

## Parlando Notation: Accentual Quantitative Verse by Thomas Christopher

Here I present my notation for lyric/parlando verse with chord-progression accompaniment. I avoid using musical notation in order to avoid over-specifying the rhythm and pitch, leaving much of those up to the performer. When I perform my verses, I aim for a conversational tone. My notation can be edited into the text of the poems/song lyrics.

Using this notation does not compel one to have musical accompaniment. It can also guide *a cappella* recital.

### ***Time Markers***

The verses are annotated with special characters and formatting to indicate how the syllables fit into the musical beat. The two fundamental principles are

1. The music will have a regular cadence of stressed and unstressed beats.
2. Stressed syllables of the verse will mostly be spoken on the stressed beats of the music.

The notation uses *timing markers*,

^ (caret) for a stressed musical beat, and

~ (tilde) for an unstressed beat.

**Lyrical measures** are either two or three beats:

^ ~ (trochee)

^ ~ ~ (dactyl)

These may be combined into musical measures, e.g., 4/4 time, ^ ~ ^ ~, and 6/8 time, ^ ~ ~ ^ ~ ~.

### ***How To Annotate a Song***

Current popular songs are typically composed of up to three poems. The verses are a two or three stanza poem, the chorus and the bridge, if present, are single stanza poems. The corresponding lines of the verses need to have at least the same number of lyrical measures and perhaps the same distinctive patterns of accents, pauses, long and short syllables.

Consider this example, the chorus of one of my songs:

a dance does not last past the dancing.  
 we dance for the sake of the dance.  
 why should we crave the eternal  
 and not give ourselves to this dance?  
 let's dance for the sake of the dance.  
 just dance for the sake of the dance.

First, place a ^ immediately in front of any syllable that is to be spoken on the downbeat of a lyrical measure. (Do not leave a space between the ^ and the syllable. That has a special meaning we will see later.) This gives us

a ^dance does not ^last past the ^dancing.  
 we ^dance for the ^sake of the ^dance.  
 ^why should we ^crave the e^ternal  
 and ^not give our^selves to this ^dance?  
 let's ^dance for the ^sake of the ^dance.  
 just ^dance for the ^sake of the ^dance.

Optionally, underline long syllables. We are not required to sustain them longer than a beat, but they are available. This is mainly useful for suggesting how the verse can be set to music. It suggests the note length. If I only intend to recite over a chord progression, I don't use this.

a ^dance does not ^last past the ^dancing.  
 we ^dance for the ^sake of the ^dance.  
 ^why should we ^crave the e^ternal  
 and ^not give our^selves to this ^dance?  
 let's ^dance for the ^sake of the ^dance.  
 just ^dance for the ^sake of the ^dance.

For verses, you may wish to remove underlines that are not in the same place in all verses to keep the verses more parallel. On the other hand, this notation gives the performer discretion to improvise, and as we will see for enjambed lines, there may be good reason not to make the lines perfectly parallel. Ultimately it is a matter of artistic sensibility.

Because of its emphasis on stressed syllables and the consideration of long and short syllables, this can legitimately be considered **accentual quantitative verse**.

The stressed syllable and the unstressed syllables following it are all contained in a lyrical measure. We will add ~'s to indicate how syllables are to be distributed among the unstressed beats. In placing the ~'s, we are interested in several things:

- The lyrical metric. Almost always, three syllable feet will call for a three beat lyrical meter, two for two.
- Long syllables.
- How long it will take to say strings of syllables.
- What special rhythmic patterns are desired.

- How much discretion the performer is to have in choosing the rhythm.

Here are rules for placing ~'s:

- Put exactly the number of ~'s as called for in the lyrical measures.
- Place a ~ immediately in front of a syllable you want spoken on a secondary beat.  
^dance ~for ~the ^sake
- Place spaces after a time marker where you want the following syllables spoken *during* the beat, but not necessarily *on* the beat, as shown in "^sake ~ \_ ~ of the ^dance."
- The absence of syllables between a ^ or ~ and the following timing marker indicates a pause.

Put an underscore immediately following a time marker where you want the preceding lyric beat's time lengthened to include this beat. Any syllables in the preceding beat can be continued or moved into this beat. One reason would be to give enough time to a long syllable. A more important reason is to maintain a conversational cadence: multiple stresses in the same word or in a tight phrase cannot be spoken conversationally while hitting the stressed beats.

^sake ~ \_ ~ of the ^dance

^stand there ^staring ^at the ^emptiness. ~ \_ ^ ~ ^ ~

- To give the performer complete discretion about the timing of the syllables in the lyrical measure, put ~ \_ or ~ \_ ~ \_ at the end of the measure.

^why should we ~ \_ ~ ^crave

which could be spoken as "^why ~should ~we ^crave," or "^why should we ~ \_ ~ ^crave," or "^why ~ ~ should we ^crave,"

- If the syllables in a measure will take too long to speak in that time, you can put a ^ \_ at the end of the measure to give them another measure to extend into, e.g.,

^not give ourselves ^ \_ to this ^dance? ~ \_ ~ ^ ~ ~ let's

Add lyrical measures as needed to adjust line length:

- Add more empty lyrical measures as needed for pauses.
- Each line of a verse requires the same number of lyrical measures as the same line in each verse, so add more empty measures to bring each corresponding line up to the same length.
- Add more empty lyrical measures as needed for padding out lines to the number of musical measures required, e. g., 4/4 and 6/8 time require 2 lyrical measures per musical measure, and with an integral number of musical measures per line, each line requires an even number of lyrical measures.

Move the initial unstressed syllables of a line to the final measure in the preceding line. Some measures may need to be placed before the poem for the unstressed syllables that begin the first line. A few bars of introduction are needed anyway. The alternative of moving the last measure of the preceding line to

the beginning of the current line would make the current line begin in the middle of a musical measure of 4/4 or 6/8 time, which would be confusing. For 2/4 or 3/4, it wouldn't be a problem.

After adding ~'s, we have

^ ~ ~ ^ ~ ~ a  
 ^ dance ~ does ~ not ^ last ~ \_ ~ past the ^ dancing. ~ \_ ~ ^ ~ ~ we  
 ^ dance ~ \_ ~ for the ^ sake ~ of ~ the ^ dance. ~ \_ ~ ^ ~ ~  
 ^ why should we ~ \_ ~ ^ crave ~ \_ the ~ \_ e ^ ternal ~ \_ ~ ^ ~ ~ and  
 ^ not ~ give ~ our ^ selves ~ to ~ \_ this ^ dance? ~ \_ ~ ^ ~ ~ let's  
 ^ dance ~ \_ ~ for the ^ sake ~ of ~ the ^ dance. ~ \_ ~ ^ ~ ~ just  
 ^ dance ~ for ~ the ^ sake ~ of ~ the ^ dance. ~ \_ ~

Once on the computer, the notation can be decluttered. I use these three conventions:

1. I sometimes remove ~ \_ or ~ \_ ~ \_ at the end of a two- or three-beat lyrical measure that contains several syllables. No specified secondary beats means the performer has complete discretion on how to say the syllables. (If there is only one long syllable, I often leave ~ \_ or ~ \_ ~ \_ in to take more space on the line and make the measure more visible.)
2. I boldface a syllable immediately following a ^ and remove the ^ if I intend to stress the syllable. Occasionally I want to speak an unstressed syllable on a beat, so I leave the ^ for example,

**jostling** ^ and abrasion

3. I italicize a syllable that is to be stressed, but is not on the heavy beat. This occurs in noun phrases as well as where the meaning requires certain words to be emphasized.

^ **Night-time** be- **gins** with the **feasting** ~ \_ ~

^ I know ^ what I **chose**, but **what** would **you**? ~ \_

These edits render the verse

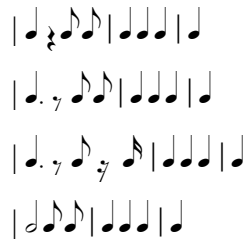
^ ~ ~ ^ ~ ~ a  
**dance** ~ does ~ not **last** ~ \_ ~ **past** the **dancing**. ~ \_ ~ ^ ~ ~ we  
**dance** ~ \_ ~ for the **sake** ~ of ~ the **dance**. ~ \_ ~ ^ ~ ~  
**why** should we **crave** ~ \_ the ~ \_ **eternal** ~ \_ ~ ^ ~ ~ and  
**not** ~ give ~ ourselves ~ to ~ \_ this **dance**? ~ \_ ~ ^ ~ ~ let's  
**dance** ~ \_ ~ for the **sake** ~ of ~ the **dance**. ~ \_ ~ ^ ~ ~ just  
**dance** ~ for ~ the **sake** ~ of ~ the **dance**. ~ \_ ~ ^ ~ ~

Make sure the corresponding lines in verses are parallel, i.e., that they have the same number of lyrical measures and the same distinctive rhythms.

Distinctive rhythms are only partially specified by the notation. Consider

**dance** ~ \_ ~ for the **sake** ~ of ~ the **dance**. ^

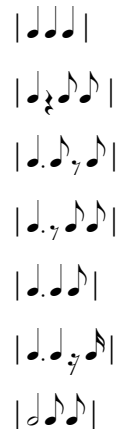
the first "**dance**" can be sustained and the " for the" come during the last beat, just before "**sake**", while in "**sake** ~of ~the **dance**" all the syllables come on evenly spaced beats. In musical notation, this could give us any of these, among others:



For

**crave** ~ \_ the ~ \_ e-

we could get any of these, among others:



## Enjambed Lines

When a sentence continues onto another line, breaking in mid thought, pauses during the musical beats at the end of a line may make the sentence harder to understand. Here are examples of what may be done to ameliorate the problem.

In converting some roundels to songs, the three lines of iambic pentameter contained in the stanzas suggested adapting 12-bar blues for the chord progressions. That gives four bars, eight lyrical measures per line.

Here's what the first two lines of the poem "So Soft" become:

^ ~ ^ ~ ^ ~ ^ So  
**soft** the **night**, so **soft** her **body** **pressed** ~ ^ ~ ^ ~ ^ a-  
**gainst** my **chest** the **first** time **dancing** **slow**. ~ ^ ~ ^ ~ ^ Her

The long delay before the word "against" is awkward at best. The first thing we can do about it is to reduce the length of the first line of each stanza. Since the music will be in 4/4 time, we need an even

number of lyrical measures per line. We can reduce the eight lyrical measures to six, and the six measures are enough for pentameter. Note that the length of the first line in *each* of the stanzas must be shortened to six lyrical measures. This change gives us

^ ~ ^ ~ ^ ~ ^ So  
**soft** the **night**, so **soft** her **body** **pressed** ~ ^ a-  
**gainst** my **chest** the **first** time **dancing** **slow**. ~ ^ ~ ^ ~ ^ Her

That may be satisfactory, but we can go further by moving the pause to a logical place:

^ ~ ^ ~ ^ ~ ^ So  
**soft** the **night**, ~ ^ so **soft** her **body** **pressed** a-  
**gainst** my **chest** the **first** time **dancing** **slow**. ~ ^ ~ ^ ~ ^ Her

Moving the pause will not cause too much of a problem with parallelism. All of the initial lines still have six measures and they all sound rather like normal speech. Breaking a distinctive rhythm, however, would be a problem.

Enjambed lines may not have good break points. The second stanza of "Stones Don't Feel" begins

... ~ ^ We  
**social** **misfits** **wish** we **could** **conceal** ~ ^ ~ ^ ~ ^ the  
**hurts** we **cause** in **daily** **conversation**, ^ ~ ^ ~ ^ the

If we shorten the initial lines of the stanzas, we still get an inconvenient pause

... ~ ^ We  
**social** **misfits** **wish** we **could** **conceal** ~ ^ the  
**hurts** we **cause** in **daily** **conversation**, ^ ~ ^ ~ ^ the

and there is no place earlier in the line to which to move the pause.

Maybe the pause between "conceal" and "the" isn't important enough to worry about. It can be diminished by suggesting the '-ceal' to be sustained:

**social** **misfits** **wish** we **could** conceal ~ \_ ^ \_ the

The pause could be moved after another long syllable, or a syllable we wish to emphasize, even if it is not naturally long:

**social** **misfits** wish ~ \_ ^ \_ we **could** **conceal** the

**social** **misfits** **wish** we could ~ \_ ^ \_ **conceal** the

Or we could duplicate another word or phrase

**social** **misfits** **wish** ~ \_ **wish** we **could** **conceal** the

Or we could *not* shorten the line, but duplicate the initial phrase of the second line into the first

... ~ ^ We  
**social misfits wish we could conceal the hurts** ~ ^ ~ ^ the  
**hurts we cause in daily conversation,** ^ ~ ^ ~ ^

## Chords

When I am learning to perform the lyric, accompanying myself on the banjo or baritone ukulele, I like to indicate the chord changes within the lines. I put the chords in brackets. For example, here I have indicated the chords in roman numerals, upper case for major and lower case for minor, not committing myself to a specific key:

[I] ^ ~ ^ ~ ^ ~ ^ No  
 [I] **single tile** can [iii] **see the whole design;** ^ ~ ^ ~ ^ No  
 [IV] **gem** controls the **light** that **lets** it [I] **shine;** ^ ~ ^ ~ ^ A  
 [IV] **raindrop cannot comprehend** the [ii ] **sea;** ^ ~ ^ ~ ^ We  
**single grapes don't know we share a [V] vine.** ^ ~ ^ ~ ^

## Volta

Alternative endings (or just alternate passages) can be specified in curly brackets (a.k.a. braces), e. g.,

[I] **No.** ~ \_ **No.** ~ \_ **No.** ~ \_ **No.** ~ \_ You **must get high.** ~ ^ ~ ^ ~ Get  
 [IV] **high** on **wine**, on **work**, on **love**, ~ which-  
 [ii] **ever cup** you **choose**, ~ \_ ^ ~ *drink* **deep.** ~ \_ ^ You  
 [V] **must get high** to **relish life.** ~ ^ ~ You  
 [I] **must ~ get ~ high.** ~ { [1,2] ^ ~ || [3] ^ ~ You  
     [I7] **must get high.** ~ ^ ~ ^ ~ You  
     [IV] **must get high.** ~ ^ ~ ^ ~ You  
     [I] **must get high.** ~ }

The third and last time through this chorus, it concludes with three more repetitions of "You must get high."

## *Appendix: Why This Notation Was Invented*

Noticing that there are more music than poetry open mics, and certainly a greater audience for songs than for recited poems, I decided to write lyrics and convert some of my previous poems to song lyrics.

Unfortunately, I don't have a composer as a collaborator, and I don't have much experience composing music. Since I don't have a singer as a collaborator either, I have been left with the problem of performing songs myself without actually resorting to singing.

Fortunately, there are inspirations<sup>1</sup>:

1. Rex Harrison - who demonstrated the parlando style,

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/rockandpopmusic/6654478/Top-ten-great-singers-who-cant-sing.html>

2. Leonard Cohen - the master of the monotonic phrase,
3. Bob Dylan - who demonstrates that with a nasal voice, you can sustain long vowels.

I decided to adopt *parlando* - "music to be performed as though speaking."<sup>2</sup>

**Parlando Singing:** A style where the rhythm--and often the pitch--of the tune are usually observed, but the "singing" sounds more like the speaking voice than the singing voice. Notes are often shortened, and the ends of phrases often have a downward inflection, simulating natural English speech. Rex Harrison was a master of this technique and used it in his role in *My Fair Lady*, among other musicals.<sup>3</sup>

I construct many of my poems to have a strong meter, and I recite them in performance. All I need is accompaniment for them to fit into the tradition of lyric poetry: Chord progressions are fine for accompaniment, which overcomes the difficulties of composition.

Lyric poems have a musical rhythm, and their topics often explore romantic feelings or other strong emotions. You can usually identify a lyric poem by its musicality: if you can imagine singing it, it's probably lyric. In ancient Greece and Rome, lyric poems were in fact sung to the strums of an accompanying lyre. It's the word *lyre*, in fact, that is at the root of *lyric*; the Greek *lyrikos* means "singing to the lyre."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/parlando>

<sup>3</sup> <http://voicestudio.kristinaseleshanko.com/SingingTerms.htm>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/lyric%20poem> My lyrics might be better called "banjoics."