

Metrics, Music and Mind

Linguistic, Metrical and Cognitive Implications in Sung Verse

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Re-examining English Broadside Ballads as a case of sung metrics

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The ballad has been extensively studied as a literary form with specific metrical characteristics of its own. It is a fact too often forgotten that, whatever its subject, this literary form was written to be sung to certain definite and well-known tunes. As critic and translator William Webbe acknowledged in his *Discourse of English Poetrie* (1586), “neither is there anie tune or stroke which may be sung or plaide on instruments, which hath not some poetical ditties framed according to [...] all manner of tunes which everie Fidler knowes better then myself.”

This paper aims at showing the intimate link between text and tune in a corpus of 17th and 18th century English Broadside Ballads by means of a deep exploration of the prosodic constraints that regulated the composition of the metrical form, which were arguably determined by the rhythm of the music. Indeed, the ultimate goal of the paper is to argue that it is virtually impossible to fully understand the rhythm of the ballad text without comprehending the structure of the song from which it has been abstracted.

References

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