

Beyond the score

American artist Ellen Banks takes inspiration exclusively from piano scores, but, as *Graham Lock* discovers, there is more to her graphic representations than meets the eye

HERE ARE MANY PAINTERS who have been inspired by music, and in many different ways, yet the American artist Ellen Banks may be unique in basing her work entirely on the musical score. She once studied piano and briefly considered becoming a concert pianist, so it's only

natural that her stack of aging piano scores should have become the starting point for her artistic creations. 'A pianist takes the score and creates a performance,' she says. 'I take the score and create a painting.'

Her 'repertoire' consists largely of classical works for solo piano, although

she also paints from piano transcriptions, as in her 'Oracle' series of Bach cantatas, as well as from music connected with her African-American heritage, notably spirituals and compositions by jazz pianists such as Mary Lou Williams. Whatever the genre, though, she invariably turns to the score,

PREVIOUS PAGE Ellen Banks, Scarlatti: Sonata in C – Andante, 1986. Acrylic on canvas, 54" x 54". Courtesy of the artist

RIGHT Ellen Banks, Scott Joplin: Maple Leaf Rag [page 3], 1988. Silkscreen, 18" x 12½". Courtesy of the artist

BOTTOM Ellen Banks, Beethoven: Opus 26

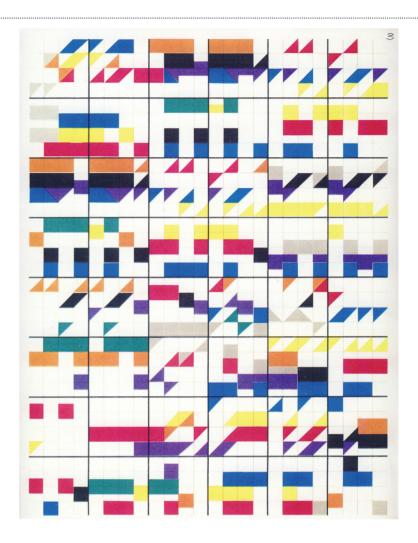
- Rondo [measure 20], 1997. Mixed media on canvas, 20" diameter. Courtesy of the artist

transforming the notation into colours and shapes by applying the same basic principles that she devised back in the early 1980s, when she first introduced music into her art.

Key to that process, she says, was a realisation that hearing the music as she painted it was a distraction (and she still refuses to listen to any piece she's working on). What mattered were the visual patterns and relationships she saw in the printed score, which she calls 'a vehicle to another aesthetic'. The point was not to capture the music's sound, or the emotions it aroused, but to extrapolate its formal properties as a template for a new work of art. 'I'm not trying to translate music,' she insists. 'I'm using the geometries of the scores to create a meaningful experience of colour, texture, brushstroke. I consider myself a representational painter of abstract forms.'

Banks' fascination with the abstract, with making visible 'the unseen things in life', goes back to her childhood. Born in Boston in 1941, she initially studied both music and art, until the offer of a scholarship to a conservatory forced her to choose. She opted for art, believing that painting would allow her to be more creative and give her the chance to discover 'something that no one else was doing'. She studied and later taught art in college, all the while honing a personal, grid-based style of abstract painting that drew on her love of both Mondrian and mathematics. Then, worried that her work was becoming 'too introspective, too self-indulgent', she looked around for a subject matter that was 'bigger than I', that could instil a new kind of discipline in her art - and remembered her old piano scores.

She began by ascribing a prismatic colour to each note: A was red, B was orange, C was yellow, and so on, with G being neutral (since there are only six prismatic colours). Initially, her approach to the score was an almost literal, linear, note-by-note representation, still evident in the three 1988 silkscreens she made from





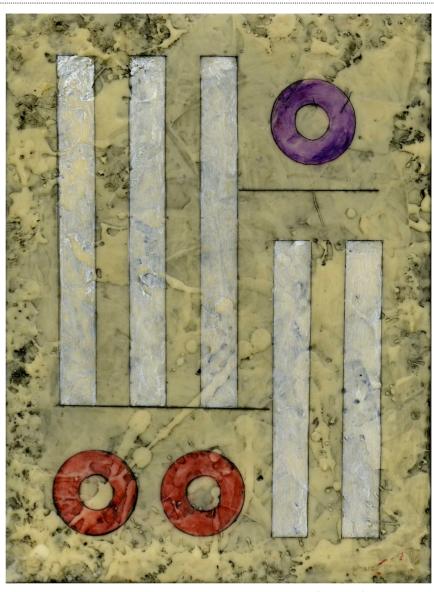
Scott Joplin's *Maple Leaf Rag* (top left), one of the earliest examples of her musical art to attract public attention. By that time, however, she had already started to experiment with a more minimal style, focusing on only a few measures and using only the treble clef, a distillation exemplified by several paintings from 1986-88 based on sonatas by composers such as Scarlatti (see page 31), in which she also tried out dappled brushwork effects.

VER THE YEARS, BANKS has continued to experiment. Although the colour coding and what she calls 'the nucleus of the musical form' have remained constant guidelines, she is now happy to 'take the score and play with it', refining and reshaping according to her artistic intuition, a process she likens to improvisation. Her 'playing with the score' has included painting Beethoven Rondos on circular canyases (bottom

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left) and Villa-Lobos pieces on burlap; introducing text into her series of spirituals and Bach cantatas; and working with different materials, from encaustics and etchings to knitting images with wool and yarn. 'Because I work within specific concepts, it's important to explore various media,' she says. Meanwhile, she is still discovering new scores that excite her: 'Ruby, My Dear' (above right) is one of several Thelonious Monk pieces she has painted recently. 'I've known his music for a while, but only came across his scores a few years ago. I like them because I find unusual patterns in them.'

There were hard times in the late 1980s and 1990s – nursing her dying



ABOVE Ellen Banks, Thelonious Monk: Ruby, My Dear [measure 8], 2010. Wax and pigment on board, 16" x 12". Courtesy of the artist

husband, struggling with cancer herself - when she had less opportunity to paint, but since retiring from teaching in 1996, she has been prolific. Her house in Brooklyn, where she now lives, is overflowing with canvases that hang from, lean against and lay piled upon every available surface. She has had regular exhibitions in New York and Berlin, and last year Boston honoured her with a big hometown show. In 2012 she will have a new exhibition in Berlin's Spandow Gallery (late August to early October) and two more in Poland, where her work is becoming very popular.

'Music,' she once wrote, 'is my still life, my landscape, my nude'; and

although she no longer plays the piano herself, she still loves to listen. 'My favourite music is spirituals and Bach's The Well-Tempered Clavier. When I hear someone play that, the texture is so wonderful and strong. I like Chopin, Beethoven and Mozart - I'm not crazy about his piano music, but I love his orchestrations. That big sound!' So has she never been tempted to paint anything other than piano music? 'No. There are other composers I like to listen to, but if it's not piano music, I've never even tried to paint it. I don't want to hop around. I want to do one thing, and really investigate all the ramifications. The less you have to work with, the more you have to manipulate it.'