

Philosophy in Review



Peter Cheyne, Andy Hamilton, and Max Paddison (eds.), "The Philosophy of Rhythm: Aesthetics, Music, Poetics."

Jennifer Judkins

Volume 40, Number 3, August 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1071518ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071518ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (print)

1920-8936 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Judkins, J. (2020). Review of [Peter Cheyne, Andy Hamilton, and Max Paddison (eds.), "The Philosophy of Rhythm: Aesthetics, Music, Poetics."]. *Philosophy in Review*, 40(3), 101–103. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071518ar>

Copyright © Jennifer Judkins, 2020



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Peter Cheyne, Andy Hamilton, and Max Paddison, eds. *The Philosophy of Rhythm: Aesthetics, Music, Poetics*. Oxford University Press 2019. 440 pp. \$125.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780199347773); \$45.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780199347780).

The Philosophy of Rhythm has a wonderful range and depth, and features both purely philosophical and more empirical approaches. Rather remarkably, the contributors are able to reference each other's chapters throughout the text, creating a delightful back-and-forth, and an anthology that reads as a whole. The result is more of a dialogue than a compilation, wending across the various disciplines and topics. An extensive bibliography enriches every essay (and the Introduction), and even those essays that discuss especially technical subjects (poetical scansion, eye-tracking in paintings) are clearly presented. Many of the chapters also refer to specific non-Western musics in enjoyable detail.

There has been a general neglect of rhythm both in music research and in philosophy, which this and other recent work has begun to remedy. Harmonic complexity and rhythmic complexity are rarely found simultaneously in music generally – we have a difficult time perceiving and appreciating both at once. Western music (including classical and popular music) does not traditionally employ the kinds of complex rhythms we see in other global musics, possibly because rhythmic intricacy was sacrificed for dense harmonic expression. Wagner's operas are incredibly dense harmonically, yet are rather simple rhythmically. Conversely, the rhythmic slipperiness of Steve Reich's phase music has a very modest harmonic structure.

The wide charge given here was: 'contributors should examine concrete manifestations of rhythm in the various arts and in human activity' (1). We certainly associate the concept of rhythm most strongly with *musical* rhythm, yet the different chapters here touch on issues of rhythm in poetics, literary studies, dance, art history, musicology, and ethnomusicology. The opening essay, from Andy Hamilton, David Macarthur, Roger Squires, Matthew Tugby, and Rachael Wiseman, features a 'Dialogue on Rhythm,' meant to be in the form of a Socratic dialogue. It features Skepticus and Dynamicus, with later appearances by Analyticus, Metaphysicus, Vitalia ... and Theodorus Gracykus (who holds his own amid challenging company, I might add). A bit of this goes a long way, and it distracts from the fine collection following.

Here are some of the highlights in each of the book's five sections, with an emphasis on material of the most interest for philosophers. The sections are organized thematically, and not by discipline. Part One (Movement and Stasis) features Peter Simons on the ontology of rhythm, with many musical examples. Importantly, Simons references complex and compound rhythms, and stresses the limits of Western notation. Like many writers in this volume, he acknowledges the ontological problems, even just between 'beat,' 'pulse,' and 'meter.' Aili Bresnahan writes on 'Dance Rhythm,' and how intention can transform mere movement. When that 'mere movement' then converts to dance, natural rhythms transform into intentional rhythms. This is one of the few essays to point out that different art forms may have very different definitions of 'rhythm.'

In Part Two (Theories of Rhythm), Garry Hagberg asks 'Why does rhythm speak to us so deeply?' He examines jazz improvisation, which allows us to hear life in music 'and respond to it as a kind of animated presence' (101). Leaning on and amplifying Dewey, Hagberg dissects several musical examples, in particular, a tune by Wayne Shorter ('Footprints'). The perceiver must *make* sense of music, especially in jazz; it's not perceivable in slices, but rather must be added together. For Dewey (and Hagberg), that 'sense-making' of music is fundamentally rhythmic. Michael Spitzer dives into historical accounts of rhythm, from the eighteenth century to Schenker. Ted Gracyk focuses on rhythm's role in musical expression, especially entrainable rhythms. Importantly, Gracyk

joins rhythmic meaning with expression. He believes that musical entrainment might connect the ‘resemblance’ and ‘contagion’ accounts of music’s expressiveness, in addition to being ‘of a piece with our relatively effortless ability to perceive the emotions in the people around us’ (165). His emphasis on the significance of the kinematic anticipation of musical rhythm, beyond merely the awareness of rhythm, is also new and noteworthy.

Part Three (Entrainment and the Social Dimension) is the most cohesive and, one might say, the most entrained set of essays. Justin London leads off with a compact overview of entrainment and problems of perception. His body of work on entrainment is cited throughout this collection, and so this chapter is a useful reference. London’s expansion here to African drumming is a great example of how musical enculturation is crucial to our subjective ‘rhythmization,’ and how we can *learn* to perceive these rhythmic groupings differently, actually changing our initial (Western) perceptions of the metrical positions. He articulates something that the other authors also allude to: 1) our direct perception of rhythm has a limited temporal range, 2) it is related to our capacities for movement and action with our environment, and 3) it is inherently cross-modal. Martin Clayton accepts London’s position and, with a brief glance at Hindustani classical rhythm, looks at our flexible capacity to coordinate internal rhythms between members of a group of people. For Clayton, however, even music made and experienced alone ‘manipulates musical concepts, structures, processes and/or materials whose origin remains social’ (185).

Michael Tenzer and Udo Will, both ethnomusicologists, open up the difficulty of speaking to world musics in each of their essays. They both stress the importance of cultural expertise, echoing the other authors in pointing out that rhythm is not entirely cognitive. Will goes on to look at work indicating the presence of differing sensory-motor networks for vocal and instrumental rhythms, via analytical data from two Indigenous Australian groups.

Christopher Hasty changes gears to begin Part Four (Time and Experience: Subjective and Objective Rhythm). Hasty writes about experimenting with poetic rhythm, with an extremely thoughtful breakdown of Keats’ ‘Hymn to Pan’ (first stanza), integrating syntax and semantics. Peter Cheyne defends a position opposed by some: he argues that, albeit in an encoded way, conventional musical notational actually favors intuitive and expressive interpretation. Intriguingly, he parses *encoded* rhythm (such as scores, printed or manuscript poems, storyboards, or dance notation) from *embodied* rhythm (rhythm as heard and felt in performance). Happily, Cheyne does not call for more notational density, but rather he advocates that we leave the minutiae of performing notation up to the ‘intuitive sensitivity of the performer’ (260).

There are a number of references throughout the anthology to the philosophy of time, but Max Paddison specifically traces its history (Newton, Leibniz, Kant) through to contemporary philosophers. Salomé Jacob centers on Husserl, pulling his model of time-consciousness to the experience of musical rhythm and sensing of flow.

The presence (or not) of rhythm in pictorial experience is often cited but rarely seriously addressed. Jason Gaiger’s chapter asserts the negative position: pictorial experience is durational but not temporal, and the graphic arts cannot sustain the attentional focus required for the experience of rhythm. There are real insights here, in spite of the negative conclusions. As he points out, the cover of this book (Delaunay’s graphic abstract *Colour no .1076*) offers the kinds of regularities we often call ‘rhythm’ in a painting. He presents a very clear look at eye-tracking studies in both abstract and figurative art. Although the eye does not follow set sequences in a given painting (and in fact the eye is *always* in motion), there is a lot of consistency across viewers in terms of patterns. However, this is a ‘regularity’ not truly experienced as a rhythm.

The final section, Part Five (Reading Rhythm), begins with another poetic examination. Jason Hall's essay pairs well with Hasty's above, as he concentrates on the tensions in metered verse, and how we can read verse *as* verse, or read it in such a way as to de-emphasize metrical construction. Later, Will Montgomery shows that short-form poetry can be a vivid example of how poetic rhythm 'is integral to the thinking that a poem performs' (384).

Rebecca Wallbank and John Holliday investigate reading as performance, in regard to rhythm in literature. Wallbank (364) observes that when we read, we may have a foregrounded (or even non-foregrounded) experience of rhythm in literature 'through an articulated sub-vocalization of words,' which can serve as part of our aesthetic experience. By proposing that this 'deliberate intellectualized sounding of words can switch with immersive experience,' she gives us a way to talk about the type of oscillation of appreciation we feel when reading good prose. Or good anthologies, as it turns out.

Jennifer Judkins, UCLA