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Contrapuntal text and rondo (in the poetry of Desmond Egan and Jaroslav Seifert)

Contrapuntal texts of Desmond Egan

The Irish poet Desmond Egan¹ uses a specific form of poetic text in his poems. The traditional strophic text is accompanied by another column on the right, which forms another poem, and both poems (columns) are provided with a common title. The other poem is not written under the first as its potential continuation but is written and printed (usually in italics) to the right of the first poem as its descant. An apparent tension exists between the two poems (columns of text) and the reader asks himself whether the two texts are interrelated apart from the common title, how they are related, and how they should be read and interpreted. This article will try to understand whether comprehension and interpretation of such a poem (text counter text) is possible while utilising the apparent similarity with the principle of counterpoint in music (literally point counter point, or precisely note counter note).

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1 Desmond Egan (*15.07.1936) was born in the small town of Athlone in the central part of Ireland. He received his doctoral degree in English from Dublin University and became a teacher of English and Ancient Greek at Newbridge College. Since 1987 he has devoted his life to poetry. In the Czech Republic two books of his selected poems have been published in translation by Ivana Bozděchová: *Smiluj se nad básníkem* (Praha, 1997) and *DESpektrum* (Brumovice, 2002). The selected poems include a cross-section of Egan's work from his first collection *Midland* (1972), via his further major poetic works, such as *Seeing Double* (1983), *A Song for My Father* (1989), *In the Holocaust of Autumn* (1949) and *Famine* (1997), up to his most recent achievements, including *Music* (2000) and *The Hill of Allen* (2001).

Counterpoint in music was the basic composition technique of the Renaissance and Baroque periods, built over several parallel melodic lines (parts) forming a harmony together: a tune is accompanied by another (or more) separate tune(s) while observing the strict rules of the progress of the tunes and the chords created by their being joined together. The resulting chord should make sense both vertically (harmonically) and horizontally (melodically). Special attention is paid to dissonances, whose placement in the composition is only permitted in certain specific places. The melodies' independence is mainly manifested by their rhythms. An important element of counterpoint is imitation (repetition of a tune or its beginning in another part). Just as in music, where the study of counterpoint develops the ability to hear and imagine several tunes together (and to listen to and perform polyphonic compositions), so too in poetry the knowledge of this building principle can help understand and interpret contrapuntal text with all its specifics.

In the effort to find an equivalent to the contrapuntal principle in poetic text, the main issue is the principle of simultaneity – the creation and development of two or more concurrent verbal discourses (texts). Calvin Smith Brown comments that if the artistic intention of the poet is to make any sense, the individual parts of the text must be separate, nearly independent, and yet related. They must be based on a unified idea, but this principle excludes the possibility of simultaneous utterance. Brown gives two examples of a kind of simultaneity. One is a play of words where one word, in a certain context and at the same time, can have two different meanings, as a presentation of one and the same thing with two aspects (in music this is enharmonic substitution). And the other is association of words. This is again the same word, only in different contexts, not two different things presented simultaneously.²

In a contrapuntal text its printed form plays a specially important role, since this is the only form allows us to see the text columns side by side, representing relatively separate parts (discourses). The reader may be taken aback by the graphic format of the text and must read the individual columns (usually placed side by side) one by one. The text's interpretation and search for the overall purpose relies on the reader's memory and ability to unveil the relations between the columns on different levels – on the level of words, phrases, verses or strophes. The title of the poem may be of help to the reader, referring to the unifying theme of all parts (columns) of the poem.

As in music, to perform and understand a polyphonic composition requires the study of the individual parts for the performer and later the listener to understand the way the tunes are developed and layered together and to be able to appreciate the resulting harmony. In vocal polyphony the lyrics help us to understand the composition, in which a variation or segment of a single idea is shared by all parts in a given movement of the composition.

2 Calvin Smith Brown, *Music and Literature*, University Press of New England, 1987, p. 38–43.

In the case of the auditive perception of a contrapuntal text, two or more reciters are needed (subject to the number of parallel columns of the text) who can recite the individual columns simultaneously. They can use different recitation techniques for this purpose to highlight the most important moments of the individual parts of the poem. Recitation of contrapuntal texts involves voice overlapping, thus entailing partial misconception on the part of the listener. In this form of perception of a poetic text, the audio experience may be more important to the reader, reflecting, to a certain extent (and in a stylised manner) the authentic reality around us by the fragmentary and simultaneous nature of the individual happenings.³ But as was already mentioned, interpretation of the poem may only be completed by an understanding of the texts of the individual columns and clarification of their mutual relations, which is only possible when the poem is read on paper.

The purpose of the contrapuntal texts by Desmond Egan is not to find an accurate literary equivalent to counterpoint in music. Egan's effort is poetically emancipated and artistically independent, with clear inspiration by the music principle. His texts also visibly reflect the influence of Irish folk traditions, both in the selection of themes (Irish myths), and in the technique – the musicality of the poetry.

Egan has used the contrapuntal technique since 1983. The developmental fore-concept of his contrapuntal texts is quick alternation of discourses visually presented as two separate columns of text:

her hand
 on her shoulder
 her hair
 in my face
 her eyes
 in my eyes
 my heart in a race⁴

The independence of the two columns, except for the last verse, is supported on the meaning axis by the split of the female (her) and the male (my) principle. The selected graphic form of the poem (including the pauses between the alternating utterances) emphasizes the independence and separation of the two parts. At the same time, the graphic form attracts attention to both subjects equally, increasing the tension between them and evoking a loving dialogue. Despite the emphasized independence,

³ The CD recording *Desmond Egan – DESpektrum*, published as part of the selected poems with the same title (Carpe diem, Brumovice 2002).

⁴ D. Egan, *DESpectrum* (I. *Diarmaid's Dilemma, The Pursuit of Diarmaid and Grainne*, Midland, 1972), Brumovice, Carpe diem, 2002, p. 100.

and the halldoor like a car's
 scraping open the cold night
 knockerechoed dimmed
 into street amber with streetlights
 (*so late*)

I was thinking of the woods
 quietened by its nonexistent stars

*so were you*⁷

The typical contrapuntal texts by Egan represent the basic principle of the technique of counterpoint – simultaneous layering of separate text lines (parts, voices). Their creation is led by the goal of creating harmonies to fulfill the poet's idea of their theme. Special attention is drawn to the contrasts and confrontations between the parts (similar to dissonances in music). The independence of the voices is manifested by the different time duration, the narrator's perspective, the difference in motifs. Important linking elements include motif or keyword repetitions by the other voice. The repetitions can be literal or synonymic.

As was already mentioned, counterpoint in music develops the ability to hear and understand polyphony. In literature, similarly, the reader can synthesize the individual levels of meaning into the purpose and message of the poem as a whole. This may be achieved on condition that the individual texts, although independent in their meaning, are built over a shared unifying theme.

Now interpretations of a couple of texts will try to demonstrate these theoretical considerations in practice. The poem *Last day of May* (*Seeing double*, 1983) makes us witness an impressive rendering of hope leaving with the last May day:

why did you stand there
 thinking out the gable window?

*rain falls straight
 in the warmth
 the vegetation*

like something that didn't fully happen
 the grass
 lay soggy and lush it was
 littered with petals round the crabapple tree
 where an odd one still hung

*roads fill in fill in
 the ditches are nests
 and houses empty with
 long long evening of
 the longest day*

drooping making lifesounds
 with a sad pigeon somewhere down the woods

where the cuckoo hides

7 Idem, *Collected Poems*, p. 67.

somewhere down the woods

where the swallows lift

*and I go mowing
trying not to care⁸*

The left column, framed by a rhetoric question, uses the past tense, the du- and the er-form. The text depicts what used to be, what slowly falls into oblivion, or even makes an impression of never having happened. The elusiveness and sorrow accompany May's departing hope (one remaining apple, fading, a sad pigeon). By way of contrast – the right column – the use of the present tense, the er- and the ich-form, evoke the currently lived moment, which is fulfilling (the warmth of vegetation, the filled in roads, the long evening).

The basic tension of the whole poem (harmony) follows from the confrontation between the past (the left column) and the present (the right column in italics), of the finished and non-living against the fully lived. And yet they are two sides of the same thing: the past hiding its long-past present, and the present anticipating its near past.

The interconnection of the two columns is supported by motifs (the grass, mowing the grass, the pigeon, the cuckoo, the swallows), poetic descriptions and repetitions [somewhere down the woods; roads fill in fill in; long long evening]. The theme of the poem (hope leaving with the last May day) suggested at the beginning of this interpretation thus stands out from the described harmony in a more pronounced, more plastic way.

Other poems reveal, by interpretation and comparison of the two columns; for example, the contrast between war and peace (*Májový den*) or a confrontation between human fire (music) and coldness (emptiness, death) in the poem *O potřebě filozofie* (both in *Double seeing*, 1983). Egan tries to find the best way to show various points of view, ways to perceive a phenomenon, always by means of original imagination drawing from a particular landscape, particular human stories and fates (see for example *Ballyferriter, Peninsula*, 1992). Specially suggestive is the use of the technique of double seeing in the collection *In the Holocaust of Autumn* (1994), where the individual sections confront different concepts of time as the central motif: autumn symbolises death linked to the suffering brought by holocaust. The separate texts offer different perspectives of the approach to the destinies of nations and individuals, victims and murderers.

The model of contrapuntal texts in Egan is not repeated mechanically, but rather always acquires new forms and meanings. The poem *Návrat v májový večer* (*A song for my father*, 1989) describes a mood of a landscape in the left column, poetically and yet in a civilian way, while the right column offers an idea of Camus.

⁸ Idem, *DESpectrum*, p. 124.

The clash of the two voices supports the demonstration of the philosophical idea: in an overlap of the world of nature and the world of ideas.

A rather different function can be found in the poems where one of the parts only complements the other or enriches the other with further situations and meanings. This way, the main idea and its grasp by the reader are emphasized. The other column may also contribute to the atmosphere of the text as a whole. The poem *In memoriam Bill Evans (A song for my father, 1989)* is a dialogue between the poet and the pianist across the boundaries of time (the poem is devoted to the jazz pianist Bill Evans):

his reaching piano fingers	
his paleness the glasses	<i>it's love</i>
the submissive listening head	<i>this time it's</i>
	<i>love</i>
will sink no more into chords	
he has slipped out unsmiling	<i>my</i>
through the drinks the night talk the barmaids	<i>foolish</i>
before the end of this final set	<i>heart</i>
at 51 to die ⁹	

While the left column introduces the famous jazz pianist, the right includes a fragment of the lyrics of a popular song of the 1950s which Evans liked to play. The whole text creates a plastic contour of the musician and the atmosphere of his world of music.

All these examples show that only a holistic view – interpretation of both columns – reveals the ultimate meaning of the text. This only confirms that although the two texts are independent, only in mutual harmony do they convey their message. The opening parallel to counterpoint in music helps us to understand, by means of switching between the parallel thinking about the music principle and its literary counterpart, the structure of the text, to answer formerly asked questions about the relation between the individual poems (columns), about their links and about how the poem as a whole can be read and understood.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 194.

Rondo by Jaroslav Seifert

The cycle *Mozart v Praze (Mozart in Prague)*¹⁰ by Jaroslav Seifert¹¹ offers a parallel to classicist music with its balance, closeness and the sense of order of things. The thirteen unnumbered rondos are built around the music principle of this multi-part form, where the main idea is often repeated and with each return is interspersed with different contrasting ideas.

The rondo is an ancient form originating from a dance arrangement alternating solo performances by individual dance couples with the dances of all dancers together. In France in the 13th–15th centuries, rondeau was a genre of dance song with a chorus, performed by a choir and soloists. Rondo was frequently used in the Baroque period (P. E. Bach) and in classicist music as an optimistic finale of sonatas, chamber compositions, symphonies and concertos (Mozart, Beethoven).¹²

The Italian word rondo and its French counterpart rondeau means a circle. In connection with music the word means singing in a circle, i.e., alternations of the same chorus with differing strophes (i.e., continuous returns of the chorus in a circular movement). This principle of a circle is used by Seifert in individual poems, i.e., the idea – motif – new and contrasting in a poem, is the link to and the basis of the following poem. If you mark the individual ideas – motifs – by the letters of the alphabet, the motivic structure of the cycle can be schematically expressed as follows: AB-BC-CD-(...)- XA.

Seifert also uses the principle of a circle across the cycle, which begins and ends with the same motif: the search for a grave (Muse) in a cemetery. Z. Pešat notes to this that “in harmony with the order of the used form the poet decomposes the miniature story skeleton down to the individual lyrical moments”¹³.

The linked nature of the whole is further supported by the way the motifs are constructed, based on repetitions of motif in different contexts, see for example the motif of grapes and vineyards¹⁴:

¹⁰ The cycle was issued in 1964 by the Československý spisovatel publishing house in Prague as part of the collection called *Praha* in Complete Works, vol. VI; originally issued as a bibliophilic print with the title *Praha a věnec sonetů*.

¹¹ Jaroslav Seifert (1901–1986) is a Czech poet who entered the world of literature in the 1920s with his collection of proletarian poetry *Město v slzách*, followed by poetic works (*Na vlnách TSF*) and works in his individual style. His basic motifs include the city (*Světlem oděná*, 1940), the woman in various forms (*Píseň o Viktorce*, 1950), the earth (*Zhasněte světla*, 1938), death (*Koncert na ostrově*, 1965), time and music, with frequently repeating Mozart themes (*Býti básníkem*, 1983)). Seifert is the only Czech holder of the Nobel Prize for literature.

¹² Luděk Zenkl, *ABC hudebních forem*, Supraphon, Praha 1990, p. 126, 129.

¹³ Zdeněk Pešat, *Jaroslav Seifert*, Československý spisovatel, Praha 1991, p. 186.

¹⁴ Another example may be the motif of the song:

[– Tu píseň? (–The song?) Možná. (Maybe.) Uvidím! (I will see!)
Však hostitelka nepovolí. (But the host will not yield.)

(5th rondo)

zrávaly jste tu, hrozny vína, (you used to ripen here, you wine grapes,)
 a ten, jenž tenkrát trhal vás, (and he who then picked you,)
 myslil na ústa milenčina... (thought of his mistress's lips...) (4th rondo)¹⁵

A vinice, blízko je Řím, (And the vineyard, Rome is close,)
 tam květů je, až hlava bolí. (there are blossoms making the head ache.) (5th rondo)

A ten, jenž spával na hroznech, (And he who used to sleep on the grapes,)
 bloudí tu ještě po pokoji... (still wanders around this room...) (11th rondo)

Vyrvali révu do kořenů (The vines were torn out with their roots)
 a mělkou studnu zavál sníh. (and the shallow well was filled with snow) (12th rondo)¹⁶

The cohesion is also supported by the continuous extension of the meanings of the individual motifs (dead – dead Josefína – host – mistress) and hidden associations (grave – hearse – dead – time – memory). The method of continuous unveiling of the lyric story, blurred by the perspective of the deepness, unfinished sentence and hints, reflects the same thematic areas (death, love, music, poetry), reinforcing them by repetitions (choruses), which significantly build up the tension in the text.

The whole cycle is framed by the theme of the search for a grave. This motif is connected with the motifs of death and ruin, all veiled in the atmosphere of night and graveyard. The hidden dreaminess is supported by the longing to wake up the dead, i.e., to wake up dead memories and overcome the time created space of oblivion, ruin and nothingness. Although death is refined by love, in contrast it is underlined by the motif of coldness and winter.

Addio, krásný plameni, (Addion, you beautiful flame.)
 nápěv se lehce dotkl čela. (the tune has lightly touched the forehead.) (6th rondo)

Zpěvák, jenž k písni nabral dech, (The singer taking in breath to sing the song,)
 teď mlčí; škoda nebylo jí, (now keeps silent, no pity,)
 však začnem jinou, není spěch...] (let me begin another one, there is no hurry..) (11th rondo)

Jaroslav Seifert, *Zpěvy o Praze*, Československý spisovatel, Praha 1968, p. 134, 135, 140.

15 For the sake of easier orientation within Seifert's work, the rondos are provided with fictitious numbers according to their sequence in the text.

16 Jaroslav Seifert, *Zpěvy o Praze*, pp. 133, 134, 140, 141.

The love context overlaps the latter half of the cycle, focusing more on the connection between the Mozart myth and Prague. Seifert adores Prague as a place of peaceful rest, as a unique value:

Budu se vracet neznámý (I will return unknown)
a chudý, třeba v dešti, v zimě, (and poor, maybe in the rain and cold,)

a v koutku lůžko ze slámy (but the straw bed in the corner)
bych nezměnil za palác v Římě. (I would never exchange for a palace in Rome)¹⁷
(8th rondo)

Seifert makes a myth of certain facts connected with Mozart's visits to Prague, especially the warm welcome and recognition he received from Prague audiences, or the enthusiastic to uncritical response to the premieres of his compositions and operas. He balances adoration of Mozart's music and the greatness of the city whose inhabitants were able to appreciate Mozart's music during the course of his life (unlike those in Vienna). Mozart motifs are constantly linked to adorations of Prague. Mozart's last parting with Prague features signs of fatigue, fatality and foreseen death:

... Jako rány hran (... As the bell tolls for the dead)
zněly mu tenkrát hlasy zvonů; (he heard the bell chimes then;)

nechtělo se mu vyjet z bran (not wanting to leave the gates)¹⁸

The contrast between dance and the loneliness of the dead (Mozart's funeral) serves Seifert as an ironic depiction of Vienna. The only consolation for the dead is the chiming of the Prague bells, paradoxically anticipating his death. Only emptiness, silence and oblivion are left, soon replaced by light and glory:

když prošel tmou a vcházel pak (after walking through the darkness he entered)
už přímo do světél a slávy (directly the lights of the glory)¹⁹

The opening motif of a playing flute is connected to loving desire, as well as to the desire to overcome words and come closer to music. Words limit him too much in his expression and tie him in the effort to tell the essential, for the poet is aware that there is always something unsaid, something beyond him:

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 137.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 138.

Kdybych na flétnu uměl hrát, (If only I could play the flute)
tak jako umím verše s rýmy! (like I play with verses and rhymes!)²⁰ (1st rondo)

As noted already, the whole cycle is closed into a circle by its opening motif of the search for a grave. This motif evokes the congeniality of Mozart's music and is connected with the motif of looking for the Muse that would help the poet fulfil his desire to go beyond words. This desire, however, remains an illusion:

Mé verše jsou však z olova, (My verses are of lead, though)
toužil jsem marně po té Múze (my desire for the Muse was in vain)²¹ (13th rondo)

The search for Mozart's grave repeats in Seifert's works (see for example the collections *Noční divertimento*, *Býti básníkem*, 1983). It is more than just piety for the composer, an intimate gesture, it is also a symbol of the search for the order of things and the purpose of this world. Mozart becomes one of the symbols creating the genius loci of Prague – Seifert's city.

Seifert's work uses rondo in a very sophisticated and complex way. The theme of the Mozart myth is introduced using a form belonging to the period of classicism, the style in which Mozart wrote his music. The principle of a circle interconnects the individual motifs and the cycle as a whole, its poetic imitation bears the same signs as rondo in music: clarity, order, symmetry, modesty, balance, respect for rules.

Conclusion

The work of both poets shows a significant inspiration by music. Both poets want their readers to feel the same as when listening to music. This is most clearly seen in the thematic rendering of music, compositions and composers in their poems (see for example the Mozart-like composition by J. Seifert called *Noční divertimento*, or Egan's collection *Music* monothematically focusing on music). In addition to the music themes both poets also approach music by using music principles to compose their poems.

The question is to what extent Egan's contrapuntal texts and Seifert's rondos can be seen as literary equivalents to the music forms of the same names. This article tries to show that poems of the analysed poets in fact materialise the respective music principles: the text counter text in Egan's counterpoint, and the rondo (circle) principle with chorus returns in Seifert. Werner Wolf speaks about the implicit form of reference from one medium to another, called imitation. In

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 130.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 142.

his opinion the principle of imitation lies in that “the medium of the analysed work imitates signs of a foreign medium with its own, as a rule formal means, thus referring to the other medium by iconic similarity”²². The problem of the typology of the mentioned intermedial phenomenon is in the fact that if the principles of counterpoint or rondo were considered as general structural principles transferable to another mode of art, not only to literature, then we might also incline towards transmedialisation. This too involves transporting formal (or content) concepts from one medium to other media, creating indirect relations between these media, which however do not affect the creation of the purpose of the particular artefact. Such transport is however conditioned by the non-specificity of the phenomena, i.e., their universal function (such as the principle of variation). There is a question of whether the principle of counterpoint or rondo is a specific phenomenon, i.e., belongs exclusively to music, or whether one can imagine their universal action.

Leaving aside the issue of the intermedial typology of the two principles, the conclusion of this article rests mainly in the area of the reader’s perception of poetic texts whose graphic form or theme inspires music references. The author has come to the conclusion that knowledge (active and passive) of the music principles of counterpoint and rondo can help readers in these particular cases understand the deeper layers of the structure, theme and the ultimate purpose of the poetic texts.

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Radomil Novák

Contrapuntal text and rondo (in the poetry of Desmond Egan and Jaroslav Seifert)

Summary

This paper is concerned with the complicated relationships between poetry and music. It tries to show that one of the common denominators between both arts can be the musical form in poetry, strictly speaking a method of poetry creation based on a musical principle. For this paper, two illustrations of this process are chosen: an Irish poet Desmond Egan's contrapuntal poems (chosen from all Egan's poetry) and a Czech poet Jaroslav Seifert's *Mozart in Prague*.

The conclusions concern the impact on the reader's reception of poetic texts, which in their graphic form or theme stimulate references to music. We conclude that knowing (active and passive) the musical principles of counterpoint and rondo can help readers to better understand the structure, theme and meaning of the texts.

Keywords: Music Principle, poetry and music, Contrapuntal Poems, Rondo, Desmond Egan, Jaroslav Seifert

Tekst kontrapunktyczny i rondo (w poezji Desmonda Egana i Jaroslava Seiferta)

Streszczenie

Artykuł dotyczy skomplikowanych relacji między poezją a muzyką. Próbuje pokazać, że jednym ze wspólnych mianowników między obiema sztukami może być forma muzyczna w poezji, ściślej mówiąc metoda tworzenia poezji oparta na zasadzie muzycznej. W tym celu wybrano dwie ilustracje tego procesu: wiersze kontrapunktyczne poety irlandzkiego Desmonda Egana i czeskiego poety Mozarta Jaroslava Seiferta w Pradze (wzięto pod uwagę wybrane utwory z ich dorobku). Wnioski dotyczą wpływu na odbiór tekstów poetyckich, które w formie graficznej lub temacie wskazują na odniesienia do muzyki. Wnioskujemy, że znajomość (aktywna i pasywna) zasad muzycznych kontrapunktu i rondo może pomóc czytelnikom lepiej zrozumieć strukturę, temat i znaczenie tekstów.

Słowa kluczowe: zasada muzyczna, poezja a muzyka, poemat kontrapunktyczny, rondo, Desmond Egan, Jaroslav Seifert

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