



Poetry and Music

Waxing lyrical by [Denis Joe](#) August 2013

Recently I heard a work by a friend of mine. It is a [soundscape](#) made up of a selection of poems of mine, read by someone who reads them much better than I ever could, set to sound and music. I was both flattered and impressed, but also surprised because for many years I have held to the belief that poetry doesn't need anything added to it; it should stand on its own.

Back in the second half of the 1970s poetry rode the punk bandwagon. **Patti Smith's *Piss Factory***, a great piece of Beat poetics, with soft jazz piano backing, was the first 'punk poetry' I became aware of. Later, **Patrik Fitzgerald** would incorporate poetry into his set. But it was the Manchester poet, **John Cooper Clarke** who set the scene that many others were to follow (and you can still hear pale imitations of him

at open mic nights). His impact was relatively profound. Whilst his poems worked well enough without musical accompaniment, for recordings many of his poems were given a backing track, sometimes to the detriment.

It wasn't a new approach to recorded poetry - poets of the stature of **John Betjeman** made recordings with musical accompaniment, and

Betjeman's Banana Blush

is a classic of the genre. And it seems that poetry is becoming quite popular again, with the likes of

Saul Williams

,

Talib Kweli

,

Scroobius Pip

and

Kate Tempest

drawing respectable crowds. So has poetry become the new pop music?

There is a strong relationship between the two art forms, and how they affect the listener. Both rely on rhythm as well as sound (hard or soft). But although that is a large component of music and poetry, beyond that the two arts diverge. Both art forms stand alone. It is only with the **song** that the problems arise, because a song has lyrics and music, and can only work as a song using those both forms together. To separate those two components means that the work ceases to be a song.

The one exception to that is the **ballad**, which can act both as a song and a poem, because the overall structure is simple and needs only a bare musical accompaniment. The form is designed so that the voice is clearly heard. The earliest ballads date from the 14th or 15th century and

will, most likely, have had a musical accompaniment, but their themes (what we might view as tabloid-like) meant that they were treasured as reading matter and there were many anthologies of ballads published once printing became affordable around the 17th century.



But for the most part, poetry and music operated independently of each other and were more sophisticated than those of the Ballad. It was **Aristotle's *Poetics*** that was the earliest treatise on poetry; identifying three genres of the art. It had a great impact on the poets of the **Renaissance**

, whose influence would spread throughout Europe, with the development of forms such as the Sonnet, and its strict structural rules.

In England there arose a decisive shift of taste toward a fluent artistry; self-consciously displaying its own grace and sophistication. The works of the court poets **Thomas Wyatt, Edmu**

nd Spenser

and

Sir Phillip Sidney

, who drew on the Renaissance poets for inspiration, are an ideal example of that shift. The next development in English poetry was the

metaphysical

poets

such as

George Herbert

,

Henry Vaughan

,

Andrew Marvell

and

John Donne

, the latter who would go on to become one of the most influential English poets ever.

The works were characterised by idiosyncratic metaphor and simile such as **Marvell's** comparison of the soul with a drop of dew; much like

Petrarch

and

Dante

, the poetry was used to discuss philosophical issues, even though the forms that each poet used were vastly different. What occurred during that period was that the rules for poetry evolved enormously. Structurally the different forms had their own rules but also the 'meaning' had its own rules as a result of the approach to metaphor and simile.

Although 17th century poetry was used by composers for writing songs it was the Romantic period (19th century) that saw an explosion of poetry set to music. This occurred mainly in central Europe with composers such as **Franz Schubert**, **Robert Schumann** and **Johannes Brahms**

amongst the greatest exponents. Sometimes a group of poems would be set to music such as **Schubert**

's

Die Schöne Müllerin

. The accompanying music (piano) was relatively simple. The song relied heavily on the voice, to articulate the words and meaning of the poem. This tradition carried on up to today. Some composers, such as the US composer

Ned Rorem

, have made a speciality of the ‘

Art Song

’. Generally speaking what the composer does with the poem is to give it extra emphasis; to the sound and meaning of the words. Probably the perfect example of this is

Schoenberg

’s

Pierrot Lunaire

,

a setting of twenty-one selected

[poems](#)

from

Otto Erich Hartleben

’s

[German](#)

translation of

Albert Giraud

’s cycle of French poems, where the music serves to greatly exaggerate the emotions and word sounds. But the poetry generally serves the musical composition

In contemporary times the label ‘poet’ has been applied to many singer/songwriters, **Bob Dylan** being an obvious case. But it is debatable whether Dylan’s lyrics can be seen as poetry. For one thing they lose a lot of power as the written word; they have little in common with any form of poetry, with the exception of the Ballad. It could be argued that the meaning of poetry has altered so much that the song lyric can be categorised as poetry, that singing has replace declamation.

The band **Mumford and Sons** are the latest to be knighted with the ‘poetic’ label. Their lyrics are laden with poetic devices such as metaphor, simile, assonance, alliteration, and rhythm, ([http://events.ff.uni-mb.si/mir/files/2012/Plemenitas Mumford Sons.pdf](http://events.ff.uni-mb.si/mir/files/2012/Plemenitas_Mumford_Sons.pdf))

). This would seem to support the idea that singing can replace narration when declaiming poetry.

Then there is the question of **hip-hop** and **rap**. Both forms use external rhythm meaning that the lyric/poem need not be metered (unlike the Ballad, say). Both forms could be said to have their origin in the poetry of the **Beats**: the writers and poets like **Jack Kerouac** and **Allen Ginsberg**.

Contemporary poets such as **Saul Williams** rely heavily on a supporting music, usually rhythmic, in their work, whilst **Kate Tempest** uses less measured music. But why is it needed? Poetry has always contained its own rhythm which the listener can hear for themselves or discern from reading the poem. It could be said that the music adds a greater emotional weight to the poem. But what should the audience be doing: appreciating the poem or the music? Is the rule book, with regards to poetry, being thrown away? It would seem that anything goes and that the test of a poem need no longer be what is on the page.

Editor's Note: The issue of blending pod music will be looked at in a Manchester Salon public discussion on Saturday 26 October - see [Music and poetry: why the fashion to blend them?](#)