

Prosody

Prosody: the alignment of stresses in music with stresses in the lyric for the purpose of clarity of meaning.

Linear prosody: the alignment of phrases of music with units of meaning in the lyric

Emotional prosody: the alignment of the emotional effect of a moment in music with an equal emotional meaning in the lyric

Euphony. an harmonious succession of words having a pleasant sound.

Ideally, perfect prosody incorporates all four of these concepts simultaneously. If but one of these concepts is lacking, the meaning of the lyric may suffer or even fail.

We often use the word “prosody” to mean merely the way accents of music are falling in relation to the accents of the lyric, but there are at least two other principles of prosody to consider:

- 1) The sound of one syllable flows easily into the sound of the following syllable (*euphony*)
- 2) the shape of the phrase points inevitably to the word or words which, when stressed, underscore or deliver the meaning of the phrase. (*linear prosody*)

a third principle is much more subjective:

- 3) the emotional content of the music must match the emotional content of the lyric, on a phrase-by-phrase level (*emotional prosody*)

That is to say

poor euphony may cause the audience to think about the sound of the words themselves, rather than the meaning of the words

poor prosody may cause consternation or confusion by forcing the singer to mispronounce a word, or give an unintended line reading

poor linear prosody (e.g., a broken phrase) may cause a temporary unintentional meaning, or leave a phrase dangling in a halting or confusing way

poor emotional prosody may cause a disconnect between the idea which the lyric is attempting to convey, and the music which is conveying a different idea

A disclaimer: Although egregious violations of these concepts are obvious and jarring, mild infractions are more likely to be subjective and a question of personal taste. *Emotional prosody* is particularly subjective. Very subtle infringements of these principles, however, can make the difference between a song which soars, and a song which merely gets the point across.

Great actors can overcome an enormous amount of inferior craft and still get the point across; but great writers do not rely on an actor to do their work for them.

Repairing Bad Prosody

Problem: The accents of the music do not match the accents of the lyric.

Solution:

Either change the lyric to match the music.

or

Change the music to match the lyric.

or

Both.

The lyricist has the option of swapping, adding, deleting or inverting words.

The composer’s options of manipulating accent are more varied, and include dynamic, tonic, agogic and harmonic variations.

Poetic meter v. Musical meter

Almost invariably, accents in poetry are different from the conversational speech. Similarly, accents in poetry *and* speech are different from lyrics...from words which are sung.

The key to discovering logical prosody is to ask yourself: 1) Where are the accents when you *read* the lyric out loud, as though it were conversation? 2) Where are the accents when you *scan* the lyric (as though it were regular, sing-songy poetry)...by scanning the lyric as if it's poetry you can often discern where prosody issues are going to occur; that is to say, where are the weak syllables which reside in places of strong stress, and where are strong syllables which reside in places of weak stress; and then of course 3) Where are the accents in the music?

For instance:

*Two bright sidelights winkin' and blinkin'.
Ain't no finer rig, I'm thinkin'.
You c'n keep your rig if you're thinkin'
'At I'd keer to swap fer that
Shiny little surrey with the fringe on top.*

Musical Accents and Prosody

There are four main types of accents in music:

Dynamic. Dynamic accents are a result of notes which are noticeably louder than the notes around them. Dynamic accents can be created by notation (placing accent marks over notes), by syncopation, or by observing the natural accents created by regular meter in which accented syllables fall on accented beats).

Tonic. Tonic accents are a result of notes which are noticeably different in pitch than the notes around them: either higher or lower. A higher pitch may be perceived as emphasized; likewise, a lower pitch may be perceived as emphasized.

Agogic. Agogic refers to *duration*. Agogic accents are a result of notes which are noticeably longer (or shorter) than the notes around them.

Harmonic. A change in the expected harmony causes harmonic accents, or change in the *harmonic rhythm*. Perhaps a pattern has been established wherein the chords change only and always on the downbeat, so that when this harmonic rhythm is altered, an accent results. Or an deviation from the use of standard tonal harmony might cause an accent (e.g., a key change; an unexpected or unusual chord in the middle of standard tonal harmony; revoicing of a chord; etc.)

Do not confuse musical accents with poetic accents in lyrics. They are related but not directly parallel.