

Editor's Introduction: The Condition of Music

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It reads like a secular fall-myth: the first men communicated through vocal exclamations, which only eventually were institutionalised into words meaning by convention within a system of signs. The purpose of these pre-verbal vocalic utterances was to exteriorise our passions: because of their communal nature, searching out an auditor, because, also, of the vocal-auditory means of transmission, and because, finally, language had not yet been extracted from the sensuous world but was rather the means through which we inhabited this world, the first languages 'were sung and impassioned before they were single and methodical'.¹ As language became methodical rather than melodic, imitating and mediating rather than giving immediate voice to sensuous life, melody became the preserve of music alone: first as song opposed to speech, but then exiting the voice entirely to become instrumental music. This shift from vocal to instrument music coincides with a second shift: from the primacy of melody to diatonic system. Music too, in this sense, becomes a language that means by convention.

Rousseau's story (which I recount only in its broadest brushstrokes) is one of progress, but one, also, of loss. Where our ancestors, articulating themselves in melody and rhythm, spoke in poetry, we, in the epoch of disenchanting, disembodied rationality, but also of a politics whose eloquence, equally

¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essai sur l'origine des langues, où il est parlé de la Mélodie, et de l'Imitation musicale* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1974), p. 96.

disenchanted, is simply a repertoire of topics designed to ornament the phrase ‘*give us some money*’ (p. 173), consider poetry as a rarefied kind of language. Indeed, we might extrapolate—when metre and rhyme themselves becomes markers of a ‘poetic’ form of language, the sensuous dimension of poetry too is subsumed into the same structure of the sign-that-means-by-convention, just as happened when melodic interval came to be formalised in diatonic harmony.

To extrapolate thus is, perhaps, to push the point excessively; nevertheless, its polemic pervades much of the thinking that would hope to find in poetry something like a ‘condition of music’. In qualifying his now celebrated aphorism, Pater tells us that music is the only kind of art in which there is no distinction between form and content; insofar as all art is characterised by ‘the constant effort ... to obliterate [this distinction]’, each medium ‘aspires constantly towards the condition of music’.² Within Rousseau’s speculative history, this necessity of craft attains metaphysical import. And something similar subtends Pater’s own argument, if never wholly articulated as such. He continues:

Art, then, is thus always striving to be independent of the mere intelligence, to become a matter of pure perception, to get rid of its responsibilities to its subject or material; the idea examples of poetry and painting being those in which the constituent elements of the composition are so welded together, that the material or subject no longer strikes the intellect only; nor the form, the eye or the ear only; but form and matter, in their union or identity, present one single effect to the ‘imaginative reason,’ that complex faculty for which every thought and feeling is twin-born with its sensible analogue or symbol (138).

The dualism of analogue and symbol is already far fallen from Rousseau’s original sung speech, but for both we see that the unity of form and matter is not only a synthesis of different art media, but also of mind and body—and indeed, of the receptive organs themselves, which are no longer carved up as ‘the eye or the ear only’. When Pater speaks of an ‘*Anders-streben*’ between the arts, he also gestures towards a synaesthetics of the human body.

But such synaesthetics is by no means a merging of the art forms; rather, they converge only insofar as they insist on the specificity of their medium. To remain,

² Walter Pater, ‘The School of Giorgione’, in *The Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1922), p. 135.

for a moment, contemporary to Pater: if Wagner was aspiring to a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, this coincided with an exploration of chromaticism and the compositional structure of the *Leitmotiv*; if Whistler's 'Nocturnes' took their inspiration from Chopin, they were nevertheless concerned with using colour to overwhelm linear representation. The musical compound phrase 'tone colour' is in Whistler transposed into painting, its metaphor displaced from the second to the first of its terms. Or, to situate this in the present day, I may refer you to the conversation between poets David Herd and Simon Smith, and improvisational musicians Sam Bailey and Jake Hues, about their collaborative piece *Rote/Thru* (both conversation and collaboration are available on the site), who discuss some of the guiding faultlines and difficulties that arise in the collaboration between the two art forms, both by exploring the ontological peculiarities of the two media, and the questions that collaboration poses for practitioners. And, as all the contributions to the current volume observe, the 'music of poetry' will be necessarily be a linguistic 'music'—and the musicality of language cannot be conflated with the musicality of linguistic sound.

We should also note that Pater's 'condition of music', pointing to a rather universal desire to unite form and content, tells us very little about the art itself, not least because it leaves undefined what such form or content might look like, or how they may be united. This is made strikingly clear by Peter Dayan in his 'Different Music, Same Condition' (pp. 9-26): two accounts of the musical 'condition' of poetry, by Douglas Hofstadter and Jean-François Lyotard respectively, agree wholeheartedly on what this condition is, and draw from it wholly opposed and mutually incompatible conceptions of what poetry and music are and ought to be. We should also notice that music, as well as constituting a 'condition' for poetry, is also a rival art medium. As Joseph Acquisto notes in his contribution, 'On Artistic Form and the Spiritual' (68-87), some of the most significant theorists and practitioners of modernist art (Acquisto discusses Mallarmé, Schönberg and Kandinsky) grasped the 'spiritual' vocation of art—its shared 'condition'—through an exploration of the specificity of medium, and through developing techniques which were themselves radically medium-specific. The shared vocation was predicated on the minutiae of craft.

Indeed, the case of Mallarmé is particularly illuminating, given his own admiration of Wagner, his friendship with Debussy, and the number of his works set to music. His wish to return poetry to a common source in music might be taken as an echo of Rousseau's—were it not that what he aspires to in music is precisely what Rousseau excoriates: 'instrumentation' rather than the melodic voice, and moreover, an instrumentation that lies not simply in the sensuous dimension of language, but in the 'intellectual word':

[N]ous en sommes là, précisément, à rechercher, devant une brisure des grands rythmes littéraires ... et leur éparpillement en frissons articulés proches de l'instrumentation, un art d'achever la transposition, au Livre, de la symphonie ou uniment de reprendre notre bien : car, ce n'est pas de sonorités élémentaires par les cuivres, les cordes, les bois, indéniablement mais de l'intellectuelle parole à son apogée que doit avec plénitude et évidence, résulter, en tant que l'ensemble des rapports existant dans tout, la Musique.³

'Rhythm', 'instrumentation', and 'symphony' are constructed in poetry not by 'simple sounds' but the 'intellectual word brought to its apogee'; the resultant 'Music' is not simply an art form, not structured sound, but has become a vocation, an ontological insight that only poetry, through its workings of language, can fulfil: 'the whole of relations existing in everything'. T. S. Eliot too, in his 'The Music of Poetry', will see 'music' as first and foremost not sonority, not figure of spontaneity or the overcoming of semantic meaning, but rather as relation:

[T]he music of a word is, so to speak, at a point of intersection: it arises from its relation first to the words immediately preceding and following it, and indefinitely to the rest of its contexts; and from another relation, that of its immediate meaning in that context to all the other meanings which it has had in other contexts, to its greater or less wealth of association.⁴

³ Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Crise de vers', in *Œuvres complètes* (eds. Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 367. [We are at the stage of seeking out, faced with a fragment of great literary rhythms ... and their scattering in shivers that are articulated into an instrumentation, for a means to achieve the transposition, into the Book, of the symphony or rather to take back what is ours: for it is not elementary sonorities by brass, woodwind, strings, but undeniably the intellectual word at its apogee in which Music, as the ensemble of relations that exist in everything, must fully and openly result.]

⁴ T. S. Eliot, 'The Music of Poetry', *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber, 1957), pp. 32-3.

For Rousseau, the unity of music and language in melodic speech was anterior to both the functioning of language as a network of signs and the development of music into diatonic harmony: it is radically non-relational. For Mallarmé and Eliot, music has come to stand for relation itself. This also means that the music of a word is not mere 'sonority'. But what of such sounds? One possibility is to disregard them entirely as being so much surface jingling. When Celan praised Mandelstam, it was for his refusal to go in for 'impressionistic affect-poetry woven together out of sound-colours': *keine Wortmusik*.⁵ Here, 'music' takes on a derogatory sense: it signifies easy, superficial sentimentalism, instant gratification, just as does for Adorno 'the "musical language" of Rilke or Swinburne, which imitates musical effects and which is alien to the origins of music'.⁶ 'Musical language', on such an account, mere 'effect', is index of aesthetic decadence, grounded on a false model of music and language alike. By contrast, Kafka's parables, which point towards a meaning but then break off leaving any determinate meaning unfulfilled—here literature has internalised the mode of cognition that, so argues Adorno, is characteristic of music itself. Whatever 'music' poetry has will inhere within its language, rather than simply be a kind of 'surface effect'. Only by becoming deeply *unlike* music will the language of poetry touch on the origins of music.

Yet just as syntax works Mallarmé's *Poésies*, so is rhyme crucial to their peculiar condensation. In 'Distraction Fits' (pp. 27-67), Anne Stillman will cite Mallarmé's 'Petit air II', whose first two stanzas' suspension of the grammatical subject is punctuated by the rich rhymes, which attain further density from Mallarmé's use of the octosyllabic line:

Indomptablement a dû
Comme mon espoir s'y lance
Éclater là-haut perdu
Avec furie et silence,

⁵ Paul Celan, 'Die Dichtung Ossip Mandelstamms', *Tübigen Celan-Ausgabe* vol. 5, p. 215.

⁶ T. W. Adorno, 'Music, Language, and Composition', *Essays on Music* trans. Susan Gillespie, pp. 113-126, p. 115.

Voix étrangère au bosquet
Ou par nul écho suivie,
L'oiseau qu'on n'ouït jamais
Une autre fois en la vie.⁷

The rhyme here, quite simply, cannot be dismissed as mere 'sound-colour', or taken to as mere play of 'affect'; rather, it is a vehicle for the cognitive workings of the poem—and in the *rime riche* of *s'y lance* and *silence*, advertises itself as such. Rhyme, after all, is no less ineliminable a feature of our language than is syntax—no matter how deaf to it we might become.

Stillman sees 'distraction' as central to the cognitive processes of poems, in first-hand accounts of composition, in the poems' own linguistic operations, and in our experience of them. At first 'music' is approached as a figure within poems: a figure of danger, as 'sense might drown in a whirlpool of sonority' (p. 32), of the transience of aesthetic experience, and the poem's hold over us, which at once diverts us and leads us to distraction. As for Mallarmé and Eliot, music for Stillman becomes the analogy of relation, of coherence. Poems hold together not as arguments do, but rather motivically, as an intricate weave of 'many small details, many distracting movements' (p. 63). This might offer a powerful corrective to Adorno's highhanded dismissal of Swinburne and Rilke. Yes, poetry is musical when its cognition resists any precipitate filling out of concepts; but, *pace* Adorno, such resistance is generated by the poems' prosodic texture, by the way they engage the ear, provoke and then drift away from our attentiveness, rather than simply a 'structure' lying behind its sensuous effects.

If, then, linguistic music must also take into account the music of linguistic sound, then might musicological analysis allow insights into how we normally conceive of versification? This journal's overriding opinion on the matter is made clear on the website's homepage, and its reproduction of an image from Joshua Steele's *Prosodia Rationalis*: an attempt to use the musical notation available in the

⁷ Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Poésies', *Œuvres complètes*, p. 66. 'Little Tune II': 'Indomitably must / like my far-flung hopes / have gone up with a bang, lost / in fury and silence, / voice stranger to the wood / or followed by no echo, / the bird you get to hear / only once. / The haggard musician, / expiring in doubt / that my breast and not his / might have issued the louder sob / blown apart will all of him / still hit the road!' Peter Manson's translation, *The Poems in Verse*, p. 155.

late eighteenth century to scan the prosody of English poetry. Yet much has happened in poetry and music since 1781: might recent work in musicology offer a more capacious understanding of the 'music' of words? This is the basis of Richard Cureton's contribution, 'Meter and Metrical Reading in Temporal Poetics' (pp. 112-237). Understood temporally, metre is a '*beating*, a structure of felt pulsations' (p. 112), and is thus grasped in terms of cyclical, rather than linear time. But this also means that metre is understood as one of four rhythmic components of versification (along with grouping, prolongation, and theme); Cureton thus argues that we should narrow our conception of metre in order to attain greater conceptual clarity about what metre is and does. For instance, what a foot substitution metrist might consider a metrical syncopation, Cureton will argue is in fact the counterpoint between two different phrasings, or rhythmical organisations (for instance metre and grouping). His central question is how metre can affect our rhythmical reading of verse, and in the second half of the essay proposes a series of preference rules which will systematise the ways in which we read metrically.

Cureton's account of metre thus points towards another crucial 'condition' of poetry's music—that of how we as readers perform as we read. This question is taken up most explicitly in the case studies Reuven Tsur (with Chen Gafni) puts forward in his 'Poetry Reading—Rhythmical Performance' (pp. 88-111). Like Cureton, Tsur argues against seeing rhythmical deviations from a metre as simply 'tension'; he goes on to suggest that we leave aside for a moment abstract rules and rather 'dwell on what we hear' (p. 89). In particular he wishes to ask whether, in performance, a reader of poetry might be able to hold in abeyance conflicting intonation contours, rather than having to plump for one or other interpretation. New digital technology allows us to 'doctor' the choices made in recorded readings; the case studies Tsur uses in the current essay are experiments with this technology in order to work out whether readings can be imagined in which conflicting prosodic patterns intersect in a single performance.

There are, of course, many more conditions, and musics, than can be treated in the current volume: popular forms, from folk-song to dub poetry and hip-hop, for instance, or technological changes in both music-making and recording equipment over recent centuries. In *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, Rousseau directed his ire at

Rameau, who was himself taking advantage of the invention of the modern keyboard and the acoustic and technical possibilities that offered, whilst Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* would not have been possible without the acoustics of concert halls (and accessibility of anvils for orchestral use) in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Whilst the phrase 'the condition of music' arises from a particular moment in the histories of music, poetry and criticism, and this volume reflects such a bias to some degree, it is by no means the only conception of music that has influenced poets and critics—one might think, for instance, of Pythagorean models in the seventeenth century, or the model, often associated with romanticism, of music as spontaneous subjective expression. Such is the breadth of the topic, that all the current volume can do is address some of these issues: not aspire to treat them exhaustively or definitively, but rather offer a series of paths for further thinking.

Works cited

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