

2 Spoken Music

excerpt from:

A Story as Sharp as a Knife: The Classical Haida
Mythtellers and Their World,
by Robert Bringhurst

(Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1999;
Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000)

THE POETS PORTRAYED in the *Odyssey* – Demodokos and Phemios – are singers. Ghandl’s poems were spoken, not chanted or sung, but they are musical in other important ways – so much so that I think his work deserves to be compared to European music as much as to European sculpture and painting.

Musicologists like to distinguish between intrinsically musical abstract structures – fugues, sonatas, and so on – and program music, in which the composer has an extramusical plot to represent or an image to convey. The two kinds of structure very often coexist in the same piece – and the abstract structures of music have their counterparts, of course, in painting and in literature too. A painting or a poem can tell a story or represent an image and be rigorously abstract, or in some sense absolutely musical, both at the same time. Ghandl’s poem about the man who married a goose is an example.

Consider, for instance, some of the symmetries in the poem. It begins at a lake – a patch of water surrounded by land – where a young man falls in love with a soft-spoken, beautiful goose. It ends with the same man marooned on a reef – a patch of land surrounded by water – where the man himself is squawking like a loudmouthed gull. At the center of the story is a pole that links the earth and sky. Either side of the pole is a series of tests and exchanges, and framing these sequences are the two domestic scenes. The first is in the groom’s father’s house, where a vegetarian bride, who cannot speak directly to her mother-in-law, is

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offered food she cannot eat. The second is in the bride's father's house. There the omnivorous groom, who cannot speak directly to his father-in-law, tries to eat the same restricted diet as the birds. In the groom's village, the people insult the bride, whose connections with the skyworld have saved them from starvation, and the bride flies off. In the bride's village, the groom insults the people, who nevertheless respond with perfect courtesy, offering to fly him back to earth since he cannot fly himself.

There are more of these symmetrical inversions in the story, but they are linked, like all good symmetries, to structures of other, more dynamic kinds.

The old man gives the younger man a gift: a tool called *skiiskil tlxhahlgaaw*, which is a marlinspike or bradawl used for working with cedar-limb line. Then he instructs him to get eight things for himself. The total is nine. At this point, every listener familiar with Haida narrative will know that there is one more gift to come. In Haida, five and ten – *tliihl* and *tlaahl* – are perfect, or consonant, numbers. Two, four and eight – *sting*, *stansing* and *stansingxha* – are perfect numbers too, though in a different mode or key. But nine is not. Nine in Haida is *tlaahl sghwaansing guu*, “ten one minus,” or *tlaahlinggiisghwaansingghu*, “ten-less-one-many.” Nine is a dissonance. It is waiting to be completed. In this poem, what completes the series is the mouse skin.

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lines
113–119

These ten items are like musical themes or motifs. They are undissipated energies. All ten must be resolved in the unfolding of the story. But Ghandl of the Qayahllaanas is an artist, who likes to make a plot stand up and dance, so there is something like a fugal structure to this aspect of the poem. The second subject – putting the ten medicine objects to use – begins before the first, their acquisition, has come to an end.

The ten things are put to use in pairs, so five occasions are required. One of these occasions is the sky pillar itself. The other four – symmetrically arranged around the pillar – involve extraordinary beings. Between their acquisition and their use, the

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ten charged objects, from marlinspike to mouse skin, are melodically and rhythmically recombined.¹ The rhythm and the melody involved have less to do with sound than with the order and the tempo at which images are called before the mind – but they are called up in the context of a set of expectations and conventions, much like a system of musical modes or keys, which can work by a mixture of statement and suggestion. Ghandl has to tell us that the salmon roe is used in combination with the mouse skin, but the other gift, the marlinspike, is never directly mentioned a second time. A reference to cedar-limb line and spruce-root cord is enough. That allusion brings the spike to mind.

page 40:
lines
205–206;
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lines
181–192

The first pair of objects – oil and comb – goes to the holy fool: a talented clairvoyant who cannot find his own lice. (Elsewhere in the world, the same joke has been told of many wise men, including Herakleitos.) When a louse bites the back of his head, he turns around and looks for it behind him. This seer who is busy accomplishing nothing is followed by a woman who tries to do everything exactly as she is told. She is holding up the country: *Xhaaydla Gwaayaay tldaghawaay*, the mountains of the Islands on the Boundary between Worlds. Beyond the pillar to the sky are two more figures – or two and a half. The first is half a man; the second is a pair of fat old guys who act as one. The pair create the coho out of salmon-colored woodchips, while the half-man downstream spears them and puts them in his creel.

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37–38:
lines
126–139

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line 188

The structure created by these characters alone is a kind of complex narrative crystal, or a piece of conceptual music. But other structures are linked to it. On the terrestrial side there are the benefactors: the old man who lives at the edge of the village, and the Mouse Woman, whose large house is hidden in a clump of ferns. On the celestial side there is a conclave of three carnivorous birds and a bear. Later comes another foursome consisting of three omnivorous birds – loon, grebe and raven – linked to a man who is evidently also a bird, since his daughters are geese as well as women. In each of these two groups, one bird acts while the other two stand by. And there is one more bird in the last

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scene: the gull, who counterbalances the brace of geese with which the plot began.

Very early in the story, the man takes one of the two goose skins – his wife’s – and gives her one of his two marten skins in exchange. After losing his wife, he gets two other skins: a coho skin and a mouse skin, which is the only skin in the story that comes with claws. This skin-swapping is linked to that innocent, even irrelevant-looking transaction between the eagle and the bear. The story of the bear getting claws from the eagle is a stock piece of North American folklore, slipped into the poem like an innocent bit of folksong inserted into a string quartet or sonata.² But it fulfills here an essential musical function.

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lines
217–225

The human husband is in heaven, where he cannot stay. He got there by means of a salmon egg and a mouse skin. Before he can return to earth, the energy residing in these images has to be resolved, the way an errant theme in music must be modulated back to its home key. But this is *narrative* music; it is not performed on a keyboard; it is played by calling images into the mind with spoken words. For the story to seem complete, tensions that are built up by that means must be discharged in the same way. The energy of the mouse skin is resolved, or answered, by the transfer of claws from eagle to bear, and the energy of the salmon egg is answered by the woodchips that transform themselves to salmon.

Between these events comes another resolution or response. The story began with two geese who came out of the sky and undressed, becoming recognizable as women. Both were caught, and one was released, by a single man. In the sky, that scene is answered by another in which the roles are reversed and the numbers cut in half. The man comes up from earth, dresses as a salmon, and evades being caught by half a man. These scenes balance one another much as episodes balance one another in sonata form, and as figures balance one another in pictorial composition. The “unnatural” figure of the clawless bear also mirrors the “unnaturally” meatless diet of the famine-stricken humans, and

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the bear's unmistakable politeness in dealing with the eagle balances the rudeness of the unnamed human whose words drove the Goose Woman back to the sky.

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lines
240–244

The transfer of the claws is nicely symmetrical with another event: the transfer of the spearhead from the hunter to the being with one leg. It is, as we shall see, an old requirement that talons, claws or fingers should *change hands* in this story. It seems that they must also fall to earth – which they do when they are passed from eagle to bear. The webbed feet and wings that belong to the geese must also go back to the sky, and a man who masquerades as a mouse and a coho must return to earth and water.

This structure was built by an artist enraptured by a story that unfolds behind his eyes. And the story is more than just a dance of the animal transvestites, a display of imagistic acrobatics, structural pattern or surreal cartoon ballet. It is grounded, let us remember, in a poignant story of love and loss. It is grounded in a world where perfection is perceived but imperfection rules, and where humans and nonhumans sometimes both want more than they can have.

page 34:
line 47

page 36:
line 96

Superficially, the story turns on the distinction between *xhaayda gataagha*, human food, and *hlgitghun gataagha*, goose food. The Goose Woman's arrival in her human husband's village, and the terms of her remaining there, are stated in a simple sentence: *Xhaayda gataagha waadluxhan gam lla taaghangas*: "She ate no human food at all." Her departure is provoked by the inversion of this sentence: *Hlgitghun gataagha lla quyaada ttxhawgwa aa*: "She thinks very highly of goose food." Both a famine and a feast intervene between these sentences. The Goose Woman's father sends the feast – but does he also send the famine? Is the famine *caused* by the Goose Woman remaining among the humans and in human form? If so, is the famine a test for the human community to pass, or is it simply an inevitable symptom of disorder in the world?

When her father sends food to the hungry humans, the Goose

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Woman tells them what is happening. *Hakw dii xhaatgha dii gi dangghattlxhattahlga*, she says: “Now my father is sending [something] down to me.” She speaks this sentence twice, to herald the arrival of two shipments of food. The complex verb she uses, *ghattlxhattahl*, means “to move quickly downward.” This verb will reappear, once only, later in the story – when the raven delivers the Goose Woman’s husband back to the surface of the earth. There the verb is differently inflected to form the second half of a double subordinate clause (a convenient construction in Haida which I cannot gracefully replicate in English). The prefix changes too, from *dang-* (which points to the object of the verb) to *giit-* (which points to the subject). The root form, nonetheless, is unmistakable:

pages
35–36:
lines
79 & 89

*Ll ghaaxhaghihljihliigaay dluu
lla dangat giitghattlxhattahldalaay dluu
nang qwaagadaaganga qqaayghudyas gha lla lla qqa'adas.*

page 44:
lines
295–297

*When he grew very tired
and let himself fall with him,
he dropped him onto a shoal exposed by the tide.*

The verbal echoes or thematic repetitions that are clear in the Haida have been submerged in these line-by-line translations. In the full translation with which we began, I added a phrase, “down through the clouds,” to each of the three sentences in which the verb *ghattlxhattahl* appears. “Down” and “through” have counterparts within that verb itself, but clouds are nowhere mentioned in the Haida. I put them in, to achieve in English a *noun-centered echo* equivalent in weight to the *verb-centered echo* in the original. This is far from a perfect solution, yet I think something like it is required. The poem’s thematic echoes are not mere accidents of language or ornamental rhymes.

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It is a tale of transformation, or transposition, as musicians say: bird transposed to woman; man to bird. In the interim, a mouse becomes a woman and her burrow a big house; a man becomes a mouse and then a salmon; joy becomes despair. Dead redcedar springs to life as fish with cedar-colored flesh, and passion and devotion die. Even as the headman's loveliest and youngest daughter's husband in a fine house overhead, a hunter's life becomes routine.

But there are other transformations here, and other continuities, that summaries know nothing whatever about. In the beginning of the poem, when the hunter sees the women in the water and the goose skins on the shore, Ghandl says, in two superbly simple lines,

pages
32 & 33:
lines 13–14

Lla qindi qawdihaw
lla dawghattlxhasi.

After watching for a while,
he swooped in.

The verb in the first line is *qing*, to watch or to see. It can apply to anything with eyes (and that includes, in Haida biology, the earth, the sea, the forest and the sky, and nearly everything that lives in all these realms.) The verb in the next line is *dawghattlxha*. It means to swoop in order to catch prey. It calls to mind one class of creatures only: the small hawks and falcons that in English are called kestrels, merlins and sharp-shins. In Haida, these three species have one name: *dawghattlxhaayang*. The hunter of the birds, transformed into a gull at the end of the poem, was himself a bird of prey in the beginning.

After Swanton put this poem in writing, he asked Ghandl if it had a name. Ghandl called it *Ghungghang llanaagha gha nang xhitiit ttsinhlgwaangxidaghan*. This means "In his own father's village, someone was just about to go out hunting birds." The

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verb used here includes a component, *-xidi-*, that makes it a verb of anticipation or inception. The young man is getting ready to go, or thinking of going, out to hunt birds, but he hasn't yet gone.

In the opening lines of the story itself, Ghandl uses a different form of the verb: not *ttsinhlghwaangxidaghan* but rather *ttsinhlghwaanggwang*, which implies that the hunting has begun. I wonder if this subtle shift in the verb has something to tell us. Should we take this story at face value as a tale of what happened, maybe, once upon a time? Or does Ghandl's title set it into a different context, as something that hasn't happened yet but that could occur tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow: something like a dream, or a young hunter's preparatory vision?



It is easy to imagine – and not very difficult, at present, to go to a few galleries and see – how the elements in Velázquez's *Supper at Emmaus* could be differently combined by other painters. Rembrandt, for example, painted the same subject ten or twelve years later, while he was still in his early twenties and living in Leiden. There is very little chance that he had seen Velázquez's painting – a work by another young artist like himself, with as yet only a local reputation, living 1600 sea miles to the south – but Rembrandt also knew the story. He assembled the same figures on his canvas, while turning the arrangement inside out. The result (never trimmed or overpainted) now hangs in the Musée Jacquemart-André in Paris.

Rembrandt's serving maid occupies the spot Velázquez gave to the disciples. She is far off in the background to the left, perhaps suspecting nothing. Both she and Christ, who looms up large and ghostlike on the right, are potent silhouettes. In the foreground, also faceless, is a nearly invisible figure: a pilgrim crouching down in sudden recognition. But at the center of it all, as in a mirror, there is a face. It is drawing back, twisted with astonishment. It belongs to the other pilgrim – and to us.

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Ghandl's poem, like Rembrandt's painting, or Velázquez's, takes the form it does because that is the form its author gave it. It has the human poignancy it does because that poignancy is something its author had learned to perceive and communicate. The images and themes of which it is made are largely materials he inherited – and along with these components, he inherited a narrative and visionary grammar for putting them together. He could however have built them into a vastly different structure – a more sentimental structure, for example, or a colder one, with a lower emotional charge – just as any fluent speaker of a language can assemble a cluster of words into sentences with very different values.

Pokhodsk is farther from Hlghagilda than Leiden from Seville. It is an overgrown mission station, trading post and neolithic village near the mouth of the Kolyma, which empties into the East Siberian Sea, 3000 rough and windy miles north and west of Haida Gwaii. There in the summer of 1896 a Yukaghir woman told several stories to a listener willing, like Swanton, to take dictation. I do not know her Yukaghir name, but a royalist Russian missionary had given her another: Ekaterina Rummyantsev. Her listener was a Russian political activist, anthropologist and novelist named Vladimir Germanovich Bogoraz.³

Ekaterina Rummyantsev had not only a Russian name; she had considerable exposure to Russian colonial culture. She therefore told her stories to Bogoraz in the Russian language. And some of Bogoraz's research in Siberia was funded, like Swanton's work in Haida Gwaii, through the American Museum of Natural History in New York, at the instance of Franz Boas. The stories Rummyantsev had learned in Yukaghir and told to Bogoraz in Russian were, for this reason, ultimately published not in Leningrad or Moscow but in New York, in Bogoraz's English translation.

In the absence of an actual transcription, there is no hope of appraising Rummyantsev's skill or stature as a mythteller, and no hope of studying her work and Ghandl's together on equitable

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terms. But one of her stories has something important to tell us, even when reduced to English prose. Side by side with Ghandl's poem, it shows how the same events and characters can be assembled very differently by different human beings, just as the same figures can be grouped very differently in different painters' paintings and in different people's dreams. This is Rumyantsev's story as rendered by Bogoraz:⁴

There was a family of Tungus. They lived in a tent. They had three daughters. The girls, when going to pick berries, would turn into female geese. In this form they visited the sea islands. One time they flew farther than usual. On a lonely island they saw a one-sided man. When he breathed, his heart and lungs would jump out of his side. The Geese were afraid and flew home.

After some time, they had nothing to eat, so they went again to the sea islands for berries. Wherever they chose a spot on which to alight, One-Side appeared and frightened them away. At last they found a place full of berries. They descended and laid aside their wings. They picked so many berries that they could hardly carry them all. They went back to the place where they had left their wings. The wings of the youngest daughter were gone. They looked for them a long time. At last, evening came and the sun went down. It grew very dark. The two elder sisters reproached the youngest one: "Probably you have taken a liking to One-Side, and you have asked him to hide your wings. Now remain here alone and let him take you!"

She almost cried while assuring them that their suspicions were unjust. "I have never seen him and never thought of him." They left her and flew away. She remained alone.

As soon as they were out of sight, One-Side appeared carrying her wings. "Well, now," he said. "Fair maiden, will you not consent to marry me?" She refused for a long time. Then she gave in and said, "I will!"

"If you are willing," said One-Side, "I will lead the way." He took

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her to his house. It was the usual house, made of wood, with a wooden fireplace. He proved to be a good hunter, able to catch any kind of game. Still he had only one side, and with every breath his heart would jump out. They lived together for a while, and the woman brought forth a son. The young woman nursed the infant. But One-Side did not want to stay at home. He would wander about all the time and bring back reindeer and elk. They had so much meat that the storehouses would no longer hold it. He was a great hunter. He hunted on foot on snowshoes, for he had neither reindeer nor horses for traveling.

One time he set off to hunt as usual. Then his wife's sisters suddenly came and carried the youngest sister and her little son off to their own country. The small boy, while carried on high, shouted, "O father! O my father! We are being carried by aunties to their home, to their home."

One-Side ran home as fast as he could, but he came too late. They were out of sight. Only the boy's voice was heard far away. Then he shot an arrow with a forked head in the direction whence the voices seemed to come, and the arrow cut off one of the boy's little fingers. One-Side found the arrow and the finger and put them into his pouch.

Then he started in search of his boy. He walked and walked. A whole year passed. Then he arrived at a village. A number of children were playing sticks. He looked from one to another, thinking of his boy. There was one poor boy who was dressed in the poorest of clothing. His body was mangy, and his head was bruised and covered with scars. First, One-Side paid no attention to him, but when he finally looked at this boy, he saw that the little finger on his left hand was missing. He snatched the finger out of his pouch and placed it beside the hand, and indeed it fit! The poor boy was his son! "Whose boy are you?" asked One-Side.

"I am mamma's boy."

"And where is your father?"

"I have no father. I used to have one, but now I have none."

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"I am your father."

The boy refused to believe it and only cried bitterly. "If my father were alive, we should not be so wretched, mother and I."

The elder sisters had married and made their youngest sister a drudge in the house.

"Why is your head so bruised and scarred?" asked One-Side.

"It is because my aunts order me to enter the house only by the back entrance, and every time I try to go in by the front entrance, they strike my head with their heavy staffs."

"Let us go to your house."

They arrived at the house. The boy went ahead and One-Side followed him. They came to the front entrance. As soon as the boy tried to go in, his eldest aunt jumped up and struck him with her iron staff. Then the woman saw the boy's father and felt so much ashamed that she fell down before him.

He entered the house. They hustled about, brought food of every kind, and prepared tea. They ate so long that it grew very late and it was time to go to bed. On the following morning after breakfast, he said to his brothers-in-law, "Let us go and try which of us can shoot the best with the bow! You are two and I am only one."

They made ready their bows and arrows and began to shoot at each other. The elder brother-in-law shot first, but One-Side jumped upward, and the arrow missed him. The second brother-in-law also shot. One-Side jumped aside and dodged the arrow.

"Now I shall shoot," said One-Side, "and you try to dodge my arrows." He shot once and hit his elder brother-in-law straight through the heart. With the second shot he killed his other brother-in-law. Then he went back to the house, killed his wife's sisters and took home his wife and son.

One time he set off as usual to look for game. When he was out of sight of his wife, he took off the skin that disguised his true form and hung it up in the top of a high larch tree. He became a young man, quite fair and handsome, just like the sunrise. He went home and sat down on his wife's bed. While he was sitting there, he was

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about to take off his boots. The woman began to argue. "Go away from here! My husband will be here soon, and he will be angry with me. He will say, 'Why have you let a strange man sit on your bed?'"

"I am your husband," said he. "Why do you try to drive me away?"

"No," said the woman. "My husband is one-sided, and you are like other men."

They argued for a long time. At last he said, "Go and look at that tree yonder. I hung up my one-sided skin on it." She found the tree and the one-sided skin, and now she believed him. Then she caught him in her arms and covered him with kisses. After that they lived happier than ever.

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Ghandl's poem about the hunter who married his prey has been spared the indignities visited on many works of indigenous oral literature. It was transcribed in the language in which it was spoken, and it has quietly been travelling the world since 1905 in Swanton's admirably faithful prose translation. In that form it is also the subject of a sensitive, close study by the poet Gary Snyder.⁵ It is nonetheless a literary work that we have only just begun to understand.

I have been calling it a poem and a piece of spoken music. That is because I hear in it resonant textures and densities, and vividness and shapeliness and clarity that, for me, define the terms I want to use. I cannot tell what terms to use for Rumyantsev's story, because Bogoraz's translated paraphrase is all that now remains.

Some things, nonetheless, can be known about the story on the basis of the paraphrase alone, just as some things can be known about a painting on the basis of a poorer painter's copy or a second-hand account.

The paraphrase can tell us, first of all, that the list of narrative ingredients is very much the same – almost uncannily the same

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– in Rummyantsev’s story and in Ghandl’s. The ingredients are very much the same, but they are differently assembled by two very different cooks, one of whom has learned the European fairytale custom of serving happy endings for dessert. “The same story” has become two wholly different meals for the mind. That much is clear, though in the one case we can still attend the feast – because we have the actual text – and in the other we can only read the menu and collect the empty plates. There is no supper at Pokhodsk because no one took dictation – just as, in the legacy of Velázquez, there was once no supper at Emmaus because vandals, in whose hands the treasure rested, chose to have the painter’s vision blotted out.

Digesting the sense of the world – of which we are made, and to which we return – is just as essential to life as digesting its physical substance. The mythteller’s art is as old, universal and vital as that of the cook. The congruences between these tales told by Ghandl and Rummyantsev are reminders of that fact. Drawing on this old, shared recipe – as dormant in its way as Luke’s abbreviated version of the supper at Emmaus – and adding some significant resources of his own, Ghandl could construct a work of art that can stand beside the paintings of Rembrandt and Velázquez or, I think, beside the sonatas of Haydn and Mozart. It is a work of music built from silent images, sounding down the years. It is a vision painted indelibly in the air with words that disappear the moment they are spoken.