

Language, music, and text-setting: Mismatches in length and intonation

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Verse language and western art music share a rhythmic foundation of positing equally prominent elements at regular intervals. A striking difference between the rhythmic organization of the two domains is the much wider range of rhythmic distinctions in music. The rhythmic categories of language tend to be restricted to binary values (e.g. short vs. long syllables). In art music, however, non-binary organization is common, and the relative lengths of notes can include a much greater amount of hierarchical levels, for example ten different length values featuring in the same song.

Word stress in text-setting has already received previous scholarly attention, whereas the other aspects of prosody have been more neglected. In my corpus-based study on Finnish, I focus on length clashes, misalignments between segment or unit length (notes, sound segments, and syllable length) in songs. Prosodic clashes can also occur on other suprasegmental levels; a shared prosodic feature of language and music is the use of intonation and accents for the purposes of information structure and conveying affective emphasis. In text-setting, however, simultaneous expression of linguistic and musical emphasis can be difficult.

Finnish is structurally different from the major European languages, and has a prosodic system featuring both phonemic and stress-independent length distinctions. As these features make the language speakers particularly sensitive to length clashes, Finnish is an intriguing test environment for prosodic behavior in vocal music. Determining the amount and nature of prosodic clashes acceptable to actual songwriters and audiences can also reveal new insights into the aesthetic and practical functions of prosody in speech.

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