

Poetic Rhythm and Musical Rhythm: Theories and Controversies in Nineteenth-Century Italy

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Abstract: *This article contains a brief exposition of theories and controversies concerning the supposed interrelationships between the standard poetic rhythm conferred by classical poetic metrics (Greek, Roman, Italian) and the musical rhythm proper, with profound implications for nineteenth-century opera music). The final aim of this paper is to map poetic metrics according to the musical phrases used, as it was envisaged by the musical theorists of the musical bel canto era and the one that followed it. A whole host of Italian or German authors (many of them almost unknown) are listed and quoted. The various, more or less speculative theories still tributary to the mentality of the time are succinctly presented. All these discussions and controversies converge towards a possible and utopian general theory of rhythm, a theory based on the analogy between the regular metrical feet of classical poetry and rhythm.*

Key-words: *ritmo, accento musicale, clausole, sensi, desinenza, versi semplice, versi doppi*

1. Theories and controversies in Nineteenth-Century

In nineteenth-century Italian, the word for musical rhythm, *ritmo*, encompassed a whole range of concepts and meanings, far more numerous than its modern counterpart. Thus, the emotions and feelings generated by them corresponded to the fluid movements of the individual human mind, i.e. the “soul”, through the affective states generated by poetry or music, manifested mainly through the ebb and flow of a reading, a concert or an opera performance. Given the overwhelming preponderance of vocal music in Italian musical traditions, the term could also designate either the various accents of the verses or the so-called musical rhythm of an individual poetic line or, rather imprecisely, a succession of several such lines, insofar as the singular word “line” can be used to designate both a single poetic line and an entire verse. In this sense, the musical rhythm (*ritmo*) used in a melody was in fact synonymous with the “phrase” (*frase*), which could also designate an

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individual utterance of a verse or two or a series of similar such utterances. A closely associated but essentially independent rhythmic-harmonic system, governed by a succession of weaker or stronger accents within the instrumental accompaniment, was regarded as *“a complement to these vocal phrases accompanying the verses”* (Baragwanath 2011, 68).

Contemporary theories and methods ultimately aim to map verse meter onto musical phrases by interpreting poetic syllables and accents as note values and exploring the resulting melodic rhythms in a space populated with strong or weak metrical accents. The practice of using such rhythmic organizations to structure longer sections of musical phrases, even when they differ from the poetic meter of a given text, is of course supported and evidenced. For example, polymetric stanzas, which use a wide variety of verse types, can be anchored on a number of pre-existing phrase structures centred on the rhythmic realization of a single common poetic line. All these aspects have led to the interpretation of musical phrases through the prism of verse metrics, and this method of analysis has thus become relatively commonplace in recent studies of opera. Ideas about the mismatch between versification and rhythm often led to a veritable polymetric “counterpoint”, a fact emphasized in the nineteenth century by the analytical demonstrations made by Bonifazio Asioli (1769-1832), or Giuseppe Staffa (1807-1877), even if all this pioneering research received far too little attention in the literature. This can be explained by the disagreement that existed among nineteenth-century Italian writers about the means of putting into practice the notion of a fundamental identity between poetry and verse and between melody and rhythm. All this ambiguity that accompanied Italian definitions of rhythmic practice throughout the nineteenth century might be partly attributable *“to an earlier division of poetry into the regular metrical verse of ancient Greece and Rome and the more elastic harmonic verse of the modern age, ungoverned by fixed, quantitative correlations between rhythmic durations and stressed syllables”* (Maguire 1989, 12-13).

The dictionary of Pietro Lichtenthal (1779-1853) describes the ancient “metrical” form of *Rhythmopoeia*, as it was understood in the early 19th century, in terms of an application of fixed rhythmic durations to the metrics of poetic syllables, closely following the ancient principle that musical rhythm was strictly regulated by the poetic rhythm of the sung verses, all syllables being either long or short. A long syllable was twice as long as a short syllable, and several long or short syllables joined together made up the so-called “musical feet”, *“by the union of which the rhythm was created”* (Lichtenthal 1970, 97).

In contrast, eighteenth-century German theorists broadly and more simplistically defined meter in terms of a succession of poetic feet (Mattheson

1999, 123). The Italian semiotician Paolo Fabri defined the harmonic poetic text as something that contained clear metrical features, fixing the discretionary and vague qualities of each of its syllabic durations and “*restricting the freedom of their articulation as a whole by specifying it with notation*” (Fabri 2003, 15).

Yet the resulting musical rhythm would have constituted only one of countless possible interpretations, the literary accents could be compressed into shorter durations or stretched over longer periods. Melismatic configurations “*made it difficult to distinguish true musical syllables from their complicated extensions*” (Choron 1804, 64). In the debate in the 1780’s between Stefano Arteaga (1747-1799) and Vincenzo Manfredini (1737-1799), this underlying freedom of contemporary verse was emphasized, typical of late eighteenth-century writers eager to find new ways to regulate and control this problem of the relationship between poetic meter and musical rhythm possibly “*through a universal theory of versification*” (Sacchi 1969, 114). Since this new global theory of verse arrangement sought to unite the dance rhythm (*tempo nel ballo*) characteristic of instrumental music with that used in vocal music, a reduction in the number of poetic feet to only four types were envisioned: *anapestic*, *dactylic*, *iambic* and *trochaic*, generating in turn four corresponding species of rhythm resulting from their repetition.

2. 20th century perspectives

At the beginning of the 20th century, the musicologist Amintore Galli (1845-1919) continued to advocate theoretically the distinction between a repetitive pulse, composed of either feet or accents, and rhythm, which he defined as “*an aesthetic ordering of a succession of musical values, which are repeated identically or very similarly once or more than once due to the rhythmic accent, which is isochronically repeated, thus existing the basis of the fundamental rhythmic design*” (Galli 1975, 109). Making the analogy between the strong or weak accents of a measure and the breath, elements that were at the basis of the so-called “rhythmic design” founded on the metrics of the verse, Galli mentioned two different concepts that had to be differentiated. So that the breath was in fact the prototype of the musical measure and the generator of the rhythm of a musical phrase, made up of two physiological moments: inspiration and expiration, *tesis* (strong accent) and *arsis* (weak accent), these two elements constituting practically “*the descending and ascending dynamics of a musical measure*” (Galli 1902, 294).

The vast majority of Italian maestri had a deep sense of discouragement towards the representation of poetic meter through simple musical forms and

formulas, disillusioned by the schematic representation of poetic meter through simple musical formulas, similar to the transcription of oral traditions through a musical notation insufficiently nuanced to capture the myriad expressive fluctuations. This is precisely why, in Italian traditions, the nature of rhythm was often discussed from a theoretical point of view and was rarely illustrated by formulas suggested by musical notation. The great importance of rhythmic freedom within the phenomenon of the perception of vocal-type melody and its association with such factors as meaning, feeling and expression seem to have demoralized Italian authors of the time, preventing them from specifying with precision the musical equivalents of the metrics of poetic verse, "*metrics which in fact constituted the essence of typical phrases in nineteenth-century operatic music*" (Hiller 1774, 46-47).

Some sources give general descriptions of the relationships between poetic feet, metrics and musical rhythm, but more detailed practical guidance was usually given in the form of extracts from scores and interpreted by all sorts of analytic annotations. The essential freedom of the vocal rhythm from a regular pulsation within the meter bars was eventually rationalized by the use of the notion of *accento musicale*, a kind of accent of musical-type speech, thus referring to the expressive nuances generated which ultimately determined the contours and fluctuations of the vocal-type phrase. In Amintore Galli's *Lexicon* of 1902 the accent is defined as no more and no less than an "inflection of the voice" and is therefore synonymous with "expression" (Galli 1902, 10). However, earlier writings on the subject suggest that, beyond being considered merely an aspect of vocal expression, the musical accent was in reality an integrating factor that required a series of compositional solutions. *Accento musicale*, the direct organizer of both the rhythm of the phrase and of the entire musical period, had a series of special characteristics: increase or decrease of force, softness or impetuosity of the sound expression, a certain agogic involving slowing down or speeding up the speed of execution, emphasizing both the "loud" and the "soft" type by "controlling both types of accents" (De Macchi 1830, 24). As explained by Giovanni Pacini the *accent*, according to the usual understanding, was nothing more than a modification of the *tempo* of the vocal part, which had to maintain a kind of appropriate sonority while respecting the syllables, words and sentiment that together make up a period or a so-called "discourse" (Pacini 1834, 28).

Therefore, the composer could improve the expressiveness of the text at the local level by deviating from the rigid rhythm of the phrase corresponding to the poetic meter of the verse, but only in accordance with the guidelines that governed the harmony and development of the melodic line, and only so long as the fragment in question remained faithful to the "dominant affective mood" (pathetic,

grave, etc.) that controls the musical framework of the period as a whole. Without proper application, the associativity of musical and poetic accents in nineteenth-century Italian traditions suggests that, for example, four consecutive ordinary verses could yield four rhythmically identical phrases. This was accepted (from a certain angle) only within melodic lines rooted in a popular style, although it could occur even in the works of less experienced composers, as authors such as Abramo Basevi (1818-1885) and Arrigo Boito declared in their progressive critical writings on the rigidity of the Italian system of versification. By the end of the 19th century, the constant and combined influences of Richard Wagner and French opera, with their more flexible rules of prosody, contributed greatly to the loosening of the close link between the melodic typical of the opera genre and standard poetic meter. The contemporary musicologist Julian Budden, more jokingly or more seriously alluding to Wagner's influence on Giacomo Puccini, remarked, "Puccini was Wagner's best Italian pupil" (Budden 1987, 327).

The influences of the old rhythmic formulae (*ritmi*), subject to the expressive distortions of the so-called *accenti musicali*, continued to influence the structure of melodic phrases, however, until Giacomo Puccini, sometimes even within irregular polymetric verse. The evolution of Giovanni Pacini's division of the vocal-type musical phrase into units of meaning (*sensi*), rather than ordinary phrases (*frasi*) can be traced throughout the entire nineteenth century and is a natural consequence of the polemics initiated by Francesco Galeazzi (1758-1819) in 1794, about the melodic period in terms of "terms" (*clausole*) and "meanings" (*sensi*) (Galeazzi 1791, 91). In his letters to librettists, Giuseppe Verdi frequently used the term "*senso*" in direct reference to the close and direct links between content and syntax in lyric verse, "*links which allowed significant units of text to be associated with individual musical phrases, while at the same time directing, through words, the musical impulse towards a series of cadences usually used at the end of verses or distichs*" (Moreen 1975, 38). Therefore, when modifying a passage in accordance with the requirements of *accento musicale*, a composer had to ensure that the modifications applied equally to the sensibility of the verses and phrases; thus, there was an essential difference between meter, as a regular pulse, and poetic-musical rhythm, conceived and represented in performance and composition by the regularity typical of *accento musicale*. The same integrative concept was the basis for the generation of a musical rhythm of verse as the foundation of the melodic phrase based on both traditional poetic recitation and the expressiveness of speech. It is for this very reason that the idea that the art of singing was largely understood as an expressive mode of poetic recitation according to the Italian traditions of the early Ottocento is further supported, having direct and significant consequences in the composition of a vocal musical phrase. Significantly, "*the verb*

'to speak' (*dire*) was usually replaced in opera librettos by the verb 'to sing' (*cantare*)" (Maguire 1989, 57).

Another important feature was the position of the main accents within the verses. Word strings with an equal number of syllables could differ according to the position of the main accents. The distinction was important for distinguishing between *versi semplici* (simple verses) and *versi doppi* (double verses): a double verse was made up of two shorter verses with an identical stress structure. The rhyme scheme usually comprised two broad and distinct groupings: *rima alternata* (abab, cdcd) and *rima baciata* (aa, bb, cc, dd). In the librettos used in musical drama, there was a clear distinction between *recitativo* and the other numbers (arias, duets, choruses, ensembles): while *recitativo* was mainly used for *verso sciolto*, for all the other numbers the structure of the poetic text was governed by a principle of symmetry built on the scaffolding of two or more verses, all of the same type and with the same rhyme scheme. Verses of the *settenari* or *hendecasyllabic* type, alternated freely, without a particular rhyme scheme, except at the end of a section, which "was usually marked by an alternating rhyme or *rhyme baciata*, the last line being usually a *verso tronco*" (Petrobelli 1994, 173-174).

In the nineteenth century, the way in which different types of verse could be arranged in musical rhythms (or phrases) was explained in the most general terms by the old notion that stressed syllables were given long notes and unstressed syllables were given short notes, usually in the ratio 2:1 "according to the rules of prosody, which assigns to long syllables double the value of short ones" (Asioli 1832, 39). Thus, the resulting "principal inflection" or "common accent" (*desinenza* or *accento comune*), on the penultimate syllable of a simple line (*piano*), could be given double value. In practice, however, the placement of the desinence was the central concern, while "the beginnings of the phrases were treated with much more ease" (Lippmann 1973, 253-254). Once the verses were adapted to this pattern, the composer had complete freedom to engage much more creatively with the music, being able to modify and implicitly "vary the correspondence of the words to the main rhythm, while still conforming to the expressive requirements imposed by the *accento musicale*" (De Vecchis 1850, 54-55). Because the vagaries of these *accento musicali* and the lack of fixed quantities of syllables and accents made it difficult, almost impossible, to generalize rhythmic patterns that might have corresponded to standard verse metrics, contemporary accounts have dealt more with rules of versification, generally recommending the placement of accents according to specific individual examples drawn from the repertoire of the time.

3. Conclusion

The inescapable conclusion is that *Ritmo*, in the nineteenth-century thinking, could be understood and interpreted as a repetitive rhythmic pattern, which runs through the musical texture being supported by both a melodic pattern (*ritmo melodico*) and a harmonic impulse (*ritmo armonico*) predetermined, yet not fully corresponding to the musical framework contained in a verse. The predominance of melody and its rhythmic structure, typical of 19th-century Italian opera, contrasts with conventional modern notions of the primacy of harmony over melodic structures. This should not be seen as a form of casual reductive analysis representing, rather, the application of a melodic archetype as an integral part of the teaching of harmony and counterpoint in nineteenth-century Italy.

4. References

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