

# Perfume Polytechnic

Exploring olfaction in perfume, art, science & life.

## Music and Smell: Brian Eno's Scents and Sensibility

Posted on [January 7, 2015](#) by [FeministConfessional](#)



(<https://perfumepolytechnic.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/neroli.jpg>).

*Bitter orange (neroli) foliage, blossoms and fruit. By Franz Eugen Köhler, from Köhler's "Medizinal-Pflanzen". Public Domain.*

I'm a composer of more than twenty years, a musician of thirty years, and an accomplished knitter. I sew reasonably well, I write, I love to cook and plant things and once had a tiny business making and selling my own felt and textile jewellery. You could say I like to make things. In fact, creativity is my life force, and it's the thing that gets me going more than anything. That and sensuality: creativity as it relates to the senses. In order to create in any medium or art form, I feel that I really need to get to the core of an activity and find out how things work in the background. If there's a science to it, I try to learn about it, if there are methods and practices that artists use to make their work, I find out about them and practice them. That's what I intend to do with this blog, to really get into the nitty-gritty of the sense of smell and the art of perfume.

One of the things I wanted to do when I started Perfume Polytechnic a few months back was to investigate the connections and parallels between music and perfume. This is something else I do, and perhaps it's because I'm a synaesthete (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synesthesia>) as well as a creative person – I like to see and find the connections between things. Or perhaps it's because I hope to use fragrance or scent or smell in an artwork I create one day. As music is the field I understand best of all, perhaps I strive to understand other creative practices by finding parallels

and similarities (and also differences) between other artistic practices and it. I see other art forms through the lens of music, and my understanding of it, as well as looking at each art form as a separate entity.

I've only just started digging into this topic of the connections and differences between music and perfume, and in doing so, I came across a wonderful article by Brian Eno called *Scents and Sensibility*, published in *Details Magazine* in 1992. It was news to me that Eno, a well-known musician and creative polymath, is a long time fan of all things smelly, including fragrance. Eno is interested in trying to understand the working innards of perfumery and the science of smell, and in his article muses about the futility of trying to find a classification system for smells that is neat and clear and finite. He also laments the difficulty of finding a direct and clear language to describe smells that doesn't simply rely on metaphors and similes. Eno draws some wonderful comparisons between the areas of music and scent, and how the two fields are studied and described, but I won't spoil too many surprises by summarising any further. You can read Brian Eno's *Scents and Sensibility* [here](http://www.eno-web.co.uk/interviews/detail92.html) (<http://www.eno-web.co.uk/interviews/detail92.html>).

In 1993 Eno released an ambient instrumental album called *Neroli* ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neroli\\_%28album%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neroli_%28album%29)), named after the syrupy sweet, floral and heady essential oil produced from the blossom of the bitter orange tree (*citrus aurantium* subspecies *amara* or *bigaradia*). The perfume ingredient **neroli** actually got its name after the popular 17th Century Princess of **Nerola** (Anne Marie Orsini, aka Marie Anne de la Trémoille) started using the oil to fragrance both her gloves and bath. A lovely name and etymology for such a beautiful fragrance ingredient!

I haven't listened to Brian Eno's *Neroli* yet, but I intend to soon. Did you know that Brian Eno was interested in perfume and the sense of smell? What do you think of comparing one art form to another – can it be done, or should each art form stay clearly defined as a separate entity? Let me know what you think in the comments box below!

Until next time...

Polly Technic

X

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## 4 thoughts on “Music and Smell: Brian Eno’s Scents and Sensibility”

1. *Sharon Freeman*

JANUARY 7, 2015 AT 4:22 PM

Great post Melita, fascinating to learn this about Eno, off to read the article. I have often thought of fragrant notes as musical notes and often colour them also. ~Sharon~

Reply

◦ *pollytechnic*

JANUARY 7, 2015 AT 5:31 PM

Sharon, so glad you liked the post! Sounds like you have synaesthesia too! Mine is grapheme-colour synaesthesia (numbers and letters appear in fixed colours in my mind). Wish I could associate musical notes with smells and colour – that would be wondrous! I have to be happy with the synaesthesia I got I guess, as it's not something you can cultivate unfortunately...

Reply

◦ *Sharon Freeman*

JANUARY 8, 2015 AT 2:31 AM

I don't have synaesthesia, I have to apply myself to thinking about it. Say I smell ylang ylang – the flower is yellow, yet to me it is myriad because it evokes many emotions in me, and then I will think, not necessarily what musical note per se as I'm not a musician but more – what piece of music or song is this. I find your synaesthesia fascinating, I recall a previous conversation about it.

◦ *pollytechnic*

JANUARY 8, 2015 AT 10:10 AM

Yes, probably a conversation over at FB? I think it's great that you make these connections, whether you do it consciously or otherwise!

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