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It's Got a Good Beat and You Can Write to It

BY DIANN BLAKELY

John Ashbery has stated in interviews that he often writes in coffee shops, cafés, and restaurants—places noisy with simultaneous and overlapping conversations that seem transcribed, or transformed, into his poems, among the most auditorially eclectic since mid-century. When at home, he prefers to work against a background of classical orchestral works, often fastidiously selected by composer to provide “background for what I’m thinking about while I’m writing a particular poem.” One of the prose poems in *Three Poems*, he elaborates, was gotten to “listening to Brahms’ first sextet and it seemed to be the only piece of music that would work for this particular poem . . . [although] it’s hard to say anything very meaningful as to why.”

Is it? Genuine poems “work” because they summon the fullest available response—conscious *and* unconscious, left *and* right brain, center of linguistic perception *and* center of musical perception—from readers. But why are the responses complementary rather than mutually canceling? And, if it follows that genuine poems are created by means of the fullest verbal resources—sense *and* sonics, syntax *and* rhythm—available to writers, how are those resources affected by the means of composition?

“The relationship between life and art is so obvious that nothing need

be said and so complicated that nothing can be said.” Substitute “music” for “life” and “poetry” for “art”; substitute, for Ashbery, W. H. Auden. Who, of course, admired and knew music to the extent that he began his career by writing lullabies and ended it with writing—among many other forms—libretti. “I was brought up on Bach,” he said. “Later, I developed a love for Wagner and Schumann. You go through composers as people you will love in the same way you do poets. But one can’t be influenced as a poet by a composer because they are two different arts.” Nor could Auden write while music was playing.

For Anne Sexton, a house with two small children demanded a perverse, mirror-image equivalent of Proust’s cork-lined room: “I would turn on a symphony to make a constant noise to drown them out so I could work.” Yet Sylvia Plath listened to music after the day was done and her children were in bed: “Nights are no good. I’m so flat by then that all I can cope with is music & brandy & water.” The author responded with particular intensity to Beethoven’s late quartets, as did the middle-aged T.S. Eliot.

Young Mr. Eliot the bank clerk was both allured and repelled by the Unreal City’s polyphony, *The Waste Land*’s ground-note and *modus operandi*. Street-raucous, heartbreakingly lyrical, quasi-liturgical, and densely allusive by turns, the era-defining poem appeared in 1922, the same year as a laudatory essay regarding not Beethoven but the vaudeville singer Marie Lloyd. Eliot’s enthusiasm for a performer who was evidently one of Madonna’s forebears stands in marked contrast to his criticism of Matthew Arnold, who lacked

What I call “the auditory imagination” . . . the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end. It works through meanings, certainly, or not without meanings in the ordinary sense, and fuses the old and obliterated and the trite, the current, and the new and surprising, the most ancient and the most civilised mentality.

Is this what Hart Crane was after, plunging his head into the gramophone’s vast funnel to absorb the Dionysiac strains of Ravel’s *Bolero* while writing *The Bridge*, which he intended as an affirmative response to the nay-saying *Waste Land*? The notion of Eliot seeking inspiration in a similar manner—“She smoothes her hair with automatic hand,” he writes of *The Waste Land*’s typist after her loveless tryst with the young

man carbuncular, “And puts a record on the gramophone”—is as incongruous as imagining the poet attached to a Discman.

And yet, almost a dozen years after the police had done their thing in different voices, the post-*Waste Land*, post-Vivienne, and post-conversion Eliot found his way out of a poetic drought through music. Eliot told Stephen Spender in 1931 that he heard in Beethoven’s *A* minor quartet, according to a biographer’s paraphrase, a “kind of nonhuman gaiety which had emerged from the other side of extraordinary suffering.” In Eliot’s own medium, the obvious model was Mallarmé, from whom he sought to learn how

to write poetry which should be essentially poetry, with nothing poetic about it, poetry standing naked in its bare bones, or poetry so transparent that we should not see the poetry, but that which we are meant to see through the poetry, poetry so transparent that in reading it we are intent on what the poem *points at*, and not on the poetry, this seems to me the thing to try for. To get *beyond poetry*, as Beethoven, in his later works, strove to get *beyond music*.

Thus the *Four Quartets*’ passages of stark and discursive plainsong, which some readers see—or hear—as an advance over *The Waste Land*, others as a falling off. What seems inarguable, however, is that Eliot found through music and even more primal sonic rumblings either a means of “associating” his merciless intellect and tormented spirit or one of attuning himself to his sensibility’s starkest dissociations. Or perhaps both.

Medical professionals can prove empirically what poets know instinctively: the art is a hybrid of speech and song, and it thus works on both brain hemispheres. That speech and song are processed by different parts of the brain has long been known from studies of stroke patients or those undergoing cranial surgery: “many elderly patients who have suffered cerebral hemorrhages on the left hemisphere such that they cannot speak can still sing,” one source offers; additionally, “electrical stimulation on the right hemisphere in regions adjacent to the posterior temporal lobe, particularly the anterior temporal lobe, often produces hallucinations of singing and music.”

And again Eliot: “Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood.” And again Anne Sexton: “I often write in silence, too. I can’t just have the radio on. Any talking distracts me. “

Thirty-Two Short Films About Glenn Gould, a 1994 work about the eccentric Canadian pianist, contains a pair of scenes that bear directly on music, speech, and the creative process. Gould ceased to give concerts relatively early in his career, believing that technology offered a better, and less hierarchical, means of experiencing music for the listener. He also declared that he wished to have more time for composing, of which he proceeded to do very little. Instead, he turned his attention to making radio documentaries, not of music but of overlapping human voices. Broadcasting the first of these, "The Idea of North," the film actor playing Gould is shown with his eyes closed, hands moving rapturously as if to bring up the sound level of one woman's speaking voice, slowing a man's to *lento*, and so on. In another segment, called "Truckstop," we hear, with almost painful clarity, the conversations of various diners in the same way that a listener hears the various instruments playing in chamber music—violin, viola, cello, bass—or in symphonies. The obvious inference drawn from these outtakes is that Gould's auditory abilities were paranormal; the more subtle one indicates that Gould's brain worked in daily life the way that poets' do: he was able to hear speech as music and music as speech simultaneously.

At this point, a conservative literary critic might argue that most canonical poets have been drawn to music as high art, not as part of popular culture: in other words, if Shakespeare were alive today, he'd have season tickets to the symphony and opera and dismiss the Velvet Underground and Hole as entertaining trash for teenagers. Our Keeper of Tradition's Flame might furthermore assert that such musical enthusiasms must be outgrown, as Prince Hal did Falstaff; that poets' ears must be trained and treated with refined care, like Glenn Gould's million-dollar hands. Raymond Chandler, nobody's idea of stick-in-the-mud, offers one possible response.

Shakespeare would have done well in any generation because . . . he would have taken the current formulae and forced them into something lesser men thought them incapable of. Alive today he would have undoubtedly written and directed motion pictures. . . . Instead of saying "This medium is not good," he would have used it and made it good. If some people called some of his work cheap (which some of it is), he wouldn't have cared a rap, because he would know that without some vulgarity there is no complete man.

But although poets and prose writers alike revere Chandler as a master

of syntax, doesn't he stumble a bit here? For film is primarily a nonverbal medium, as is made obvious by perusing even the most well-wrought screenplay. If this seems like a poet's snobbery, allow me to introduce two statements from Chandler's fellow novelist, Barry Hannah. He won't look beyond page one of a novel, no matter how lauded or how interesting the story promises to be, unless "it's got . . . rhythm and ear, as well as vision. If I read that first page, and if it doesn't have . . . the rhythm, the ear, I won't buy it." Hannah, whose novels and short stories are often praised for their poetic attention to language, sometimes listens through headphones to Hendrix or Miles Davis or Mozart or Dylan when he's stuck: "they rumble up something."

Whether music provides a direct impetus to the composition process, or, like reading, functions simply as part of the poet's daily life, how is the creative process affected by listening to genres containing both melody and lyrics, like rock-and-roll or blues? Indeed, an impromptu survey of several poet friends indicates that popular music plays a much larger part in their lives than classical varieties. One pal even notes that new CDs from Bob Dylan, Lou Reed, Lucinda Williams, and younger talents like P. J. Harvey and Liz Phair occasion more genuine enthusiasm in his literary circle than the latest collection by Ashbery or Hecht or Glück or Rich, not to mention the most recent crop of Yale and Laughlin winners. This isn't the place to speculate on the reasons behind such cultural shifts; instead, I'll focus on what each of the surveyees went on to discuss, at least implicitly: the predominance of *rhythm* in pop music. Turning on the radio or the stereo before beginning to write helps "loosen up the mind and body," one woman said, helps shake off the overdetermined and mechanistic aspects of daily life in the postmodern era. Maybe a little Courtney Love is good for the writer's soul, helping us to hear not the telephone and TV noise that are a ubiquitous presence in so many households, but to hear, instead, the gods. What gods? The divine within ourselves, Emerson would say, in opposition to Freud and Jung, who I suspect would argue for a force more chthonic, primitive, and Dionysian than Apollonian.

Glancing back to the first Clinton inaugural, which featured a Fleetwood Mac singalong, David Rivard, in his provocative essay "Rock'n'Roll Republic," notes that it was in his nearing-fifty-something generation

that “the link between rock and poetry became cemented—maybe, because . . . many made the trip to poetry through rock music, through the lyrics of song writers.” He goes on to discuss the evolution of lyrics and structure from Jagger/Richards and Joni Mitchell to Ice Cube and Bikini Kill, concluding with speculations on melody itself, and on how abrupt shifts in musical diction might lead poetry in interesting future directions:

[Today’s most inventive work moves] the listener back and forth disjunctively from delicate piano effects, to dirty blues, to good-old-boy country-western, to pure feedback, to straight-ahead jazz, to muted sirens, with repetitions of some of the blocks being electronically altered, sometimes purposefully “decayed.” From the admittedly “avant-garde” musician John Zorn it’s a short step to “pop” groups like Arrested Development, rappers like the notorious Ice Cube, grunge-meisters like Soundgarden. If you want to hear where the future of American poetry might be being shaped, turn off the White House-approved soundtrack for a while and tilt your ear in this direction.

Thinking back to the Chandler quotation, I try to keep an open mind here, but suddenly I’m confronted by images of the boomer poets as they near retirement, their thin ponytails now peeking grayly beneath their baseball caps. I want Shakespeare *and* Lou Reed in the poems of the present, as well as those of the future, Beethoven *and* Denis Johnson, Donne *and* riot grrls.

Freedom of choice. The capacity to choose both this woman’s art and that man’s scope. “In dreams begin responsibilities,” as Delmore Schwartz put the matter. Or, “the song’s got a good beat and you can dance to it—I’ll give it a ten.”

“*De la musique avant tout chose*,” opens Verlaine’s “Art Poétique,” a manifesto of the previous *fin de siècle*. *De gustibus*: poetry in English, even before the rich infusions provided by the members of its former colonies, combined the hard, blunt, thudding and seemingly prosaic Anglo-Saxon of Macbeth’s “Making the green one red” with the mellifluous Latinate sonics of “the multitudinous seas incarnadine.” As Ted Hughes pointed out in his splendid introduction to *The Portable Shakespeare*, these phrases, the latter occurring directly before the former in Shakespeare’s text, are synonymous: each translates the sense, and the music, of the other into its own idiom.

“Music is only momentary in the mind— / The fitful tracing of a portal / But in the flesh it is immortal.” When I go to my nearest shelf’s copy of Stevens to check the line breaks, I am dismayed and disappointed to learn that for years I’ve been carrying this phrase in my own and patently incorrect translation. “*Beauty* is momentary in the mind . . .,” reads the finale to “Peter Quince at the Clavier.” What part of my brain is responsible for this misprision?

The word made flesh equals beauty in the world, equals music in poetry. Equals the dancer’s body merging with the dance, the singer’s with her aria, the sculptor’s hand with his chisel. The means by which the left and right halves of the brain merge into one concentrated, neuron-drunk organ of perception operating via all five or six or seven of our senses is ultimately a matter deeply private. Writers learn, sooner preferably than later, the poems that occasion this lavish union in ourselves; the others are said not to “move” or “work for” us. We write our poems to re-create gorgeous blurs of language and music that seem the conjurings of *déjà vu*, and the means by which we pursue that musical language or verbal music can be triggered by images, yes, but surely they must be accompanied by pulsings from stereo speakers or the blood-noise of our own hearts.

Encore and coda: “Music is only momentary in the mind— / The fitful tracing of a portal / But in the flesh it is immortal.” If poets finally hear—and remember—what they want, they must want—*das muss sein*, as Beethoven played Schiller’s words against his own crashing chords in the 9th Symphony’s last movement—they *must* want to hear.