The Soundman's Art

A chat about the processes of painting art gets DENNIS BAXTER thinking in terms of audio deconstruction and reconstruction.

My wife Charlotte, who is a watercolour artist and my writing partner, and I were discussing the similarities between art and sound and the artistic process. She said the artist will deconstruct what is seen down to its essential forms and then reconstruct it in their own artistic interpretation.

For example, take a portrait. When viewed, you notice how well the artist has 'captured' the person. The glow of the skin; the ghost of a smile, the spirit in the eyes, the details of clothing, hair, and jewellery. Now consider the deconstructive analysis the painter goes through to reconstruct their interpretive 'likeness'.

1. CONSTRUCTION — the head is an ovoid shape; the ears are halfway between the back of the head and the front. The eyes, nose and mouth form a triangle allowing for very small brushstrokes to convey the unique characteristics of the likeness.

2. COMPOSITION — the relationship of the human form to its surroundings. Is it profile or three quarter or frontal? Is it a symmetrical or asymmetrical layout? And what does the setting say about the person in the portrait?

3. COLOUR — use of the colour palette gives impact and drama to the portrait. Purple suggests royalty, purpose and higher ambitions. Blue: honesty and altruism. Black: power and judgment. Crimson imbues its subject with passion and life. Pink with childishness and femininity. White with purity. Green with nature and fertility.

4. LIGHT — the use of light adds dimension and drama. Think of Rembrandt's self-portrait — his face partially hidden in darkness as he gazes out from under his hat. In fact, there is even a special word for the artist's interplay of light and dark 'Chiaroscuro'.

5. TECHNIQUE — painting in water washes creates a soft, muted and transparent feel to the likeness. Colours change when overpainted with another, creating a new one. Oils are thick and heavy with pigment. They can be applied in brushstrokes or with a palette knife, creating a three-dimensional texture.

What a beautiful description of an artist's approach — and a soundman's challenge.

To create an aural landscape you have to deconstruct the real sound and then reconstruct it through microphones, mix, and mastery while trying to compensate for the limitations of technology, transmission, reception and viewer amplification capabilities.

The soundman's art requires a hefty understanding of sound, electronics and systems engineering but mixing the sound requires the same 'deconstruction — reconstruction' interpretive process that the painter goes through. Creating the aural architecture means putting the actual sound back together in a way that surrounds the viewer's visual field. And there is no question that it takes creative talent and a trained ear to construct a better-than-reality-broadcast under complex and subjective conditions.

Ear-trained reconstruction includes:

1. SOUNDFIELD — Learn how to analyse the natural soundfield. Deconstruct the soundfield into the core elements such as timbre, volume and space. Additionally, what interference from unwanted noise are you experiencing? Excessive PA and air conditioning racket have ruined many good programmes.

2. CONTENT — Announce or vocal, sports effects and atmosphere. Consider the role and effect of the play-by-play. How important is it to the viewer experience? An undercurrent or the main event? Dominant or subdued? Remember, they whisper during golf action. Think of the importance of atmosphere — the audience noise and ambience created by the action. An important part of the viewer's experience is hearing the onsite crowd reaction.

3. MICROPHONES — Often, in sports production, you are trying to minimise the unwanted noise and construct an acceptable soundscape. Proper microphone selection and placement are critical for success. Creative microphone placements such as in the home plate in cricket, under the gymnastics balance beam, or on top of the buoy in sailing, create an intimacy and immediacy to the action and excitement.

4. ELECTRONIC PROCESSING — A wonderful tool when properly used to control the dynamics, equalisation and spatial orientation in the sound mix. I have often wondered why in a recording studio you have racks and racks of processing gear but when you go into a TV OB van there is a mixing console, monitor speakers, a playback device for music and maybe some compressors — if you are lucky. Why?

5. CONSISTENCY — With large sports events across many venues and disciplines (such as the Olympics) consistency becomes very important and a difficult challenge. Every venue sounds different, has different acoustics, different PAs and certainly different sound mixers that makes applying the soundfield characteristics across multiple venues complicated.

At the end of the day, the soundman's art is subjective. His interpretation, like that of a painter, is a blend of knowledge, training and talent. The viewer's reaction is subjective too. Different cultures, diverse technologies, and personal preferences create a wide spectrum of reaction to the qualities of broadcast sound. But this subjectivity is precisely why training the brain as an audio tool is so critical in meeting the soundman's challenge. You don't need a meter or scope to tell you something doesn't sound right. You only need a well-trained brain.

Listen analytically. Think creatively. Apply intelligently.