

Rhymes and Rondeaux: Writing the Body with Words and Music

I recently collaborated with the cellist Ingrid Perrin on a creative writing workshop we entitled *Rhymes and Rondeaux*, which used music as an inspiration for writing. We began our planning with the precise song and poetic form of the rondeau, agreeing with Bob Dylan's Nobel Prize citation, that songs can create "new poetic expressions"¹ We originally started discussing this collaboration before the Covid pandemic and had envisaged running a face to face workshop for adult participants at all levels of experience, at the Dragon Hall campus of the National Centre for Writing in Norwich, but by the time the workshop was scheduled, we had stepped through the looking glass into the virtual world of Zoom.

The workshop was structured in two halves, each lasting about an hour. Each half started with a performance on the cello of a wide range of short pieces. These were chosen to offer variations in mood, pace and performance style. A complete playlist can be found below. The first performance consisted of two Purcell rondeaux arranged by Ingrid for two cellos and cello with piano accompaniment respectively. During the workshop Ingrid played live to the pre-recorded tracks. She then explained and deconstructed the rondeau. The musical form is believed to derive from the poetic structure of the medieval rondeau, one of the three *formes fixes* of French poetry from the 13th to the 15th centuries, the other two being the *ballade* and the *virelai* or *lai*. In both words and music, the rondeau is made up of alternating refrains and stanzas and is believed to have originated as dance songs, with chorus and soloist taking the different parts.

We then moved on to writing exercises in which students were divided into smaller groups in breakout rooms and invited to collaborate, with the musical model in mind, on making a poem using

¹ The Nobel Prize in Literature 2016. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Media AB 2021. Fri. 11 Jun 2021. <<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2016/summary/>>

one of a range of alternative poetic forms. As preparation for this we gave them examples of several different forms to read, including the celebrated Dylan Thomas villanelle, *Do Not Go Gentle*² and Shakespeare's sonnet 18³. My aim in choosing such well known poems was to defamiliarize them for the participants by considering them through the lens of form rather than content, to provoke them to make different and more critical readings of works with which most, if not all, were familiar. When listening to music, I would suggest we perceive form first; we pick up rhythms, repetitions, runs of notes. When we read, however, we tend to think first in terms of language and meaning.

We also shared a contemporary pantoum, A. E. Stallings' *Another Lullaby for Insomniacs*⁴, and allowed Swinburne to do our work for us where the English roundel was concerned:

A roundel is wrought as a ring or a starbright sphere, (A)

With craft of delight and with cunning of sound unsought, (B)

That the heart of the hearer may smile if to pleasure his ear (A)

A roundel is wrought. (R)

Its jewel of music is carven of all or of aught - (B)

Love, laughter, or mourning - remembrance of rapture or fear - (A)

That fancy may fashion to hang in the ear of thought. (B)

As a bird's quick song runs round, and the hearts in us hear (A)

Pause answer to pause, and again the same strain caught, (B)

² Thomas D. (1952) *In Country Sleep and Other Poems* London: Dent

³ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45087/sonnet-18-shall-i-compare-thee-to-a-summer's-day> accessed 30/07/2021

⁴ Stallings A. E. 'Another Lullaby for Insomniacs', *Poetry Magazine*, April 2004, p. 3

So moves the device whence, round as a pearl or tear, (A)

*A roundel is wrought. (R)*⁵

As shown, we marked up the rhyme schemes and repetitions for each poem to give guidance to the participants, as well as summarising the structure of each form for them. The forms covered were the English roundel, the English sonnet, the pantoum and the sestina. We discovered that, in the time available, group work produced only rough drafts, which was not entirely surprising given the complexity of the task. However, we achieved the aim of encouraging participants to think about the power and musicality of formal constraints in writing and how these relate to rhetorical devices such as repetition, parataxis and hypotaxis, and thematic or imagistic linking. This process also helped to break the ice for the online participants and to “warm up” writing “muscles”. It achieved a “shaking loose” of participants’ creativity which resulted in some engaging writing during the second session.

As feedback from one participant suggests, it did provoke some interesting creative thinking:

...my reading led me into the confused realms of the “impure pantoum”, an image which conjures up curious flights of fancy.

An enjoyable pun on the concept of formal impurity when a poem deviates from the form in which it is written. Rupert Brooke’s superbly cynical *Sonnet Reversed*⁶ is a fine example of this kind of playful subversion.

⁵ Swinburne A. C. *The Roundel* <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45301/the-roundel> accessed 30/07/2021

⁶ Brooke, R. (1914) *Sonnet Reversed* <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43715/sonnet-reversed> accessed 29/07/2021

Our main focus for the second half of the workshop was less on the ways in which musical structure might inspire and inform our writing and more on how the physicality of playing might inspire words. How can we use language to inscribe the body, in which we all live and which inevitably determines our lives? This relates to my own creative and critical writing PhD research, which is using fiction to explore the body - as Olivia Laing (2021) says, “not...whole or undamaged or unaugmented...always changing, changing, changing, a fluid form...”⁷ - as a site of historical inscription. I am writing a two period historical novel set among the women who stitched the early Montgolfier hot air balloons and the machinists at Playtex who made the Apollo spacesuits. I am interested in the workers’ bodies as sold bodies but also in the fetishized bodies of the astronauts and early balloon pilots who submitted to experimentation in flight and the “deviant” bodies of French revolutionaries and civil rights and anti-war protestors in the 1960s.⁸

Having to adapt our plans for Zoom inevitably changed the nature of the interaction, both between Ingrid and myself as the creative writing tutor (we were in our respective homes rather than physically in the same place), and between us and the workshop participants. Most significantly, we could not now establish a physical dynamic based on a group of people working together in the same room. However, because we were by this time in the second lockdown, we were all growing used to working remotely and we received some very positive feedback:

It was an insightful introduction to the world of creative writing and music and has further increased my confidence in switching to a career in writing. It’s not too late and there is hope, thank you so much for giving me the opportunity to learn and grow!

Ingrid opened the second session with a programme of short cello pieces in a wide variety of styles. Participants were asked to focus, not just on the music but on the cellist in the physical act of

⁷ Laing, O. (2021) *Everybody*. London: Picador, p. 309

⁸ These definitions and distinctions are discussed in Brooks, P. (1984), *Reading for the Plot*, New York: Knopf, pp. 143 - 170

playing. All musical performance is, of course, intensely physical, predicated entirely on the interaction of the human body with the instrument, but there is, to my mind, something unique in the relationship between the cellist and their instrument. The cello shares its nubile curvaceousness with the rest of its family, but projects a powerful erotic charge because of where it sits, between the player's knees. The way in which it moves with the player's body is more organic. It seems less like an appendage and more like an integral part of the player's body. It is also said, and my ears would certainly concur, that the cello's range is the closest to the human voice of any instrument.

We encouraged workshop participants not only to listen to the music but to observe the playing, the way in which the body interpreted the notation and translated it into sound. Clearly the process of observation was changed by moving the workshop online but there were positive aspects to this. The intervention of the camera disinhibited the process of observation for participants, who might have felt constrained, in a face to face setting, by the conventions of the relationship between audience and performer. While not all would have been comfortable moving around Ingrid's physical playing space in order to make close observations, all were content to watch the live video in a close, critical way which would facilitate their writing. While the camera, being unavoidably fixed, was limited in the angles of vision it could convey, it helped to free up imaginative and speculative engagement. That said, we collected some anecdotal evidence that participants were reluctant to attempt to inhabit the cellist's body in their writing because she was, in a sense, present with them, on screen while they were writing. We have not been able to follow up on the workshop to see if this would change were participants undertaking exercises after the event.

The writing which arose from this second session, and which participants were prepared to share in class, was predominantly prose. Several were happy to read aloud to the group whereas none had been willing to do this with the rather provisional work undertaken in the first half. The prose pieces shared demonstrated how participants had used their observations and reflections on the

relationship between music and the body as the foundation for a range of fiction and non-fiction pieces, for which watching and listening to Ingrid's performance was a catalyst. Some, however, took it as more direct inspiration. One participant later submitted a poem by email to the National Centre for Writing, entitled *Ode to a Cellist's Eyebrows*.

This was a great second half of the workshop, and unexpected. I am always drawn to look at eyebrows, possibly because my name Gwendoline comes from the Celtic gwyn, meaning blessed, and dolen meaning eyebrows.

Thank you to Gwendoline Coates for permission to quote from her poem:

*Grand movements of the bowing arm,
strong fingers placed with skill to make the cello sing,
whole body sways.*

*Yet I am drawn to watch the eyebrows,
lowered in concentration,
solemn to begin.*

It was wonderful to see this evidence of the poet's understanding that looking behind and around the conventional observation of instrumental technique can reveal something fresh and unique about the player's relationship to her instrument and the work she performs with it. What do the raised eyebrows signify? Perhaps a questioning, an opening up of the player to the beginning of this performance, which will be like no other she has given. Perhaps what in others might be a frown of concentration. What can be seen of the body, and what it consciously and unconsciously performs, is both literally and metaphorically only skin deep. Yet the body is what each of lives in and looks out from and what bounds and defines our sense of our self in the world.

I have recently begun to expand my thinking on ekphrastic practice, with an emphasis on the relationship between needlework and writing (which also informed my first novel whose subject is the Bayeux Tapestry), through participation in a panel discussion of Lorina Bulwer⁹ whose extraordinary embroidered diatribes are curated by the Norfolk Museums Service. While much of the conversation focused on the content of her work, I was particularly interested in her process, in the physical strength it would have taken to embroider such dense text through two or three thicknesses of fabric in a process reminiscent of Bengali kantha quilting. This expression of her intense emotions seems to me as important as the words used. The way Lorina implicated her body in the creation of her samplers is as meaningful as what she embroidered on them.

Our bodies define the world we have made as much as being products of this planet's specific physical attributes. Our houses, our factories, our cityscapes and transportation systems, our politics and the realms of our imaginations, are determined by the limits of what our bodies can do. When we leave the atmosphere for which we are adapted we have to encase our bodies in clothing which recreates it in order to survive. It is clearly time for us to consider the limits of our evolutionary possibility and what happens when our atmosphere deserts us rather than us travelling beyond it, and it is my hope that the themes I will address in my historical fiction and accompanying theoretical work will have something useful to say to us today and in what looks like a rapidly diminishing future about how we can reset the balance between our bodies and their lifelines. I think this is also a useful framework for teaching which will engage students with some of the pressing issues of our times, not just the climate crisis but how the bodies we live in determine our intellectual and emotional wellbeing. The approach Ingrid and I took to the different ways in which musical

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lorina_Bulwer A useful introduction which links to a range of interesting blogs and learning resources relating to Lorina.

performance might inspire writing is an effective route into thinking and writing widely about the human condition.

Playlist for Rhymes and Rondeaux Workshop

Purcell: Rondeau from The Fairy Queen

Purcell: Rondeau from Abdelazer

(Rondeaux arranged for cello and piano and for two cellos by Ingrid Perrin)

Vivaldi: Largo from A minor Cello Sonata

Puccini: Ch'Ella Mi Creda from La Fanciulla del West

Puccini: Lucevan le Stelle from Tosca

Bach: Prelude from the 1st Solo Cello Suite

Purcell: Aria trans. David Popper

Britten: Canto terzo from Suite for Cello Op. 72 (excerpt)

Schumann: Fünf Stücke im Volkston – II Langsam (excerpt)

Paradies: Sicilienne (omitted)

Alan Gout: My Blue Cello

References

Brooks, P. (1984) *Reading for the Plot*. New York: Knopf

Laing, O. (2021) *Everybody*. London: Picador

Sarah Bower is an Associate Lecturer in creative writing at the Open University. She has also taught at the University of East Anglia and Lingnan University in Hong Kong. Based in Norwich, she regularly works with the National Centre for Writing www.nationalcentreforwriting.org.uk on a range of events and workshops. She is the author of three novels, most recently *Erosion*, writing as S. A. Hemmings. Her first novel, *The Needle in the Blood*, won the Susan Hill Award 2007. Her short fiction and non-fiction has been published in *MsLexia*, *Spiked*, *QWF* and *The Yellow Room* and broadcast on BBC Radio 4. She is currently working towards a PhD in creative and critical writing at the Open University.

Ingrid Perrin is a cellist/teacher. She teaches online and has recently played for the Self Isolation String Quartet recording of Mr Blue Sky and a Latin American concert live-streamed from the Theatre Royal Norwich with the Rojas String Quartet. She has worked on the RPO Share Sound project with students from all over Norfolk. Ingrid started her career as cellist/MD at the National Theatre and toured with Lumière and Son Theatre Company, as well as recording for ABC, Elvis Costello and Heaven 17. She is currently rebooking her string quartet and cello/piano duo for the many weddings postponed by the pandemic.

https://www.instagram.com/ingrid_perrin/?hl=en

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X49GGCro9I8>

You can find out more about the National Centre for Writing here:

<https://nationalcentreforwriting.org.uk/>

