

WILLIAM GROSVENOR NEIL: You are listening to Charlottesville Classical, WTJU 91.1 FM, the radio voice of the University of Virginia, your arts companion for our community.

What is synesthesia? Well, it's basically the merging of the senses due to a neural condition in the brain. And for those who experience synesthesia, when playing and listening to music, they see colors. Well, who experiences this condition? Well, I was alarmed to hear it's less than 4% of the population. However, among artists, it's about 15%. It's how the mind perceives reality, as I understand it.

Studies have revealed that infants may have developing brains that merge all of the senses and slowly make distinctions over time between what they see, hear, taste, or smell.

And then individuals who continue to have some blended sensorial experiences have retained this neural condition. And what are the types? Well, all combinations. Tasting colors, touching colors, hearing colors. There are over 200 combinations. Well, please welcome our guest, Anna Abounader, who has graciously agreed to be interviewed about her experience of synesthesia, live on the air today. Welcome, Anna.

ANNA ABOUNADER: Thank you. Thank you very much, Mr. Neal. It is an honor to be here. I'm really excited to be here.

NEIL: Well, I've been excited as well. Anna is a musician and plays the piano, and is interested in art, and will be a freshman at UVA starting this fall. Is that right?

ABOUNADER: Yes, that's right.

NEIL: And what will you be studying?

ABOUNADER: I'm going to be studying Studio Arts at UVA.

NEIL: Wow. So, well, I think that connects with the whole idea of seeing colors. Tell us about your first experience with synesthesia.

ABOUNADER: Okay, so I've had synesthesia since I was a kid, but I didn't really pay too much attention to it until I was, like, a teenager. That's when I decided to bring it up to my mom, and she was like, "Wow, you should write a book about this, or illustrate something. Illustrate a children's book about how you see colors in music and stuff like that."

NEIL: Wow. So you were aware of hearing or seeing colors when you heard sounds as a child.

ABOUNADER: Yes.

NEIL: But your parents didn't really know that you had this experience until you were a teenager.

ABOUNADER: Yeah, because that's when I told them. That's when I started to realize, wait a second, why am I seeing colors when I hear music?

NEIL: Wow. Is it just music, or other kinds of sounds that you see?

ABOUNADER: It's pretty much just music. It really depends on, like, what key the piece is in, what chords I'm hearing, stuff like that.

NEIL: Wow. So--the colors you see, is it in your mind, or is it as if they're floating in space in front of your eyes?

ABOUNADER: It's basically in my mind. Wow. That's very interesting. To prepare for this interview, I read a few books on this, and I'm just so fascinated.

I was familiar with this condition through music, hearing about composers, particularly the composer Alexander Scriabin, who is believed to have the condition.

But more recently, the French composer Olivier Messiaen was a true synesthete, where he would see these colors. And here's what he said about this: "When I hear the music or play the score mentally, I see in my mind's eye the interconnected colors of fluctuating, moving, shifting together with the sounds." So I think he says in his mind's eye. Would you describe that as well?

ABOUNADER: Yes, I would describe that as well. It basically just floats around in my head, in my mind, just sees specific color and stuff like that.

NEIL: And do you associate certain colors with certain sounds?

ABOUNADER: Yes, I do. Specifically music notes.

NEIL: So if you hear a single pitch or a note, like on the piano, you'll see a particular color?

ABOUNADER: Yeah. Like, for instance, if I hear C, I picture a light blue color.

NEIL: Light blue! Interesting. As I understand it, this is a very personal experience because there are other synesthetes that would hear—see--a different color with that pitch. Is that how you understand it?

ABOUNADER: Yes. Actually, my brother is also a synesthete. Because in his case, whenever he hears a C, he sees bright red. That's what he told me the other day when I was talking to him.

NEIL: Well, we'll have to have him on the show as well. I didn't know that. Wow. So you have competing colors when you hear sounds. Wow. And the phenomenon of the color, is it like one solid color, or is it different shades of the color?

ABOUNADER: Basically, it's just one solid color.

NEIL: Wow. And how long does it last? When you hear a sound, is it like it comes up in your mind, and then does it disappear after the note stops, or?

ABOUNADER: It basically lasts for like a couple seconds, because sometimes I dwell on that note, and it's color.

NEIL: Right. And so that brings to the question about notes in pieces of music. Now, you say you play the piano.

ABOUNADER: Yes.

NEIL: So when you're playing the piano, whether it be scales or anything else, do you then see those imaginary colors?

ABOUNADER: Yes, I do, actually. But they all start to blend together. Like when I'm playing a specific piece, they all start to blend together into, like, you know, some abstract masterpiece in my mind.

NEIL: Wow. Okay. So then the colors begin to cascade because you're hearing different pitches.

ABOUNADER: Yeah. And sometimes I picture a scene in my head because of that.

NEIL: Oh, a scene. Interesting.

ABOUNADER: Yeah, a whole scene.

NEIL: And does that have to do with the character of the music as well, or?

ABOUNADER: Yeah, I feel like it has to do with the character of the music as well.

NEIL: Well, let's test you out here. I have some interesting pieces that are contemporary, because this is a new sound, and I think these are pieces you most likely have never heard before. Okay. We're going to hear a piece by the composer that I mentioned earlier, Olivier Messiaen.

This is his piece, "Ventre gonfle enfant Jésus," so "Five Impressions of the Infant Jesus." And we're going to hear a piece called "Des Halteuses," which is "View from Above." And we're going to hear the pianist, Pierre-Laurent Aimard, performing.

ABOUNADER: Okay.

NEIL: So you listen, and then afterwards we're going to quiz you on what you imagined.

ABOUNADER: Okay then.

NEIL: Well, how about that?

ABOUNADER: This was actually very interesting. So, like, in the beginning and the end parts, like the parts where it's like slower, I just imagined a dark blue sky with little white twinkling stars, just four-pointed stars.

And then, like, in the super fast parts, I just saw, like, I saw a yellow background with some red winding road. As we're going down the road, we see a bunch of flickering black spots.

NEIL: Oh, that is so interesting. Wow. So, and I thought we'd start with piano pieces, because then it's, you know, one kind of sound, but then I see that the different character of the piece really had an effect on you.

ABOUNADER: It did.

NEIL: Wow. So, well, are you ready for another one?

ABOUNADER: Sure.

NEIL: Okay. So next up is a piece by Alexander Scriabin. He was more interested in the mysterious connection between music, poetry, and dance. His imagination was vivid, but there are doubts that he truly had synesthesia.

But we're going to have you hear his piano sonata number five. And this is, let's see, yes, out of order here a little bit. Yeah. Performed by Vladimir Ashkenazy. And we're going to hear just the first couple of minutes, and then we're going to fade off. So here we go.

ABOUNADER: Okay.

NEIL: Well, what about Scriabin, Anna?

ABOUNADER: This was an interesting one. So at the beginning, I saw, like, a deep brown color. Then I saw some flickering yellow glowing circles. Then afterwards, I saw a blue stained glass window with some black silhouettes.

Then I started seeing a couple of colorful polka dots in a white background.

NEIL: Wow. And so I get the impression that you can see abstract colors and shapes, but then specific images, like the stained glass window you mentioned.

ABOUNADER: Yeah.

NEIL: Yeah. Do those more figurative or concrete images come after you see the color, or can they suddenly appear when you hear a sound?

ABOUNADER: They suddenly appear when I hear a sound.

NEIL: Like suddenly there's a door or a window or something.

ABOUNADER: Yes, yes. Exactly like that.

NEIL: Right.

And are these images moving, or are they just sort of floating in space in your mind?

ABOUNADER: They're moving a little bit. Yeah.

NEIL: So does it have to do with the speed of the music, maybe?

ABOUNADER: Yeah, more or less.

NEIL: Okay. Wow.

So, well, we're going to go back to Messiaen, and this time it's going to be a piece for an ensemble. So we're going to hear a clarinet and a piano trio.

We're going to hear his piece of his entitled "Intermezzo." And we're going to hear Robert Plane, clarinet, and along with Glenn Gould, piano trio.

NEIL: Well, how about those sounds? How about that clarinet too, huh?

ABOUNADER: Oh, I saw a dark red background and some moving bright yellow swirls and squiggles, basically just lines, like arches and stuff like that, just intertwining.

And then at some point I saw, like, huge splotches of blue. And then maybe during the faster parts I saw a couple black silhouettes and stuff like that, just random shapes.

NEIL: Well, you know, it's interesting because that piece starts out with unison. Everybody's playing the same note, but very fast.

And the piece prior to that was more harmonic and more lyrical. And it seems like you had more images in the Scriabin and more abstract visions with this piece when it's more of simple music, you know?

ABOUNADER: Yes.

NEIL: Yeah. So, well, here's a piece that I think will evoke, will be, sorry, atmospheric, and it'll have some, I think, emotion in it. And I'm very curious to see what this conjures in your mind. This is a piece by Scriabin as well. It's his "Rêverie" for orchestra, "Dream" or like "Daydream" for orchestra.

And we're going to hear the Danish Symphony Orchestra. And there's also a piano involved here, Fabio Luisi on piano.

NEIL: Well, that was different music. What did that evoke in your mind?

ABOUNADER: I pictured a sunrise. First I saw, like, a silhouette of some hills and a couple trees to the side on the left, a black silhouette.

Then all of a sudden the sun rising up into the air as the sky slowly changes color from, like, blue to, like, red and pink and purple. And, I also pictured another scene of a black stage with some colorful lights, like red and green and blue, and then a ballerina in lavender dancing around at the same time.

NEIL: Well, you know, I think my theory stands in that is that when the music is more lyrical and emotional, there's more of a story in your landscape and there are specific shapes.

ABOUNADER: Yes.

NEIL: As you described it.

ABOUNADER: I also saw some birds, black silhouettes of birds flying alongside the sunrise.

NEIL: What color were the birds?

ABOUNADER: They were black.

NEIL: Oh, okay. Very interesting. Well, this next piece is one of my favorite symphonic pieces by Olivier Messiaen. It's his "Turangalila" symphony, which means "Hymn to Joy."

It's very colorful music. And I can't help but think, knowing that he was a synesthete, that he truly was building out sonic structures based on his vivid color imagination. So you see if you'd agree with me.

ABOUNADER: Okay.

NEIL: We're going to hear the Boston Symphony Orchestra conducted by Andris Nelsons. And this also has a piano in it. Ju-Ya Wang will be performing on the piano.

ABOUNADER: Alright, this one was pretty intense.

NEIL: Yeah, I bet.

ABOUNADER: So at first I pictured, like, some silhouette of some trees at night with a dark blue background. But then in the more dramatic parts, there's, like, a yellow background with, like, red shapes just, you know, splattering all over the place. And then there are, like, black silhouettes of birds, specifically birds of prey, just at each other's throats. So this is a little more dramatic for me.

NEIL: Well, actually, I was going to say, you're not familiar with this kind of music, are you?

ABOUNADER: No, I'm not.

NEIL: Yeah, what do you think?

ABOUNADER: It's very dramatic.

NEIL: Yeah. So this was, this is quite a famous orchestra piece that Messiaen composed. And, well, this is fascinating. And we'll be right back with more conversation with Anna after these messages.

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NEIL: Well, if you just joined us, I'm here in the studio live with Anna Abounader, and she's talking about her condition, synesthesia.

And since you'll be studying art at UVA, Anna, can you share some of your thoughts on how this sensorial phenomena that you experience may influence your work in the visual arts?

ABOUNADER: Well, I feel like this phenomenon is really going to help boost my imagination and expand my creativity.

And it's going to help give me some ideas on what I want to do at UVA, what I want to paint. Just going to give me some more ideas for, like, more abstract art, if you know what I mean.

NEIL: Well, I'm intrigued. So, hey, I got an idea. Maybe next academic year, after you produce some things that you're proud of, maybe we can have you come on the show and talk about those pieces of art that we can maybe show on the website, perhaps?

ABOUNADER: Oh, yes, that would be awesome.

NEIL: Yeah, okay. Well, great. I'd be very excited in that.

See, I noticed you brought a notebook. Yeah. With some resources and notes. Is there anything you'd like to share that you had prepared? Well, basically, let's see. So I noticed that I became even more aware of my synesthesia when I met you at a rosary group.

NEIL: Oh, really?

ABOUNADER: Yeah.

You remember? That's when I really got into this synesthesia thing. And now, honestly, after being here, I feel much more excited about this superpower that I have, if you really call it that way. If you really describe it that way.

And now I'm already feeling inspired to create more art related to my synesthesia.

NEIL: Oh, I'm so delighted that I was able to spur this pursuit and relate it to what you're going to be studying at the university.

And since you are also studying piano, is there some, do you want to continue studying music when you're here at UVA as well?

ABOUNADER: Of course I do. I would love to. I'm probably thinking about minoring in music at some point.

NEIL: Well, that would be exciting. Wow. Yeah.

So just like Messiaen, you could be actually creating music at the piano that relates to, you know, the colors you see.

ABOUNADER: Yeah, exactly. You know, something interesting that I want to add on is that sometimes when, like, I'm asleep or something, for some reason I have these random, this random music in my head. Sometimes it comes from random dreams that I have.

And so I have, and so as soon as I wake up and I still have the music in my head, I write it down instantly on the whiteboard. And then I transfer the notes over to MuseScore. MuseScore 3. You've heard of that program?

NEIL: Well, yes, yes, I do.

ABOUNADER: Yeah, it's a music-making software for, like, creating piano music and other stuff. Yeah. And so I've pretty much started creating my own music from that. Well, you've already started. You mentioned the whiteboard.

That's a real quick way of writing things down very quickly. But let me get this straight. So you dream music? Yes, I dream music sometimes, every now and then. Wow. Specific tunes or harmonies or?

ABOUNADER: Yeah.

NEIL: Wow.

ABOUNADER: And some of it is just stuff that just randomly pops out of my head that I've never heard from any other place.

NEIL: Well, I am so, so excited. I'm so excited for you.

ABOUNADER: Thank you.

NEIL: That you're embracing this and you, this gift from God, and you're going to be using it in your studies and in your pursuits. So, wow. Very exciting. Well, there is an artist that I came across, Anna. Her name is Jane MacKay. And she's in the UK. She's also a synesthete. And she has created paintings after the British composer Benjamin Britten's music.

And you can see her artwork at her website, soundingart.com. And maybe when you go back home, you could look and see what she's been doing online. And listeners, you can do the same. See what she's up to. And I think you'll be very excited about, or entranced by, the colors and the images that this artist creates. So we're going to actually hear one of the pieces that inspired her. And you can find that, I think it's a watercolor that she created after this work on her website.

And we're going to hear just a few minutes of Benjamin Britten's illuminations. We're going to hear a movement dance. Wait, I'm sorry, where is it? Here is it.

We're going to hear the sixth movement. And I want you, Anna, to listen and see what you come up with. And then when you go home, see what the other artist, Jane MacKay, created.

ABOUNADER: Okay.

NEIL: Alright.

NEIL: Well, a piece with voices. How does that look?

ABOUNADER: That was actually pretty cool. I basically saw a blending of certain colors in the background, like mainly periwinkle and, like, a pale pink and some white just blending in together.

And then I saw some little yellow stars in the front, maybe sometimes splotches of blue. And that's pretty much what I saw.

NEIL: Well, is there a difference in the tones and shapes and colors when you hear music played by instruments versus sung, like this voice you heard?

ABOUNADER: Not necessarily. What really stands out to me is basically the key that the music is in, or the certain chords that I hear, and the certain musical notes that I hear. That's basically what stands out to me the most.

NEIL: And as of standard, you have perfect pitch as well.

ABOUNADER: Yes, I do have perfect pitch.

NEIL: And that makes sense because it's as if your mind, your brain is very highly tuned to vibrations. And of course, color is vibrations.

ABOUNADER: Exactly. Yes.

NEIL: On an extreme spectrum. So, well, I'm very curious to know what comes up when you hear a piece of mine.

ABOUNADER: Oh.

NEIL: And we're going to hear a movement from my piano sonata. And to give you a little clue here, it's entitled Illuminations. And this movement is called Dance in the Light of Music. And we're going to hear Martin Jones performing.

ABOUNADER: Okay.

NEIL: Well, what did you think?

ABOUNADER: This one was actually pretty unique. So basically what I saw was just some blocky hill, as if it were, like, Minecraft or something. It just screamed Minecraft. The piece literally screamed Minecraft to me.

I just saw, like, a blocky green hill and then a light blue sky. And we're just moving along and we see some white clouds. And the sky is sometimes changing from yellow to blue depending on the key change. And then I see, and then at some point I saw some black musical notes.

Then sometimes they changed to pink. And then towards the end of the piece, I just saw a sunset.

NEIL: That's remarkable. And you mentioned Minecraft.

ABOUNADER: Yeah.

NEIL: It's just a video game.

ABOUNADER: Yeah. The music reminds me of Minecraft for some reason. That's why I pictured this in my head.

NEIL: Right. So what other activities or colors do you see? Hearing music, playing music. If you hear just vibrations or babies crying, you mentioned that earlier that when you hear a baby cry because you have perfect pitch.

ABOUNADER: Yes.

NEIL: It can be dissonant to you.

ABOUNADER: Yes.

NEIL: What about colors?

ABOUNADER: Well, colors. Basically, the colors...

NEIL: So it sounds like you need to actually hear music to hear the colors. Is that correct?

ABOUNADER: Yeah. It's more related to music. But if I hear, like, a cry, for instance, I just have an alarm going off in my head. Big red alarm.

NEIL: Oh.

ABOUNADER: That's all that I see.

NEIL: A red alarm. Okay.

Yes. Wow. So that's very interesting. And you mentioned your brother also has the ability as well to see colors. Are there any differences? I know you mentioned that you have different colors, but does he--do different kinds of music stimulate his visions of colors versus yours?

ABOUNADER: I would say maybe yes, because, you know, he has a different brain from mine, which is pretty obvious. But not only does he see different colors when he's, like, listening to music and stuff, but he also sees different colors and associates them with, like, different letters and numbers.

NEIL: He's told me that before. I heard of that. Where numbers and words, letters have specific colors. Yeah. So if he's reading a book, he will see those colors on the page. Wow.

ABOUNADER: Yeah.

NEIL: Are there other people you've encountered your age that have the condition as well? Or is there a society for synesthesia?

ABOUNADER: As far as I know, I don't know. I don't know any other synesthetes that I personally know besides my brother.

NEIL: Well, maybe you encounter someone here at the university. You never know.

ABOUNADER: Yes. It'll be super cool.

NEIL: Yeah. So, wow. Well, we're going to finish with a piece you know. I asked you to list a piece that you've played before or are familiar with. And I chose from that list Mozart's Sonata Number 11, the Rondo Alla Turca Movement. You know the piece. You know the melody.

Why don't you tell the listeners what they could be envisioning in terms of color and shapes when we hear this piece?

ABOUNADER: Alright, then. So basically what I hear when I listen to this piece, like at the beginning, for instance, I see, like, these different shades of purple, like, flying together. And for some reason, I see a white queen.

NEIL: A white queen?

ABOUNADER: Don't ask. A white queen. I just do.

NEIL: Okay. Very good. Well, we're going to end with this. We're going to just play the music. And so we'll say goodbye now. And I just want to thank you so much for joining me this afternoon.

You've really made this edition of A New Sound very special, Anna.

ABOUNADER: Thank you. Thank you very much. It was an honor being here, like I said before.

NEIL: Wonderful. So here we go.

NEIL: Well, you heard Anna Abounader in that last segment. And we were so excited to hear about her wonderful visions of music. And this is one of her favorite pieces that she actually can play as well on the piano. That was Mozart's Rondo Alla Turca from his Sonata Number 11.

And we heard Mitsuko Uchida on piano.