

Ce qu'on voit et ce qu'on ne voit pas

The title of this charming pamphlet, better known in English as *What Is Seen And What Is Not Seen* (July 1850, by Claude-Frédéric Bastiat) poses a question so much more basic than the purportedly simple economic question it asks about a broken window, i.e; why do performing artists so readily fall into the trap of only seeing and accepting the simplest understanding when viewing a printed text, as opposed to at least peeking behind the curtain?

1. Starglow

My prejudices against the usefulness, validity and meaning of time signatures (TSs) are reasonably well known. Sadly, if one speaks about the meaning, function and usefulness (or lack thereof) of TSs (and therefore of barlines), the deep-seated, virtually religious convictions that one so frequently and quickly encounters, make any such discussion an exercise of pissing into the wind. Therefore, in order to better approach some understanding of the notional and notational problems we face “laying out” any written text, I shall stray to a different, closely related field, i.e. a very late poem by Louis Zukofsky (full disclosure, my father) which context (at least for musicians) may not be so fraught with shibboleths.

I grew up with the notion that music could be considered, or indeed was, the highest form of speech. This did not mean the usual flatulence of music as a universal language conveying great emotions etc. Rather, it meant that the components of speech – the stresses, the syntax, the emphasis, what Bunting referred to as “thump”ⁱ, i.e. the speech patterns, the sibilants, glottals, et al – all appeared in music in some highly refined form; and in the final analysis, the desire and need to understand, endow, appreciate and convey meaning when reading (or performing) a text (whether poetry or prose, read out loud or silently) was/is directly comparable to the problem of determining musical structure and phrasing, and to the activities of performing music.

In pursuit of this thought, let us make the assumption that the choices a poet makes about how a poem is “laid out” may in some sense be comparable to those made by a composer in determining how to lay out a musical metric structure. To explain this further, allow me to dissect a somewhat arbitrarily chosen poem from LZ’s last series of poems “80 Flowers”.ⁱⁱ

The original reads:

Starglow

Starglow dwarf china rose shrubthorn
lantern fashion-fare airing car-tire crushed
young's churning old rambler's flown
to sky cane cut back
a crown transplanted patient of
drought sun's gold firerimmed branched
greeting thyme's autumn sprig head
happier winter sculpt white rose

Notice that the poem takes up eight lines, with five words per line. This is not that different from a piece of music with eight phrases of five

bars each, or perhaps eight bars of $\frac{5}{4}$.

QUESTION: does emphasizing the “fiveness” of each line help us achieve some clarity and understanding of the meaning?

The following presents the poem “laid out” on the page in a grid with each word receiving equal spatial weight.

Ex. 1

Starglow

<i>Starglow</i>	dwarf	china	rose	shrubthorn
lantern	fashion-fare	airing	car-tire	crushed
young's	churning	old	rambler's	flown
to	sky	cane	cut	back
a	crown	transplanted	patient	of
drought	sun's	gold	firerimmed	branched
greeting	thyme's	autumn	sprig	head
happier	winter	sculpt	white	rose

This presentation does little to aid understanding, or help convey meaning. Furthermore, the result of reading it in a fairly equal-time-per-word style (and yes, I have heard it done in that manner – I hasten to add, not by my father) is extraordinarily clunky and boring.ⁱⁱⁱ

Perhaps we should not think five words per line. Perhaps we should consider the syllable count, which differs from line to line. Such a version might be presented as follows:

Ex. 2 (by syllable)

Starglow

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
<i>Star</i>	<i>glow</i>	dwarf	chi	na	rose	shrub	thorn			
lan	tern	fa	shion	fare	air	ing	car	ti	re	crushed
young's	churn	ing	old	ram	bler's	flown				
to	sky	cane	cut	back						
a	crown	trans	plant	ed	pa	tient	of			
drought	sun's	gold	fi	re	rim	med	branch	ed		
greet	ing	thyme's	au	tumn	sprig	head				
hap	pi	er	win	ter	sculpt	white	rose			

While this version does have the possible advantage of showing that each line has a different syllable count, and may therefore be more revealing of internal structure than the previous example, but in terms of meaning, the syllabic version (Ex.2) is even less helpful than (Ex. 1), and a reading giving each syllable equal weight, duration or meaning is so stilted that it can hardly be described as English.

What, then, to do with this recalcitrant lump?

Perhaps it might be best read or understood as:

Ex. 3 (annotated)

Starglow

Poem	Description
<i>Starglow</i>	(the name of the flower in question)
dwarf china rose shrubthorn lantern	(because that is what it is – this is a description of the flower)
fashion-fare	(because in the scene across the road from where my father lived this flower provided a touch of adornment)
airing car-tire crushed	(part of the scene – that is what was in the neighbor's yard, where an old tire that had been crushed was left exposed to the air)
young's churning old Rambler's flown to sky	(the neighbor's car (a Rambler – the brand name of a type of American car) was dead) (also note – with the exception of respectively an initial B and a final R, bramble and Rambler are identical, and yes there were brambles at the scene)
cane cut back	(an attempt had been made to scythe the weeds)
a crown transplanted	(someone, or nature itself, had arranged for the flower to grow on top of this particular site)
patient of drought	(the flower survived being not being watered)
sun's gold firerimmed branched greeting	(sunlight played on the scene)
thyme's autumn sprig head	(this one is self-evident)
happier winter	(seeing this made the winter more bearable because of this sculpt w.r.)
sculpt white rose	(another description balancing the opening)

This last version does have the advantage of telling one where to make some syntactical breaks, and therefore has more “air” in it, and “breathes” better. That makes the meaning somewhat clearer, even

without the explanations I have appended.^{iv}

Very well, you may say, if (Ex.3) is what the man wanted, or might have been prepared to accept as an interpretation, or might have preferred as a reading, why did he not just write it utilizing a different number of words per line? LZ is obviously prepared to accept a different number of syllables per line, something classical prosody supposedly disallows, so why the self-imposed formal restriction (for that is what it is) of five words per each and every line.^v

Two answers immediately come to mind. The first involves plasticity; the second historical acknowledgment and analogy.

In regard to plasticity, we quickly discover that (Ex.3) is not the panacea we might have hoped for. It is simply too fixed. It allows few, perhaps no, possibilities. Put another way, (Ex.3) eliminates far too many of the interconnections and ambiguities in the original poem.

As an example, consider the word “crushed”, which occurs at the end of the original second line.

Most probably “crushed” refers to the tire, but it might also refer to the car (the “rambler” of the next line). (Ex. 3) minimizes that ambiguity. (Ex. 3) forces us to read the poem in a certain way, and does not provide the reader-performer flexibility to make their own decision(s) regarding cross-references, or trajectory of phrase. One of the great blessings derived from using a fixed form such as the original version is: “everyone” recognizes it to be a convention; a neutral mechanism. Ergo, such a fixed form allows for, or even provides, maximum (syntactical) freedom and flexibility; enjambment^{vi} is expected, probably even *de rigeur*.^{vii} Plasticity is maximized.

A second answer to the question as to WHY the poem was not written in some form of (Ex. 3) reflects the importance of historical acknowledgment.

My father was obsessed with previous formal poetic structure (and with word counts per line). In English poetry, one of the most famous of these poetic structures was the pentameter, usually the iambic pentameter.^{viii}

While my father had little interest in what passes for a traditional pentameter, his method of laying-out poems in lines of five words each was his homage to that classical meter, and the five-words-per-line form simultaneously allowed him to achieve three objectives:

- (a) to acknowledge, revivify and transmute the old form;
- (b) to irrevocably associate himself with the tradition of the great English Lyricists;
- (c) to create – out of the old – an astonishingly flexible NEW form, which looked both to the past and to the future, thereby perhaps putting him in a category with a Wyatt, or perhaps a Malherbe.^{ix}

And now, you may well ask - what does any of this have to do with the writing or reading, understanding or performance of music?

To my mind, EVERYTHING.

Plasticity, historical context and perspective are perhaps the essence of composers' fundamental concerns.

As regards plasticity, the comparable question (for music) is:

Do you wish to notate in a fashion that at least appears to be highly specific, or rather, is it preferable to provide a neutral background, which you hope the performer will recognize as such, and will feel free to ignore, or at least look beyond?

In regards historical context and perspective:

To what extent are music notational choices forced upon you, depending upon when you are writing; for whom you are writing; as well as what are you referencing or looking back upon?

Remember that:

ALL NOTATION IS A COMPROMISE.

No choice of meter solves every contingency.

While most meter changes are an indication of certain aspects of the composer's thought process, sticking with a single meter does not necessarily signify abjuration on the part of the composer regarding alternative metric stress. Nor is the use of constantly changing meters the most efficacious overall answer, given that clarity in one aspect may very well muddy the waters elsewhere. Finally, whichever style is chosen, be it one meter, or many, the choice is almost definitely not dispositive, as the decision to change, or not to change TSs, may have been quite arbitrary, or perhaps not even well considered. In short, no matter the choice, it is still incumbent upon us to look beneath the surface of the notation.

There is, however, a new wrinkle to the ancient "UNANSWERED" question. Before -- when a composer wrote in only one uniform meter throughout a movement, one could assume maximal variety, just as in the LZ poem discussed above. Now -- when a composer (purportedly) chooses a specific set of meter changes, what are we to make of those changes? Are our choices of stress, accent and shape etc., completely restricted because of the changing meters, or are they not?

As examples:

Babbitt told me many times (in conversation) that the decision to vary

or not vary the TS depended on the preference of the performer(s) he was writing for, and it made no difference to him. Therefore, should we not create multiple metrical visions/versions of a given Babbitt score to better understand his intent?

Feldman wrote his early non-graphic works without TSs, using a partially spatial, partially insinuating, notation. Then he suddenly began using a very precise, almost conventional notation, with constantly changing TSs. Are we to believe that the early works have no rhythmic “spine”, whereas the later works are back to the “I-never-saw-a-downbeat-I-didn’t-thwack” school? Are we truly to believe that his intent and intention changed so dramatically?

Cage’s early notation used TSs which hardly ever changed, employing a system of cross-beaming to provide enormous flexibility in the rhythmic impetus; he then moved to a type of proportional notation, and ultimately to a “time bracket” notation. Did his underlying ethos change so substantially, and is the notational change a reflection of that change; or is the change in notation just a different prism placed on top of the same obsessions?

The notational Stravinsky of the "Rite" is not that of the "Symphony in C". Does the latter have NO rhythmic discontinuities?

The notational Copland of the "Sextet" is not that of the "Piano Quartet": is this, speaking only rhythmically for now, a different Aaron walking towards us?

Let me not continue to the point of nausea. Rather I mention an alternative title for this essay: *Alia iacta est*, The Die Is Cast. I chose this statement by Julius Caesar, made just prior to his crossing the Rubicon, not only as a cheap pun pointing to the chance-like elements involved in any choice of TS, nor as an even cheaper pun regarding hazardous possibilities that may result, but also because, as with Caesar's crossing, there is no turning back once the TS is fixed.

Enormous unintended consequences flow from any choice, and no composer is sufficiently omniscient to envisage them all.

The bald truth is, even in this day and age, our TS notation system is not flexible enough to provide clear vision onto all the multiphase rhythmic possibilities a composer may have envisaged. No solution is idiot-proof.

THEREFORE:

Learn how to READ what the music is trying to say, not what the notation imposes; or as Bill Williams said to my father:

"The thing is we need to know is *how* to read (as Ez would say) in order to GET what the newer way of writing calls for".^x

My only dispute with that statement being that it applies equally well to the older way(s) -- indeed all ways -- of notating any text.

And ALWAYS "give blood to ghosts".^{xi}

Footnotes

ⁱ Basil Bunting, *On Poetry*, ed. Peter Makin, Johns Hopkins Press, 2003

ⁱⁱ See Louis Zukofsky's *Anew: Complete Short Poetry*, New Directions edition.

ⁱⁱⁱ Note that "80 Flowers" is hardly unique in having people not knowing How To Read. Two of the funnier quotes on the subject are:

(a) "being, apparently, in utter ignorance of the nature of Italian syllabic verse, which is composed of various syllabic groups, and not merely strung along with a swat on syllables two, four, six, eight, ten of each line" (Pound, *ABC of Reading*, pp. 202-203 in re Binyon's translation of the *Inferno*).

(b) in re Arthur Golding's version of the *Metamorphoses*: "Though it is the most beautiful book in the language, I am not here citing it for decorative purposes but for the narrative quality. It should be read as natural spoken language. The metre is, I admit, susceptible to bad reading. A bad reader of fourteeners [the Golding consists of lines of 14-syllables each] is almost certain to tub-thump. The reader will be well advised to read according to sense and syntax, keep from thumping, observe the syntactical pauses, and not stop for the line ends save where sense requires or a comma indicates. That is the

way to get the most out of it, and come nearest to a sense of the time-element in the metrical plan.” (Pound, *ABC*, p.127).

^{iv} N.B. to my poetical friends – I do not claim that this reading (or arrangement on the page) is either authoritative or authorial in any way. Though it happens to be fairly close to the original stimulus, the verisimilitude of my rumgumptions is not the point. What IS important to note here is that the reading of (Ex.3) is far closer to the intent than are either equi-spaced versions above, and (Ex.3) is clearly one of a number of acceptable arrangements, given my father’s original notation.

^v And note that each of the 80 poems of “80 Flowers” has that restriction, as do swaths of the late movements of “A” (New Directions edition).

^{vi} From the French *enjamber* = to stride or to stride over (from *jambe* = leg); ca. 1382, it began to be used to convey the idea of passing over an obstacle. Its specialized use (by Boileau) for verse dates from 1660-68. The specialized definition: “the practice of running a phrase or sentence over the end of one line and onto the next without a punctuated pause” from *Poetry for Dummies* (John Timpane with Maureen Watts, Hungry Minds, 2001). As an aside, for those wishing a remarkably clear, detailed, and enlightening overview of poetic technique(s), one could do far, far worse than *Poetry for Dummies*. Of course, the fact that a poem of my father’s is included as an example therein, has in no way influenced my opinion of the book.

vii I should also remark that, in what passes today for the norm in performance, we never ever seem to *enjamber* in music, (i.e. pass over the bar-line). If anything, we usually jam at each and every bar-line.

viii An iambic pentameter is a single line of five iambs (a two-syllable word with a supposed pattern of weak strong, although the line is almost invariably NEVER READ with five heavy accents).

ix Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542) credited as the "inventor" of the sonnet.

François Malherbe (1555-1628) who "codified French versification".

x From William Carlos Williams to Louis Zukofsky, Feb. 23, 1949, in *The Correspondence of William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky*, ed. Barry Ahearn, Wesleyan University Press, 2003. For those wishing proof that *plus ça change, plus c'est la même Scheisse* see the letters of Boileau and Racine (*Lettres d'une amitié : correspondance 1687-1698*, ed. Pierre E Leroy, Bartillat, 2001).

xi Which statement, especially coming as it does from a "high-modernist", is astonishingly "romantic" – c.f. Pound in *ABC* (pp. 13-14):

"A classic is a classic not because it conforms to certain structural rules, or to definitions (of which its author had quite probably never heard). It is classic because of

certain eternal and irrepressible freshness.

“An Italian state examiner, jolted by my edition of Cavalcanti, expressed admiration at the almost ultra-modernity of Guido’s language.

“Ignorant men of genius are constantly rediscovering ‘laws’ of art which the academics had mislaid or hidden.”