

# THE SOUND OF FRENCH MUSIC AND THE MUSIC OF FRENCH: FROM MELODY TO PROSODY

For the past six years, my husband and I have been invited as judges for the World Languages Declamation Contest organized by Michele Lepietre at Lincoln-Sudbury (MA) High School. Students prepare for weeks in advance, memorizing their chosen texts and working closely with their teachers on pronunciation and delivery. The grand prize winner this year gave a fantastic dramatic rendering of *Seeräuber-Jenny*, Berthold Brecht's poetic narrative from the *Dreigroschenoper* (*Threepenny Opera*). Even more impressive were her near-native rhythm and intonation. I, too, knew her text by heart, since one of my favorite recordings is that of Lotte Lenya singing Kurt Weill's Berlin theater songs. It was obvious that the student had worked with the same CD since her delivery was so similar to Lotte Lenya's interpretation. In her declamation, she really "sounded German."

As French teachers, one of our most challenging goals is to have our students "sound French" when they speak. How might we better incorporate French songs into our classroom activities so as to sensitize students to the distinctive melody and rhythm of the language they are learning? This essay begins with some personal reflections on the music of French followed by several practical classroom techniques.

The most memorable songs in any language are those in which the lyrics and the tune are so closely intertwined that the rhythm of the language is reflected in the melody and, conversely, that the melody of the song mirrors the intonation pattern of the language.

Check this out for yourself. As you read aloud the lyrics to *Home on the Range*, you will discover that the stressed syllables are precisely those which, in the song, carry the beat. Whether you speak or sing the words, the rhythm and prosody are identical.

Oh, **give** me a **home** where the **buffalo roam**,  
Where the **deer** and the **antelope play**,  
Where **seldom** is **heard** a discouraging **word**,  
And the **skies** are not **cloudy** all **day**.

Irving Berlin, who learned English as a child when his family immigrated to the U.S. from Siberia, was particularly sensitive to the close link between language and melody. For him, it was the words that dictated the music. Note the unique speech-melody patterns in two of his best-known songs:

**Anything** you can do, I can do **better**./ I can do **anything better** than **you**./  
No, you **can't**. Yes, I **can**. (from *Annie Get Your Gun*)

**I'm dreaming** of a **white Christmas**, **just** like the **ones** I used to **know**...

This interplay of stressed and unstressed syllables within a word or phrase is not only typical of English speech. It also characterizes Latin and most European languages. As you read the following lyrics and then hum the tunes, and you will see how closely words and music fit together.

Latin: **Gaudeamus igitur / Juvenes dum sumus**

Spanish: **Yo soy un hombre sincero / De donde crece la palma**

German: **In München steht ein Hofbräuhaus / Eins, zwei, g'suffa**

Italian: **Arrivederci, Roma / Goodbye, goodbye to Rome**

But what about French? How many times have we heard non-speakers of the language tell us how "beautiful" our language is? Often students give as a reason for choosing French that they love the sound of the language. I must admit that such observations always used to puzzle me. As a speaker of French, I would naturally focus on the message being conveyed and thus was unable to step back and listen only to the sound of the language. Recently, though, as I took up the flute again after a lengthy hiatus, I began to wonder. What is it that makes French different? What is the "sound of French?" What is the "sound of French music?"

As we learned in our phonetics classes, French pronunciation differs from American English in several ways:

- a. French vowels are pure and not glided.  
**COMPARE:** *seau* with "so"
- b. French vowels are clearly spoken and never reduced to a schwa (or "uh" sound).  
**COMPARE:** *séparer* with "separate"
- c. French syllables tend to be open, that is, they usually end on a vowel sound.  
**COMPARE:** *États-Unis* /e ta zy ni / with "United States"
- d. French nasal vowels are pronounced without sounding the "n" or "m"  
**COMPARE:** *Inde* with "and"
- e. French consonants in final syllables are clearly released.  
**COMPARE:** *type* with "stop" (in English one can end the word with lips closed)

However, important as these individual characteristics are in establishing whether a learner has acquired a near-native "French accent," they are not the main components of the "music" of French. Rather it is the supersegmentals, that is, the rhythm and the intonation, that create the overall feeling or impression of the language and form the basis of its prosody.

So what is it that makes English and French sound so different?

- a. Stress patterns  
In English, as we noted earlier, each longer word has its own stress pattern of accented and unaccented syllables. The accented syllable is louder and longer than the unaccented syllables.  
**OBSERVE:** Good **morning**, **Missus McDonald**.  
In French, there is no word stress. The accent falls on the last syllable of a string of words or on the last syllable of a single word if it is said alone. The accented syllable is longer, but not louder, than the others.  
**COMPARE:** *Bonjour!* *Bonjour madame.* *Voici madame Dupont.*
- b. Syllable length and versification  
In English, unaccented syllables are much shorter than accented ones. Since both types of syllables alternate within words and phrases, a line of poetry is measured by the number of its beats or accented syllables. These metric units or

“feet” each have one stressed syllable and one or two unstressed ones. For example, in Longfellow’s poem “Paul Revere’s Ride” each line has four feet.

**OBSERVE:** Listen my children and you shall hear  
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere...

In French, all unaccented syllables are of similar length. Therefore, in French versification one must count the number of syllables in each line. For example, LaFontaine’s “Le Corbeau et le Renard” alternates lines of ten and eight syllables.

**COMPARE:** Maître Corbeau sur un arbre perché  
Tenait en son bec un fromage.

(Note that in French poetry, where the mute e is often pronounced, the unaccented syllable preceding a mute e may be somewhat lengthened while the syllable with the mute e is correspondingly somewhat shortened. However, the overall effect of even syllables is maintained).

c. Mid-sentence intonation patterns

In English, the intonation falls at the end of a statement. In a longer sentence, the intonation stays even or falls somewhat at the end of each non-final phrase.

**OBSERVE:** I’d like a coffee → and a croissant. ↘

In French, the intonation falls at the end of a statement also. However, in a longer sentence, the intonation rises at the end of each non-final phrase, thus giving a sense of lift or lightness.

**COMPARE:** Je voudrais un café ↗ et un croissant. ↘

d. Linking of words

In English, words are usually pronounced separately unless they constitute a meaningful group.

**COMPARE:** nitrate vs. night rate; the White House vs. the white house

In French, not only are the words in a phrase linked together, but a normally silent final consonant may be pronounced as the initial consonant of the next word (liaison) in order to maintain the desired alternation of consonant-vowel-consonant-vowel.

**OBSERVE:** Ils habitent aux États-Unis. /il za bi to ze ta zy ni/

Since the French and English languages sound so different, and if lyrics and melody are indeed intimately intertwined, then French songs should sound very different from English songs. And so they do.

In the three well-known examples below, observe how the unaccented syllables are sung on short even notes (dots) and the syllables at the end of a word or group of words are longer (dashes) but not necessarily louder. The syllables tend to begin with consonants and end on vowels.

Che- va- liers de la ta- ble ron- de, / Goû- tons voir si le vin est bon.

[“Alouette”] ... Je te plu- me- rai. / Je te plu- me- rai la tête” [bis] A- lou- ett’ [bis]

Sa- vez- vous plan- ter les choux, / à la mo- de, à la mo- de?

Sa- vez- vous plan- ter les choux, / à la mo- de de chez nous?

In French songs, the release of the final consonant of a word (*ronde*, *mode*) is indicated with the pronunciation of a mute e. (In “Alouette,” some singers also pronounce the final e of *tête* and *alouette*).

Observe also how the melody reflects the phrasing of the lyrics. In the sentence *Je te plumerai*, the accent falls of *-rai* (which is sung on a longer note). But in *Je te plumerai la tête*, the accent falls on *tête* (and *tête* has the longer note). Similarly, in the simple phrase *à la mode* the longer note coincides with *mode*, but in *à la mode de chez nous*, the accent falls on *nous* which is given the longer note.

Sometimes the composer begins the phrase with a longer note, as if establishing the key and/or heightening the anticipation of the listener. However, even in songs of this type, all the unaccented syllables are sung on shorter even notes, with a longer note at the end of the phrase.

À la clai- re fon- tai- ne, / M’en al- lant pro- me- ner,

J’ai trou- vé l’eau si bel- le / Que je m’y suis bai- gné.

[“La Vie en rose”]

Quand il me prend dans ses bras, / Il me par- le tout bas,

Je vois la vie en ro- se.

This characteristic French prosody, consisting of strings of short even syllables leading to a longer final syllable, is reflected not only in traditional folksongs and “chansons,” but also in French popular music and, more recently, in French rap (e.g., MC Solaar’s well-known “Bouge de là”).

In *South Pacific*, Richard Rodgers’ melody for the French song “Dites-moi pourquoi” matches the prosody of the lyrics, thus clearly distinguishing it from the English-language songs of the musical, such as “Some Enchanted Evening.”

An exception to the close link between French music and the prosody of the spoken language occurs when the composer forces the lyrics to fit the melody, as with the martial rhythm of the opening of *La Marseillaise*. Note how accents uncharacteristically fall on the words *la* and *est*.

*Allons enfants de la patrie, Le jour de gloire est arrivé.*

In the rest of the anthem, however, the words and the melody are in harmony with each other.

This disconnect also occurs when French lyrics are superimposed on a song originally written in another language. For example, “Waterloo Road,” a piece by the British band Jason Crest, became a hit in France when Joe Dassin popularized it as “Aux Champs-Élysées.” Note the uneven rhythm and English-sounding prosody.

*Aux Champs-Élysées, / aux Champs-Élysées*

*Au soleil, sous la pluie, / à midi ou à minuit*

*Il y a tout ce que vous voulez aux Champs-Élysées*

A similar challenge occurs when English lyrics are written for a French melody. Note how the lyricist of “Autumn Leaves” found it necessary to create original verses to correspond to the French prosody of “Les feuilles mortes.”

*C’est une chanson qui nous ressemble, Toi, tu m’aimais et je t’aimais.*

The falling **leaves** drift by the **window**                      The autumn **leaves** of red and **gold**.

But let us return to our point of departure. How is it that non-speakers of French notice the “beauty” of the language, the “music” of its prosody, while those of us who speak the language often do not? Recent advances in neuroscience have established that in general it is the left hemisphere of the brain that discriminates among words (semantics, phonetics) while the right hemisphere detects prosody (pitch, rhythm, stress). In other words the left hemisphere processes the meaning of the words whereas the right hemisphere is sensitive to the music of the language. Thus, people who do not know French will be sensitive only to the overall sound and flow of the speech, because as they listen to an unfamiliar language only the right hemisphere of the brain is activated.

What implications do all these observations have for the teaching of French?

First of all, in addition to grammar, vocabulary and phonetics, we should sensitize students to the prosody of the language, and here music can play an important role.

Secondly, and of equal importance, the prosody of the French language is clearly reflected in French folksongs and *chansons*. (Prosody and melody are also closely linked in most contemporary French songs, although some composers adapt English, African or Caribbean rhythms).

Over twenty-five years ago, the German songwriter Uwe Kind used as a point of departure the similarity between German and English prosody to create his “SingLingual Method” which he entitled *Eine Kleine Deutschmusik: Learning German Through Familiar Tunes* (Berlin: Langenscheidt, 1983). In the first song, for example, beginners learn to say “I am a foreigner and I don’t speak German well...”

TUNE: She’ll be **comin’** round the **mountain** when she **comes**...

LYRICS: *Ich bin **Ausländer** und **spreche** nicht gut **deutsch**...*

Once students have memorized the German lyrics, they learn to speak them as sentences in a conversational situation and do so with near-native accent and rhythm. However, Uwe Kind’s method linking the foreign language to American tunes simply does not work with French because, as we have seen, the prosody of the two languages is so very different.

Nor is the introduction of music into the language classroom a new idea. As generations of teachers can attest, students enjoy listening to French songs and singing along. In fact, students generally memorize sung lyrics much faster than recorded dialogs because the tunes “stick in their heads” (right hemisphere) and serve as a memory aid (for the left hemisphere). Creative teachers have often used songs to reinforce new vocabulary and structures. Recently French teacher/composer Alain Le Lait created dozens of short learning songs for children and teenagers (see [www.yadeeda.com]).

Twenty years ago, Brian Thompson put together a comprehensive teacher handbook which is as valuable today as when it was written, entitled *La Clef des chants: La Chanson dans la classe de français*. (It is now out of print, but can be consulted online at [www.faculty.umb.edu/brian\_thompson/clef.htm]). In it, Thompson provides numerous suggestions for selecting authentic songs and using them to reinforce vocabulary and grammar, as well as to develop overall listening comprehension and cultural sensitivity.

The wealth of resources on YouTube and the Internet make it relatively easy to find French songs appropriate to the level of the class. Laurent Patenotte has created a very useful classroom Web site on which he combines video clips and lyrics of a broad variety of French songs (see [http://itg.sps.edu/languages/patenotte/Liens\_pour\_les\_cours/French\_Seminar/Chansons.htm]). For excellent technical guidance, see Marat Sanatullof’s recent article entitled “Integrating Songs with Internet Resources and Educational Software into the French Classroom” ([www.dickinson.edu/prog/necftl/reviewarticles/63-sanatullof.pdf]).

The aim of this essay is to invite teachers to take a further step and consider new ways of using French songs and lyrics to reinforce the students’ awareness and control of French prosody. Here are some possible teaching techniques.

### 1. Tapping out the rhythm

As you play a song, or as the students sing along, have everyone tap out the rhythm of the syllables. Then have students say the words in the same rhythm, linking the syllables together and beginning each with a consonant sound.

Example: from "Sur le pont d'Avignon"

Sur le pont d'A- vi- gnon / On y dan- se, on y dan- se,  
Sur le pont d'A- vi- gnon / On y dan- se tous en rond.

### 2. Simple substitution

Once students have tapped out the syllables of a song or a verse, and are able to say the words in rhythm and link the syllables together, have them change one of the elements.

Example: from "Chevaliers de la table ronde"

Toc toc toc Qui frappe à la por- te?  
Je crois bien Que c'est son ma- ri.

Two or three students go to the back of the class.

One knocks on the wall and says "Toc toc toc".

The class, without looking, says: "Qui frappe à la porte?"

The teacher indicates a person who takes a guess:

"Je crois bien que c'est [Véronique]."

If the guess is correct, the students at the back respond: «Oui, c'est Véronique.»

If not, they respond: "Non, ce n'est pas Véronique." Then another person ventures a guess.

### 3. Double substitution

Once students have tapped out the syllables of a song or a verse, and are able to say the words in rhythm, have them use their imagination and change two elements.

Example: from Éric Vincent, *Il n'y a plus de crocodiles à Cocody*

This humorous refrain is based on a play on words – *crocodiles* and *Cocody* (a suburb of Abijan, in the Ivory Coast, which you can point out a map).

Il n'y a plus de cro- co- diles à Co- co- dy, mon vieux.  
Il n'y a plus de cro- co- diles à Co- co- dy.

Students provide new fillers for: *Il n'y a plus de ...à...*

*Il n'y a plus de dinosaures à Chicago...*

Variation: *Il n'y a pas de...à...*

*Il n'y a pas de neige à Paris.*

The second part of the sentence could be modified to include other prepositional phrases of location, e.g., *aux États-Unis, dans notre école, sous le bureau.*

### 4. Creative completion

Once students have tapped out the syllables of a song or a verse, and are able to say the words in even linked syllables, have them suggest original completions to one of the sentences.

Example: from Françoise Hardy, "Tous les garçons et les filles de mon âge"

Tous les gar- çons et les filles de mon âge se pro- mènent dans la rue deux par deux.

Individual students are called on to personalize the sentence while maintaining the same even rhythm of the song.

*Tous les garçons et les filles de mon âge jouent au foot (ont un mobile, envoient des textos...)*

**EXPANSION:** The teacher can use the new sentence as a point of departure for additional questions: *C'est vrai, Christophe? Tu joues au foot? (Tu as un mobile? Tu envoies des textos?)*

### 5. Declamation

Students listen to a song tapping out the syllables, and then practice singing along. Once they know the lyrics well, they practice speaking them, with the same regular French rhythm and linked syllables. For class, they pick a favorite verse and recite it, either alone or in unison with one or two classmates.

Examples: Georges Brassens, "Chanson pour l'Auvergnat," "La Vie en rose," Jacques Prévert et Joseph Kosma, "Les Feuilles mortes"

**EXPANSION:** Once students are comfortable reciting the lyrics of songs, they can be encouraged to transfer this feeling for French prosody as they read aloud French poetry.

Examples: Guillaume Apollinaire, "Le pont Mirabeau"

Sous le pont Mi- ra- beau cou- le la Seine  
Et nos a- mours /Faut- il qu'il m'en sou- vienne

La joie ve - nait tou - jours a - près la peine  
 Jacques Prévert, "Déjeuner du matin"

Il a mis le ca - fé / Dans la tasse  
 Il a mis le lait / Dans la tasse de ca - fé  
 Il a mis le sucre / Dans le ca - fé au lait

## 6. Dramatization

Songs that lend themselves to dramatization can be prepared in the same manner as for declamation. Two (or more) students play the roles.

Examples: "Au clair de la lune" (Pierrot and the person knocking at his door)  
 Misraki, "Tout va très bien, Madame la Marquise" (la Marquise and the people she calls)

As students practice tapping along with the lyrics of French songs, they will become sensitized to basic French prosody, with its linked chains of short even syllables ending on a longer syllable. In the classroom, this awareness can then be transferred to other speaking activities. Students can evenly tap out the syllables as they read aloud or as they respond to oral grammar and vocabulary exercises.

Gradually students will acquire a natural sounding French rhythm and their speech will start to reflect the music of the language. As a result, they will be much more comprehensible to native speakers whom they may encounter here or abroad. Moreover, as they internalize basic French prosody patterns, they will find it much easier to understand spoken French. Through the sound of French music, they will learn to incorporate the music of French into their interpersonal communication activities.

Rebecca M. Valette  
 AATF Past-President  
 Boston College  
 [valette@bc.edu]