I'VE GOT RHYTHM?

Ruth Rostron

This article is based on a lecture presented to the British Institute of Graphologists in which musical illustrations were also used. It was published in ‘The Graphologist’ Vol. 21 No. 2, Issue 79 Summer 2003. I was at the time a professional musician and had been a member of the Hallé orchestra for twenty-five years.

Rhythmic handwriting has been cited as an indication of musical talent, but does it necessarily go hand-in-hand with a sense of rhythm in music? Does good rhythm in writing suggest that the writer is a natural musician with an innate sense of rhythm, or is it possible to be a good musician and at the same time have writing which is disturbed or inharmonious?

The subject of rhythm in writing is complex but also obscured by some mystique, perhaps because it is not easy to identify like a single graphic indicator but is best perceived intuitively through the total writing pattern. Regularity can be measured but rhythm needs to be sensed. It is the ‘factor X’ which can lead to an understanding of someone’s make-up and an initial intuitive response to it can give a premonition of what will later be established methodically in an analysis.

Defining a ‘sense of rhythm’ is also tricky. Where it comes from is controversial and how do we know who possesses it? It is undoubtedly a vital factor in musicianship, so I decided to assume that all professional musicians must possess it to some degree and therefore used only their writing to explore these questions.

The subject of rhythm is complex yet at the same time essentially simple: rhythm has to have pulse and without a pulse there is no rhythm. The basic pulse in music is the beat, in handwriting the downstroke. Basically, having a sense of rhythm means having a sense of pulse.

Sir

Please to send me immediately the
Score of my music to the Midsummer
Night’s Dream, and the Conductor stick
which I left Monday on the desk
(if you found it) and the bill for
copying my Overture in C minor

Very truly yrs

Sample 1a  Beat – the Basic Pulse: distinct downstroke pressure
Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1809-1847) German composer, age 35, medium/light pressure
Portion of a letter dated 29 May 1844, reproduced by kind permission of Ingrid Spiegl
Sample 1 is the writing of the German composer Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1809 – 1847). It clearly shows the rhythmic pulse of distinct pressure in which firmer downstrokes alternate with lighter upstrokes. The consistent downstroke emphasis, together with the generally regular middle zone and good layout, reflects the rhythm of a self-disciplined and well-ordered life.

From an early age he was subjected to rigorous discipline with lessons beginning at 5am, and throughout his life consistent work underpinned his talents for piano playing, composing and conducting. He completed his violin concerto in 1844, the year this letter was written, after working on it for six years, and died exhausted three years later at the age of 38. Socially he was a great success and was said to be happily married, but his professional relationships were apparently not always so harmonious. Emotions in his music are generally expressed in a restrained and delicate way and the steady rhythmic pulse and firm downstrokes of his writing graphically illustrate a steady exercise of will-power and control over feelings.

Rhythm depends on pulse, but a regular pulse by itself does not constitute rhythm. A metronome gives us beats but it does not give us rhythm. It helps us to keep time but it does not give us a sense of timing.
Sample 2 is the equivalent of metronomic regularity in writing. It does have some natural flow but it is extremely regular and looks monotonous. She may be intelligent and diligent, but the rhythm of her life is predictable and dull. I expect that she is able to keep time very well when she plays.

However, strange as it may seem, being able to keep strict time does not necessarily mean having an excellent sense of rhythm, because it is also vital to have a sense of timing along with the ability to keep time. This means knowing instinctively when it is necessary to keep strict time and when it is possible to be flexible, i.e. when to keep to the rules and when to bend them.

Anything overly-regular, mechanical or automatic actually negates true rhythm, whether in music or in writing.

Eric Blom in *The Everyman’s Dictionary of Music* defined Rhythm like this:

‘In a larger sense the word means all that is concerned in music with matters dependent on time, such as the metre, the proper division of the metre into bars, the distribution and balance of phrases etc. But it also implies the proper performance of music in a natural, living and breathing way, as distinct from a merely mechanical accuracy. What is often called rhythm in modern dance music (he was writing in 1946), which is rigidly accurate in time, is therefore not rhythm, but merely a strict application of Time.’

Beats simply repeated do not have rhythm, though the vibrations can stimulate and excite people. Sound waves affect people physically, emotionally and mentally, as do light waves from pictures or a page of writing.

Rhythm first depends on a regular pulse, but for beats to become really rhythmic they need to be grouped together and given a variety of emphasis. Rhythm then depends on a repetition of these groups. In Ravel’s famous *Bolero* simple rhythmic groups gather extraordinary momentum through repetition, but most musicians hate this piece because it feels so relentless and unnatural.

The repetition feels alien because in the natural world forms change as they renew themselves. Clouds alter their formations, cats are born with different markings and oak leaves come in different shapes. Natural cycles vary as they repeat themselves. Spring may come early or late, a tide be high or low, our breaths deep or shallow. We all live and die, but our lives have different lengths.

Robert Saudek showed examples of similar periodic alteration and recurrence in people’s pressure patterns (see *Experiments with Handwriting* Exs. 54 & 55). Each example has a definite visual identity which is clearly apparent in spite of the fact that the variation in the pattern is sometimes considerable.

Clara Roman writes in her *Encyclopedia of the Written Word*:

‘The periodic recurrence of successive elements is the essence of rhythm’ and ‘A rhythmic pattern is established whenever the completion of one event or action appears as the beginning of another’.

In rhythmic writing there will be a periodic recurrence of similar features, in music a periodic repetition of rhythmic figures.
Sample 3 shows a harmonious consistency in style, though with a slight sense of persona. It has a naturally rhythmic pattern with similar features recurring periodically and the overall appearance is homogeneous. This reflects a basic stability in her personality and general consistency in her patterns of behaviour.

There is a slight jerkiness in the movement (she was suffering from arthritis) but the legibility and layout are very good, many letter forms and connections show originality, and there is a pleasing combination of poise and spontaneity. She is an individualist with high standards and a mind of her own, who also shows some concern with her image. (Notice the small PPI and small MZ). There is a sense of artistic vision and of feelings being sublimated in creative work.

The tall loops and stems of her writing stand out clearly and resemble barlines in both appearance and character. Traditionally barlines in music acted as visual landmarks to indicate that the note at the beginning of each bar was to be given the most emphasis. There would then be a natural impulse to move towards that point. Barlines therefore indicated the underlying pattern of grouping, emphasis and rhythm.

In a similar way the impulse pattern here seems to go from loop to loop. These are so large in relation to the MZ that they structure the pattern of the writing and give it points of emphasis. One rhythmic group seems to span the distance from eg. one y or g to the next. However, the writing is also quite disconnected which creates smaller units of rhythm eg. in the ‘m’ pattern or at points of clever linking. Within the larger framework are smaller sub-divisions, and longer units of rhythm run concurrently with shorter ones. They exist in proportional relation to each other. Like several instruments playing together, each can play a separate part with different notes and rhythms so long as there a harmonious proportional relationship between them.
In his book *Diagrams of the Unconscious* Werner Wolff shows how he discovered, through meticulous measuring, harmonious proportional relationships in signatures which are not immediately discernable, except perhaps at a subliminal level. With signatures of J. S. Bach (p.33) he illustrated how fundamental consistency may appear not only in absolute size but also in relative proportions which can remain stable and consistent while other, perhaps more obvious, features change.

Musical composition depends on proportional relationships in harmony and time. Musical rhythm exists in the dimension of time, and movement is the main component of writing rhythm. Writing on the page is of course actually static, but the dynamic forms are like movements captured in the making. The continuity is primarily what gives the impression of motion and fluent writing resembles a melodic line - it may be punctuated by breaks but these do not disturb the flow any more than rests interrupt a line of music.

The dimensions of time and space are as inseparable in writing as they are in music. The white spaces on the paper are an integral part of the total writing pattern, just as spaces or silences denoted by rests are an integral part of any rhythmic pattern.

There is a wonderful line in Pulver’s *Symbolism of Handwriting* which is translated as:

‘the space between word and line (is) filled with invisible life’.

In other words spaces are not like vacuums, empty and void, but more like silences in music which can be moments of respite, suspended animation or extreme tension. Musical phrases encompass silences like air-strokes making invisible connections between letters.

---

Sample 4  
*Rhythmic but irregular: space ‘filled with invisible life’ (Pulver)*  
*Male viola player, 40s, black ink, light pressure*
Sample 4 is lively, rhythmic but irregular writing which is full of connecting air-strokes. He is an artistic and creative man: restless, sensitive and impressionable, always falling in and out of love, quick-thinking but not practical, an unusual and unworldly person and a heavy smoker. In this sample not only is the actual writing very lively, but the space also seems to have a life of its own. The spacing is quite wide but it is still completely integrated with the writing so the total pattern of black and white looks full of nervous vibrations.

The configuration of the personality emerges through the writing pattern from a background of space, and may actually be perceived more sharply by alternating focus on it with focus on the white background. Betty Edwards in her Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain made a breakthrough in the teaching of drawing by encouraging students to focus on the space around an object, instead of on the object itself. This enabled them to see as if with new eyes. Using a similar technique can help us to perceive the rhythm of a piece of writing more clearly. We can intuitively sense it from the overall impression it makes on us, and then consider more analytically the interplay of the elements of its movement, form and spacing.

The rhythm of our writing depends ultimately (but not completely) on the coordination and condition of the muscles we use when we write. When they are in good shape our writing movements can be smoothly co-ordinated, and without mental or emotional problems to disturb the flow the motion can be carried on indefinitely. Clerks or scribes could write all day if they were emotionally detached from the content of what they were writing, just as musicians can perform repetitive movements for hours without strain so long as they are relaxed. Therefore the elasticity of the writing movements (or lack of it) together with the quality of the stroke, reflects the efficiency of our physical functioning, the condition of our nervous system, our emotional state at the time of writing, and the integration of conscious and unconscious elements in our personalities. However, it is not just through our movements, but also through the way forms are created and space is used that our inner world is reflected, along with our interrelation with the outside world.

So what characterises good rhythm in handwriting?

Sample 5 is the writing of the famous tenor Peter Pears, the companion of Benjamin Britten for whom the title role in Peter Grimes was composed.

The layout is excellent and there is generally a good balance between black and white on the page. The letters are well-proportioned and there is symmetry in the arrangement. The letter shapes are variable but have an overall consistency of style which gives the whole piece homogeneity. There is elasticity in the stroke, fluency in the connections, and no sudden jarring movements to disturb the continuity. The writing space is approached confidently, with quick speed, firm pressure and lively spontaneity. The baselines are flexible and rise slightly. The writing looks natural, the words are legible and the whole appearance is harmonious. All in all, the rhythm is excellent.

It has that ‘natural, living and breathing’ quality which Eric Blom thought was an essential quality of rhythm, and it came through in his music-making and his life as well as his writing. It shows that he was a man at peace with himself who lived in harmony with others. He had vitality and energy for action, will-power and determination. He was mentally alert, cultured, sensitive, adaptable and friendly, but safeguarded his right to privacy. He was true to himself.
Sample 5  
Excellent rhythm with ‘natural, living and breathing’ quality (Blom)
Male singer, age unknown, blue biro, medium pressure, top and bottom margins not shown, reproduced by kind permission of Ingrid Spiegl

So what key words are associated with good rhythm?

Cyclical pattern: Repetition with variation, Periodic alteration, Balance and Proportion
Consistency: Periodic recurrence, Homogeneity
Continuity: Fluency, Momentum
Conviction: Energy, Vitality, Spontaneity

The boundaries of these categories are not clear-cut.

Someone who has a strong sense of rhythm plays with rhythmic conviction. He just knows when it is the right moment to play and commits himself whole-heartedly to that moment. His sense of timing comes from within himself, and not just in response to a signal coming from outside. This person has the confidence to take independent action, plus the intuitive sixth sense to read the situation moment by moment, and the ability to co-ordinate his actions spontaneously with those of others. Such a person is likely to have the very rhythmic writing which is associated with a strong libido in progression (Jung).
The characteristic rhythm of a piece of writing arises from the interplay of all the elements. It reflects the total human organism – the complete entity of mind, body, emotions and spirit. In particular it registers the way in which our libido or psychic energy is expressed and how the conscious and unconscious elements in our make-up function together. Problems in any of these areas will therefore disturb the rhythm to a greater or lesser extent.

Physical problems which affect muscular co-ordination can disturb rhythm dramatically, but are usually quite easy to identify since the fluency or quality of the stroke is always affected. When physical difficulties lead to emotional and mental problems, the nature of the rhythmic disturbance will become more complex. The first casualty in rhythmic disturbance is usually continuity – the symbolic expression of energy well co-ordinated and positively directed.

*Sample 6* was written by Ron Goodwin, the composer, jazz trumpeter and arranger who wrote the music for about sixty films, including the ‘Those Magnificent Men in their Flying Machines’ and ‘Where Eagles Dare’. This theme is added here like a signature tune:

![Handwritten Sheet Music]

*Sample 6*  
*Rhythm disturbed by poor coordination, slow speed and contraction*  
*Ron Goodwin, composer and jazz trumpeter, 70s, blue ink, medium irregular pressure*

The writing looks hesitant and has a definite tremor. The narrowness surprised me because he came over as a relaxed and easy-going person. Thorough rehearsing enabled him to overcome his inhibitions on stage and give a polished performance. The rhythm is disturbed by the faltering progress of the writing as well as the excessive contraction, but this is compensated to some extent by the overall consistency of the style and spacing.
Physical problems will affect the stroke, causing awkward, jerky, angular and hesitant movements. Continuity of rhythmic movement will also be affected by very extreme or varying pressure, as well as fluctuations in size, slant, spacing, form etc. Rhythm will also be disturbed by excessive haste or release, excessive slowness or contraction, bizarre or illegible forms and imbalance between black and white on the page.

Sample 7  Rhythm disturbed by illegibility, excessive speed and release
Male concert pianist, Hungarian, age 64, blue felt tip, light pressure (signature cut through)

Sample 7 was written at such speed the forms broke down to threads and became illegible. This man is capable of being quite remarkably spontaneous. I once attended an important piano recital he gave in which, after performing the opening items, he dispensed with the rest of the advertised programme as well as the interval!

The writing is extremely lively and quite irregular with some jarring upward thrusts to disturb the flow. Nevertheless there is a recurrence of similar patterns and general homogeneity, plus regularity in the word and line spacing which helps to make the writing rhythmic, though it is on the verge of disintegration. An extremely quick-thinking, sensitive and responsive man, he has the wave-like ‘oscillographic’ shapes in his writing which Werner Wolff thought were unconscious projections of sound waves and particularly characteristic of musicians’ writing.
Sample 8  Rhythm disturbed by lack of proportion, balance and continuity  
Female flautist, 20s, blue pen, medium/heavy irregular pressure

Sample 8 has jumbled and irregular spacing which vividly expresses the turmoil of this young woman’s life. She is extremely energetic but she takes on too much, cannot prioritise and copes by the skin of her teeth. Those immensely long tails in the lower zone graphically represent her longing to put down roots but look like spanners thrown into the works – interrupting the movement like crises in her life. The lack of continuity, unfinished loops and irregular pressure suggest how keeping busy actually dispersed her energy and reduced the effectiveness of much of her activity.

Sample 9  Rhythm disturbed by bizarre, illegible forms  
Female viola player, 50s, pressure unknown

Sample 9 is the writing of a woman who appears to be extremely stressed. It has bizarre and illegible letter forms with some letters seriously split (eg. p) and some strangely caved in (eg. a and c). It look as if her lungs are about to collapse under pressure from all sides. However, the preservation of a lively rhythm suggests that she is still holding her own and resourcefully finding solutions to her problems.
Sample 10  Rhythm destroyed by excessive irregularity and lack of harmony
Male, 40s, American singer, blue ink, light/medium irregular pressure

Sample 10 is the writing of an internationally famous, prize-winning singer. Speed, forms and spacing are all erratic and the serious lack of consistency and continuity have all but destroyed the rhythm. He is temperamental, volatile, unable to express emotions in a natural way, and thinks attack is the best form of defence.

Conclusion
At the beginning I posed the question: Does rhythmic handwriting necessarily go hand-in-hand with a sense of rhythm in music? It is essential for a musician to have a sense of rhythm, so all the samples I used were written by professional musicians and clearly they do not all have rhythmic writing. (Of course every writing has some sort of rhythm: by ‘rhythmic’ here I mean a strong and lively rhythm).

Some have harmoniously rhythmic writing which reflects the cooperative and responsive disposition that is vital for good ensemble playing. Most have generally rhythmic (or slightly arrhythmic) writing which shows vitality but also undercurrents of doubts and fears that slightly disturb some aspect of the rhythm. This reflects their good physical and mental coordination, and the energy and confidence needed to be a performer, plus the emotional complexity and sensitivity that makes them artists. Some have writing with rhythm which is disturbed in several aspects, and which therefore has more serious implications for their health, as well as their ability to function effectively as people or as musicians.

It appears that it is indeed possible to be a good musician and have writing that is rhythmically disturbed or inharmonious.