Ragatime: the short-lived ascendency of Fatehpur Sikri

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Abstract

As the centre of the Mughal Empire for a brief period in the 16th century, Fatehpur Sikri was remarkable for its architecture, art and music. Emperor Akbar established not only an atelier of artists to record every aspect of court life but, also, gathered together musicians from every corner of North India. The continued success of the City seemed assured and, yet, after a period of only 18 years, Akbar's court was forced to flee. The ghost town that remains has been a source of mystery ever since. But the seeds of its downfall were evident from the beginning; Akbar's arbitrary method of site selection was the result of his consultation with a Sufi saint who predicted that the Emperor would be blessed with a child 'on the hill of Sikri'. This represented the slimmest of reasons for moving a palace and hundreds of thousands of subjects to a remote and exposed site. There may have been tactical reasons for Akbar's sudden departure but recent research has shown that, at the time, 1588, a pattern of severe weather was responsible for a period of famine and resulting economic depression. In the end, Akbar was defeated by a manifestation of the Little Ice Age.

Keywords

Fatehpur Sikri, Emperor Akbar, Mian Tansen, Hindustani classical music, Sufism, Abul Fazi, Indian Miniatures, Ravi Shankar, Raga Bilaskhani Todi, Automated Transcription for Indian Music, Little Ice Age.

Introduction

I'm exploring 'A Sense of Place' by delving into history. In 16th century India, the Mughal Emperor Akbar reigned over a City that was remarkable for its architecture, art and music. The continued success of Fatehpur Sikri seemed assured and, yet, after a period of only 18 years, Akbar's court was forced to flee. The ghost town that remains has been a source of mystery ever since. Why such a sudden departure? Where the root causes geophysical change or inherent from the very beginning?

My own fascination with the City of Fatehpur Sikri, 40 miles from Agra in North India, has stayed with me ever since I first visited the site in the 1980s. It's a place that excites the imagination and gives rise to fanciful theories about its demise. Now, many years later, I've been inspired to produce 'Ragatime' – a piece of Visual Music, in the form of a *raga,* which recreates the sights and sounds of life in Akbar's court. My aim at BunB 2017 will be to perform Ragatime, live, as part of a presentation that traces the City's brief success and untimely end through the achievements of Akbar the Great and his favourite musician, Mian Tansen. As I will reveal, it's a story that paints an unusually concise picture of temporal climate change and environmental crisis.

Ragatime: a *raga* celebrating the sights and sounds of Akbar's court at Fatehpur Sikri can be viewed at https://youtu.be/_roo4n7bLHc

Fatehpur Sikri: a City of Music

Akbar's court at Fatehpur Sikri was filled with the sound of music. The gateway to the City was home to a *naubat khana* (ensemble of wind and percussion instruments) which announced, by fanfare, the comings and goings of the Emperor and, further, marked the three hour watches of the day and night with the sound of kettle drums, trumpets and cymbals [1]. No doubt, to our ears, the aural impact would have been somewhat raucous but the Emperor tempered this outdoor music with regular performances of intimate Hindustani classical music. So as to better understand the complexities of Indian *ragas* (modal systems of Indian classical music), he himself had undergone some training as a vocalist – enough to develop an in-depth appreciation of the skills of the 30 or so classical musicians he retained at Fatehpur Sikri. In fact, Akbar's move to the new City of Fatehpur, in 1570, was closely followed by the arrival of Mian Tansen who quickly became the Emperor's favourite musician even though, at 57, he was well beyond normal retiring age.

Akbar the Great

For Akbar (Fig. 1), early in his reign, a failure to produce an heir to the throne was a matter of paramount concern. He consulted a Sufi saint, Salim Chishty, in the village of Sikri, about 40 miles from Agra, who predicted that the Emperor would be blessed with a child 'on the hill of Sikri' which was incentive enough for Akbar to locate his planned new City at this same site. No surveying of the land or assessment of its natural resources preceded this decision; all in all, it represented the slimmest of reasons for moving a palace and hundreds of thousands of subjects to a remote site. A redeeming factor was that Akbar did succeed in fathering a son, Salim, who eventually became Emperor Jahangir.

The building of the new City went ahead at a tremendous pace with Akbar rolling up his sleeves,

quarrying stone with his architects and masons and taking a first-hand role in determining the architectural style of Fatehpur. This turned out to be a radical departure from any previous Mughal building project in that it represented a merging of Mughal geometric planning and construction methods with the sculptural and monolithic style of Hindu temple architecture. As such, it exemplified Akbar's belief that, as a Persian invader of North India, he must embrace local traditions in order to generate a cohesive and tolerant society. Even today, visitors to the ghost town of Fatehpur Sikri can experience a wonderfully resolved and cohesive piece of design on a huge scale; it is truly an architectural masterpiece (Fig. 2).

Figure 1. Portrait of Akbar (detail) *Hermitage Museum.*

Figure 2. Fatehpur Sikri as it today. View from the *Anup Talad* (tank) towards the *Diwan-i-Khass* (Hall of Private Audiences).

Mian Tansen

I'll turn my attention now to Tansen (Fig. 1). He was born in Gwalior, a town in North India where music thrived, as it does today. His early promise as a vocalist led to him receiving training from one of the foremost masters of raga performance, Swami Haridas. As a result, he became adept at the *dhrupad* genre of raga performance – a genre that Tansen developed into the form as it's largely known today [2]. Because that's the significant fact about Hindustani classical music; it belongs to an unbroken tradition that goes back 2000 years or more when ragas were an integral part of Vedic ceremonies in Hindu temples. The concept of Tansen being an exponent of 'early music' doesn't exist in India; for present day raga performers his compositions are neither remote nor recondite but, instead, regarded as being as relevant now as when they were first composed.

Figure 3. Portrait of Tansen (detail) *National Museum, Delhi.*

Synthesis: the key to Akbar's success

Tansen was a Hindu but his upbringing also included him sitting at the feet of Mohammed Ghaus, in Gwalior, to learn about Sufism – an Islamic philosophy which was opposed to any rigid distinctions between religions. There's no doubt that, later in life, when Tansen was ordered to attend the court of Akbar at Fatehpur Sikri, it was his knowledge of Sufism as well as his supreme musical skills that endeared him to the Emperor. Already, in 1575, Akbar's interest in comparative religion had caused him to build an *ibadat-khana* or 'house of worship' where he hosted discussions with the leaders of many religious sects. It was symptomatic of his character that he wanted to find points of agreement and areas of uniformity between many disparate views and beliefs. If there's one word that sums up Akbar's approach as ruler,

it is 'synthesis'; his success depended on his ability to blend or synthesise subjects from different races into a social fabric that could act together in the best interests of his far-flung Empire.

Fatehpur Sikri represented a truly multi-cultural society where an administrative system set up by Akbar ensured that talent was rewarded and ways of advancement left open. Under the *mansabari* system, every office was assigned one of 33 ranks (*mansabs)* that enabled members of the nobility to take command of units that ranged between 10 and 7,000 horsemen [3]. By this method, a synthesis (that word again!) was achieved between civilian administration and military command. Failure to perform in one sphere of activity meant demotion in both Akbar's army and his administration. Conversely, young men volunteering to join the army would find that success in battle could lead to a considerable improvement in their civilian prospects.

Figure 4. The Mughal Emperor Akbar shoots the Rajput warrior Jaimal during the siege of Chittorgarth in 1567 (detail) *V&A Museum.*

Akbar at War

During Akbar's reign, Mughal held territory in North India was expanded to a huge extent. It was rare for the Emperor to lose a battle although Western observers of his tactics saw only what appeared to be an undisciplined rabble of up to 100,000 men fighting willy-nilly and without reference to a strategic plan (Fig. 4). But this was a false illusion; Akbar's fighting machine depended on the *mansabari* system forging close allegiances both within and between groups of highly trained horsemen and infantry. The straight lines and formations of Western troops would never have been viable in terrain that, more often than not, was rugged and steep. Always, in numerous battles, Akbar stayed ahead of the game by putting into the field a synthesis of conventional arms and the latest weaponry incorporating missiles and bullets propelled by gunpowder. As a brilliant strategist, he gave every opportunity for his elite corps of highly trained archers on horseback to perform miracles by shooting, at full gallop, to the front, sideways and backwards. Akbar was virtually invincible.

Figure 5. Abul Fazi presenting *Ain-i-Akbari* to Akbar. (detail)

Art and music at Fatehpur Sikri

We owe our detailed knowledge of Akbar's achievements to a contemporary biography, *Ain-i-Akbari* written, in Persian, by his friend Abul Fazi (Fig. 5). As the Emperor was dyslexic and largely illiterate, he placed considerable emphasis on the illustrations included in both the books he commissioned (eg his biography) and those he had read to him. For this purpose, he kept an atelier of artists at Fatehpur Sikri who recorded every moment of court life in a series of Indian Miniatures that are now distributed in galleries throughout the world. They provide a fascinating insight into the life and times of Fatehpur Sikri and include some life-like portraits of Tansen (Fig. 3) and other musicians appointed to the court. It's rare to find women portrayed in Miniatures commissioned by Akbar; he kept 300 wives in his harem with their ranks swollen by concubines, dancing girls and female slaves. Of these, it was only the dancing girls who were occasionally depicted in works of art.

One anecdote, in particular, illustrates the central role of music at Fatehpur Sikri. Akbar asked Tansen to sing Raga Deepak, the raga of light, with the result that all the lamps in the Palace Courtyard lit up spontaneously and Tansen's body became dangerously hot. But, as Tansen had known in advance what would happen, he had taken the precaution of teaching his daughter to play one of his own compositions, Raga Miyan Mahar, which, by repute, caused rain to pour down. When she played, the heavens

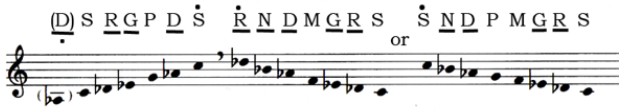
opened and Tansen was saved. Of course, this story should not be taken literally; it represents a metaphor for the power of ragas to induce not so much physical environmental change but, more, an enhanced state in the minds of its listeners. No lesser authority than Pandit Ravi Shankar has explained that the Sanskrit saying – 'Ranjayathi iti Ragah'- means "that which colours the mind is a raga.*"* For this to happen, "its effect must be created not only through the notes and embellishments, but also by the presentation of the specific emotion or mood characteristic of each raga." [4]

Raga: a Definition

Ravi Shankar goes on to say that ragas are extremely difficult to explain in a few words but, nevertheless, his words are much more succinct than most: "a raga is a scientific, precise, subtle and aesthetic melodic form with its own peculiar ascending and descending movement consisting of either a full seven note octave, or a series of six or five notes (or a combination of any of these) in a rising or falling structure. It is the subtle difference in the order of notes, an omission of a dissonant note, an emphasis on a particular note, the slide from one note to another, and the use of microtones together with other subtleties, that demarcate one raga from another." [5]

Melodic Form of 'Ragatime'

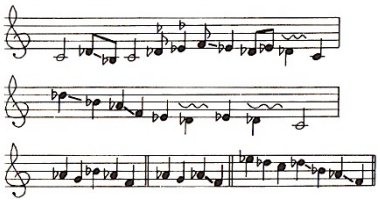
At this point, I need to declare my own intentions in presenting and performing Ragatime. It's both an aural and visual interpretation of one particular raga, Bilaskhani Todi, reputedly performed by Tansen's son, Bilas Khani, at his father's funeral to evoke a mood of 'delightful admiration'. Its ascent – descent in Western notation and Indian symbols, the start point for my interpretation, is as follows :



The letters S, R, G, M, P, D and N are abbreviations of the syllables Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha, and Ni. Flat notes are underlined, high octave notes have a dot over them and the low octave note has a dot under.

Western notation can provide only an approximation of the actual tones included in a raga performance. Our chromatic scale, for instance, contains 12 notes within the octave but by counting in all available microtones, or *shruti* (the smallest perceptible increment in pitch), an octave can be assigned up to 22 *shruti*. Ragas are differentiated, in part, by the notes that can be legitimately flattened or sharpened to produce microtones and further differentiated by 'ornamentation'. This may involve sliding from one note to another, introducing a fast and complex ornament involving two or more notes or performing a shake or *gamak* on a single note.

Joep Bor, editor of The Raga Guide, A Survey of 74 Hindustani Ragas, has made a selection of ragas that are well established in the repertoires of current raga performers. In each case he sets out their pattern of ascent-descent as in the example above but, when it comes to defining a raga's melodic outline, the task becomes more difficult. As Ravi Shankar warns, ragas defy easy explanation and it comes as no surprise, therefore, to find that various authorities on the subject disagree on the specifics of raga performance. Below, I'm showing Walter Kaufmann's melodic outlines for Raga Bilaskhani Todi [7]. The outline in The Raga Guide is similar but not the same and neither relate closely to performances I've heard. This only goes to prove how difficult it is to pin down the note patterns of ragas; in spite of the very detailed note-by-note analyses offered by Kaufmann and others, discrepancies between what you see and what you hear are inevitable.



Melodic outlines for Raga Bilaskhani Todi showing slides between notes and wavy lines indicating ornaments.

Raga Performance

Considerable latitude is available to the raga performer because 90 to 95% of his or her interpretation will be improvised. Unlike Western classical music nothing is written down although the performer must take account not only of the raga's ascending – descending structure but also of its *chalan* – the note pattern that characterises a particular raga in which a principle important note, *vadi*, and a second important note, *samavadi,* can be identified. (In the case of Raga Bilaskhani Todi, the *vadi* is *dha* and the *samavadi* is *ga*.) They are always a 4th or 5th apart.

Raga performers, then, have little in common with performers of Western classical music. A raga performer is a soloist who composes, on the spot, a solo line of considerable complexity and rhythmic ingenuity. Harmony as we know it in the West doesn't exist; everything depends on a single line of melody which can be free within clearly defined limits. A declared master of the art, or *guru*, breathes life into each raga as he or she unfolds and expands it. It's an art that cannot be learned from a book but, instead, requires that an aspiring musician is given special and individual attention by his or her *guru* until artistic mastery is achieved. This begs the question: as a clarinettist skilled only in a long tradition of Western classical music, how can I expect to create a Raga which succeeds in synthesising the aural patterns of Raga Bilaskhani Todi with visual glimpses of life in Akbar's court at Fatehpur Sikri? In response, I can say only that my immediate *guru* has been 'YouTube' where numerous performances, both vocal and instrumental, are available. I have listened and learned! Furthermore, a recent project, The Automated Transcription for Indian Music (AUTRIM) initiated by the

National Centre for Performing Arts (NCPA, Mumbai) and the University of Amsterdam (UvA) has created a new tool that enables any aspiring performer to obtain a detailed understanding of the microtonal pattern of North Indian Music [8].

AUTRIM abandons all reference to normal Western notation, which 'conceals as much as it reveals', in favour of a graphical representation of music that moves in progressive synchronization with recorded sound. I'm illustrating this idea with just a brief few seconds from a raga (Fig. 6). The graph of the melodic line can accurately convey the 22 *shruti* of the Indian octave and, also, a representation of the ornamentation incorporated in the solo line. I don't think it would be possible to play a raga, at sight, from Music in Motion but, nevertheless, it is a brilliant tool for revealing the complexities of raga performance. No other treatise on Indian classical music comes close to providing the insights that are available from AUTRIM.

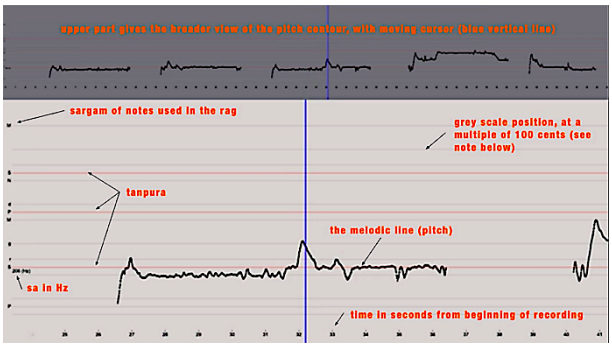


Figure 6. Graph depicting a few seconds of the melodic line of Raga Bilaskhani Todi.

Dhrupad, as developed by Tansen, is the oldest of the Hindustani classical genre; it was the favoured style for vocal performances at Akbar's court [9]. As is now frequently the case in today's instrumental performances, I've encapsulated the musical principles of *dhrupad* into an *alap – gat* sequence.

Alap At the start, a free flowing *alap,* without time signature, introduces the ascending-descending mode and melodic features of Ragatime. As tradition dictates, it's an introspective exploration where the soloist sets the *rasa* (emotion or sentiment) of the piece and assesses the mood of the audience. This initial aural rendition of the *alap* provides me with an opportunity to establish Ragatime's visual mode; events at Akbar's court and the settings in which they take place are revealed, one by one, in a series of nine images (Fig. 7). This method of coupling sound and vision together can be regarded as a viable extension of Hindustani classical tradition where every raga does have a visual counterpart. (In the case of Raga Bilaskhani Todi its equivalent *ragamala* painting depicts a woman attracting a deer in a forest with music from her vina.)

Figure 7. Ragatime's 'visual mode' is derived from nine images depicting events at Akbar's court and the settings in which they take place.

Gat Following the *alap,* a *'gat'* (main composition) is announced by rhythmic drumming which signals the instrumental soloist to begin an extended improvisation of the Raga's *chalan.* The aim here is to ensure that Ragatime remains continually vibrant with a sound pattern matched by an equivalent pattern of visual improvisation. To create this visual *gat,* I've created, through Processing, a series of 93 'collages' showing court life at Fatehpur Sikri, all derived from Ragatime's visual mode [10]. By this means my projected imagery offers viewers the opportunity of snooping on the past as if through the circular lens of a time-warp telescope; in the first part of the *gat* they witness Fatehpur Sikri at Peace-time (Figs. 8 &9), in the second part, Akbar Preparing for War (Fig. 10).

Figure 8. 'Collage' projected as part of Fatehpur Sikri in Peace-time showing Tansen preparing to perform.

Figure 9. 'Collage' projected as part of Fatehpur Sikri in Peace-time showing Akbar receiving ambassadors.

Figure 10. 'Collage' projected as part of Akbar Prepares for War.

Tala A cycle of rhythmic drumming, *tala,* continues throughout the audio-visual performance of the *gat.* This aspect of Ragatime is as important as its melodic form because *tala,* or rhythm, creates the framework which controls the temporal aspects of the performance. Ragatime's *tala,* signified by the name *tintal,* contains a cycle of 16 beats (4 + 4 + 4 + 4):

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16

clap clap wave clap

The beats that begin each section delineate the pattern of durations and, consequently, it is beats 1, 5, 9 and 13 that have particular importance. Audiences, in India, often count out the *tala* cycle with hand motions – soft claps at 1, 5 and 13 and a slight wave of the hand on beat 9. Beat 1 assumes a further special significance as the *sam,* or first beat of the cycle. A single cycle may be long enough to contain a complete musical idea or, sometimes, two or more cycles are combined into a phrase.

Instrumentation of Ragatime

Relative speeds in the Hindustani system are defined as slow, medium and fast. The *gat* of Ragatime adopts, in the first section (*sthrui*), a medium speed which becomes fast in the second section (*antara*). Today, in North India, the primary percussion instrument that produces the rhythmic *tala* is the tabla – two separate drums – but in Tansen's time a single *pakhavaj* would have been used. Also, in Ragatime, I've introduced a continuous 'drone' which can be heard throughout the *alap* and *gat.* Drones are a comparatively new feature of raga performance that would not have featured in Akbar's court. Similarly, of course, my use of a clarinet as the solo instrument in Ragatime must be regarded as anachronistic although, nowadays, the clarinet is increasingly regarded as a *bona fide* instrument for raga performance because it can successfully imitate the vocal line of sung ragas, as demonstrated in my interpretation of Raga Bilaskhani Todi.

Fatehpur Sikri: an Untimely End

Historical records of Akbar's 18 year reign in Fatehpur Sikri fail to adequately explain the sudden departure of his court in 1588. If any explanation is offered, it usually refers to the fact that the City's water supply dried up but, surely, in this eventuality, Akbar could have solved the problem. The engineering skills demonstrated in building the City, in the first place, reveal that the Emperor had access to *mansabs* who could have built the aqueducts required to move water from distant sources; such a feat had been successfully performed, a few years earlier, at Vijayanagara in South India. There may have been tactical reasons for Akbar's sudden departure (he was engaged in a war against Kabul) but recent research has shown that, at the time, a pattern of severe weather was responsible for a period of famine and resulting economic depression [11]. In fact, this situation worsened during the last years of Akbar's life with "pestilence in consequence of the dearth of grain and the necessities of ravenous hunger"[12].

The conclusion must be that Akbar was defeated by a manifestation of the Little Ice Age, caused by reduced sunspot activity, which lasted, on and off, for three centuries from 1450 to 1750. (It was this same climatic phenomenon that caused the Thames, in England, to remain frozen for long periods during 24 separate years.) Akbar's arbitrary method of site selection (Akbar the Great) hadn't helped a situation that was further exacerbated by designing Fatehpur Sikri as a primarily fine weather City. Buildings open to the elements were made comfortable with fabric hangings and soft furnishings but there was no way that the exposed site of the City could withstand the rigours of the Little Ice Age. Unlike Akbar's earlier life story, which had been recorded in detail, the climactic events of his later years remained obscured by time; his biographer, Abul Fazi, glossed over events best forgotten! Even though Akbar lived a further 17 years after the trauma of 1588, he never again matched the cultural achievements in music, art and architecture that his patronage had engendered at Fatehpur Sikri.

Because, within its short life, Fatehpur Sikri had been the setting for a quite remarkable period of inspired patronage and dedicated leadership, it is fitting that I conclude with a eulogy from Tansen to his patron Akbar: "The king Akbar adorned the throne at a time when there were many auspicious planets all around. Even the

wicked people started serving the king by holding his umbrella. His kingdom is like a heaven in which all the noblemen and kings live. The king removes all the suffering of the people. Tanasena – the composer – blesses the king for having such fortune." [13]. Tansen died in 1586, two years before the Emperor's departure from Fatehpur Sikri, and on the orders of Akbar, "all the musicians and singers accompanied his body to the grave, making melodies as at a marriage"[14]. He was buried in Gwalior, and his tomb, under a tamarind tree in the south west corner of the mausoleum of Mohammed Ghaus, has become a place of pilgrimage.

Figure 11. Tansen's tomb in Gwalior

Notes and References

[1] Wade, B. C.: Imaging Sound, An Ethnomusicological Study of Music, Art, and Culture in Mughal India, p 4. Oxford University Press, New Delhi (1999)

[2] The three genres of vocal music are *dhrupad, khyal* and *thumri. Dhrupad* is the oldest of the Hindustani classical genres. *Khyal* has been the most prominent genre of North India classical music for the past two hundred years or so. *Thumri* is the most important 'light classical' genre of North India.

[3] de la Garza, A.: Mughals at War: Babur, Akbar and the Indian Military Revolution 1500 – 1605. p 199. Routledge, London & New York (2016)

[4] Shankar, R.: On Appreciation of Indian Classical Music. The Ravi Shankar Foundation. http://www.ravishankar.org/-music.html

[5] Ibid.

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[9] Wade, B. C.: Music in India, The Classical Tradition, p 159. Ajay Kumar Jain for Manohar Publishers & Distributors, New Delhi (1987, 1999)

[10] Processing is an open source, software sketchbook and a language for coding within the context of the visual arts.

[11] Eos Transactions (American Geophysical Union). Little Ice Age in Mughal India: Solar Minima Linked to Droughts? Eos, Vol.93, No.44, 30 October 2012

[12] Sastri, K. A. N. and Srinivasachari, G. Advanced History of India. Allied Publishers, New Delhi (1982)

[13] Wade, B. C.: Imaging Sound, An Ethnomusicological Study of Music, Art, and Culture in Mughal India, p 110. Oxford University Press, New Delhi (1999)

[14] Wade, B. C.: Imaging Sound, An Ethnomusicological Study of Music, Art, and Culture in Mughal India, p 115. Oxford University Press, New Delhi (1999)

Author Biography

Working previously as an architect and designer, Terry Trickett has now become a Digital Artist exhibiting artworks and videos worldwide and performing 'visual music' at various New Media events. He has embraced the techniques of programming and developed methods for producing moving images as a complement to musical performance. By calling on his skills as a clarinettist, his performances of various compositions for solo clarinet are matched by the simultaneous projection of his visual interpretations of the pieces.

Terry Trickett's interest in digital art has been influenced in part by his work as an architect but also by his involvement, over many years, in an initiative that succeeded in bringing the disciplines of science and art closer together. With the Wellcome Trust, Terry Trickett invented and instigated a wide-ranging project (Sci-Art) in which scientists and artists, working in partnership, were encouraged to pool their ideas and, thereby, maximise each other's creative potential. The project ran with considerable success for 10 years (1997 - 2006).