Rimbaud Code is a model of brevity:

<p>A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert, O bleu (04)</p>	<p>A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue</p>
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The electricians were inspired by this poetic idea when they invented the colour code for electric resistors.

0	black		5	green
1	brown		6	blue
2	red		7	violet
3	orange		8	grey
4	yellow		9	white

But they did not dare to publish this list and call it a poem. That is the difference between poetics and electrical engineering.

Uncle Baptiste, who, like Apollinaire, was very open to technical advances, responded artistically to this code by using it to colour the national railway timetable of the SNCF (05). In the process of this work, he discovered that on certain routes the colours were symmetrical in various respects, and that one could therefore read the colours from right to left, left to right, top to bottom and vice versa. His favourite pastime was reading them vice versa. He called these patterns 'reflections', 'crab colours' and the like. He published his master piece under the modest title: 'Some Coloric Variations on the Folksong "From distant countries have I come"' (06) and thereupon was admitted to the reputed 'Academy of Colorists'.

The Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris has eight boxes of Uncle Baptiste's correspondence with French National Railways in which he tried to persuade them to issue their timetable entirely in colour and to make do without the digits. He found considerable support for his idea on the Company's Board but in the end it failed to be realised because of the then prohibitive cost of colour printing. However, this splendid idea never died entirely. The cost argument, which prevented its realisation in France, has become invalid because of modern printing techniques. The idea of printing a railway timetable in colour code and without digits was recently revived in Belgium and will be realised as part of the great national transport reform which will take place in the year 2001. This is also the year in which Belgium will relieve its overcrowded roads by letting lorries drive on the left; private cars will continue to drive on the right as before. The system will be tried for one year. If it works, left-hand driving will be made compulsory for private cars as well: at present it is optional.

Uncle Baptiste had two daughters, Katharina-the-lip and Maribel. Katharina and her mother Blanche were the bane of his life. To rid himself of outspoken Katharina, for whom no suitors were forthcoming and whom he could not marry to a tree (07), he put an embargo on Maribel until her suitors had found a husband for Katharina. In this he followed the second and third Cartesian principle (08), dividing his objectives into manageable parts and trying to achieve them in a specific order. I was present when he declared, not in his usual colourful language but in the blank verse he used when he wanted to show that he was coolly determined and that not one jot or one tittle (09) should pass from his words:

Gentlemen, importune me no farther,  
For how I firmly am resolved you know;  
That is, not to bestow my youngest daughter  
Before I have a husband for the elder. (10)

A terrible row ensued during which Tante Blanche was gripped by the "rage du coloriage" and beat her husband "0 and 6" (11), as he later noted in his diary, or "alpha and omega", as his brother, the Abbé, preferred to say. She disregarded his mild protests and pointed out that his hide could be recycled whereas the magazines and books which he "soiled" could not, and that parchment was better than paper for producing works of art, and that if he refused to provide parchment, then she would produce pulp. She then started calling herself a "performance artist".

Eventually Uncle Baptiste managed to calm her down by explaining to her George David Birkhoff's theory of "the aesthetic measure". This is the American equivalent of the ancient Greek "μηδὲν ἄγαν" (12) (Don't overdo it, mate!). It demonstrates that the word "fuck" is most effective if it is used in 37% (magick number, plus or minus 2) (13) of all sentences. 30% is not enough ("Could do better"), 40% is deafening and no longer noticed: Never open the watergates, Birkhoff counselled.

Aunt Blanche was enthralled and tried to think of domestic applications.

"Hear the sledges with the bells, silver bells!", fluted Uncle Baptiste, "What a world of merriment their melody foretells!". (14)

"I can't hear nuffink", retorted down-to-earth Aunt Blanche.

"35%!" urged Uncle Baptiste, "the sound /e/ occurs in 35% of its syllables!"

As long as Aunt Blanche was listening, she could not pound him. Uncle Baptiste felt like Sheherazade. Aunt Blanche doubted that George David ever existed and told her husband to birk off. Uncle Baptiste knew Birkhoff's dates by heart, 1884-1944, and pointed out that, on his deathbed, Birkhoff had advised that no more than 37% each of Dresden and of Hiroshima should be (and needed to be) flattened - any more was a waste of bombs and fuel, as the Germans had found over Coventry. Uncle Baptiste got some respite by sending Aunt Blanche to the Internet to read Birkhoff's biography:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George\\_David\\_Birkhoff](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_David_Birkhoff)

They listened to Bach's "Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue in D-Minor for Organ" and counted its colours and to Bach's Brandenburg Concerto in D-major and counted the number of syncopated bars: 36%. They downloaded Van Gogh's "Sunflowers" and let PaintShop calculate the percentage of yellow or near-yellow pixels: 38%. Aunt Blanche pointed out that a husband must nag his wife for no more than 6 hours of the 16 hour waking day, otherwise she will get used to it and continue to love him. He has to catch her by surprise, ever so often, but neither too often nor too rarely.

Uncle Baptiste argued that a wife must beat her husband on no more than 37 percent of the occasions when she thinks he deserves it (which is always). Otherwise he will develop a thick skin.

This is, in fact, how Tante Blanche, instinctively, had dealt with Uncle Baptiste throughout their married life, and yet she could not stop the great man on his road to immortality. That is the difference between the responses of an ordinary man and those of a genius. The genius cannot be kept down.

Uncle Baptiste produced a climax by giving her the Birkhoff theory in a nutshell, superimposed onto it one of Norbert Wiener's equations and Maxwell's Second Law of Thermodynamics, and heedlessly observed that "variety is the spice of life". Thereupon she called him a Berkshire hunt (15) (to which he responded by calling her Moby (16), a Nietzschean inversion of all values in this family!). In a flash of genius, she made an intellectual quantum leap (tiny, but a leap nonetheless) and cooked his dinner with 37.8% (in weight) of salt. He meekly

remarked, in his characteristic fashion, that this was not "cordon bleu", but thenceforth he never again argued with her about mathematics. After all, he consoled himself, she was a woman and obviously did not know how to work out percentages.

When I investigated the papers of Oncle Baptiste at the Bibliothèque Nationale, I found the following cryptic note written in his inimitable copperplate handwriting (voir Boîte IV, Div. 13.6.2): "My nephew is not "Un petit chose", "chose c'est feminine". Bugger Daudet! "Voyelles" are the spice of life. Among J S Bach's last works were 'The Art of Fugue' and 'Canonic Variations on "Vom Himmel hoch da komm ich her"'. (17) This German Christmas carol uses the tune of a 15th century pop-song 'Aus fernen Landen komm ich her'. Bach submitted his Canonic Variations to L C Mizler's 'Korrespondierende Sozietät der Musicalischen Wissenschaften' (18) in Leipzig to prove his mastery of counterpoint and qualify for membership. This exclusive society had, throughout its existence, only nineteen members since in 1755 Leopold Mozart declined an invitation to become the twentieth."

Uncle Baptiste died when he had almost completed his Magnum Opus, so to speak his 'Chromatic Art of Fugue', the coloration of the entire Paris Telephone Directory, 13 volumes, in accordance with his code. Only two volumes remained to be done.

#### ^NOTES

1. Goethe: Faust: Studierzimmer: Schülerszene
2. Alphonse Daudet (1840-1897): Le Petit Chose, Première Partie, Ch. 14
3. passion du coloriage: was obsessed with colouring
4. Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891): Voyelles
5. SNCF: the French National Railway Company
6. Aus fernen Landen: I have arrived from distant lands
7. In the Bengali film "Sati", the unwanted eldest girl, dumb, was married to a tree so that her younger brothers and sisters could get married.
8. Cartesian principles: "The second, to divide each of the difficulties under examination into as many parts as possible, and as might be necessary for its adequate solution. - The third, to conduct my thoughts in such order that, by commencing with objects the simplest and easiest to know, I might ascend by little and little, and, as it were, step by step, to the knowledge of the more complex; assigning in thought a certain order even to those objects which in their own nature do not stand

- in a relation of antecedence and sequence." (Descartes: Discourse on Method, chapter 2)
9. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. (Matthew 5:18)
  10. Shakespeare also reports the incident, in his play "The Taming of a Shrew" (1:1), where he slightly misspells my uncle's name. Shakespeare calls him "Baptista" instead of "Baptiste".
  11. "0 and 6" = "black and blue" in the electricians' colour code
  12. μηδὲν ἄγαν = nothing too much
  13. George A Miller (1956): "The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two: Some Limits on Our Capacity for Processing Information". In: Psychological Review
  14. Hear the sledges: Edgar Allan Poe: The Bells.
  15. Berkshire hunt: Rhyming slang for "cunt". She could also have called him simply "a berk", which has the same meaning. When she told him to "birk off", she wanted him to "fuck off".
  16. Herman Melville: Moby Dick
  17. Luther's chorale "Vom Himmel hoch da komm' ich her" (I come to you from heaven above) is based on a secular song of the time starting "Aus fernen Landen komm. ich her" (I come to you from distant lands)
  18. Korrespondierende Sozietät: Corresponding Society of Musical Sciences

#### **^ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Klaus Bung is of multi-national European extraction and has spent most of his life in England, contemplating his suggestive name and his navel. His passion is the chromatic music of Gesualdo, Bach and Tristan. During his saner hours he begets, by e-male, together with Teresa Schlitts, the surrea-erotic novel "Poker", an Anglo-Swiss copro-duction.

**Note for printers: Do not remove the hyphen in "copro-duction"**

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