

Castle Rock Writers Conference

**The Music
of What Happens:
Exploring Soundscape**

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It's a kind of vista made of *sonic* impressions
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instead of visual impressions.

It's not just *music*, though when we talk about a good poem, we often talk
about its music.

The problem with thinking about a poem's "music" is that we may miss the
larger impression. We may miss the sonic forest
for the sonic trees!

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Soundscape is something more than simply spoken language: it is language *intentionally shaped to make speech emotionally engaging and memorable.*

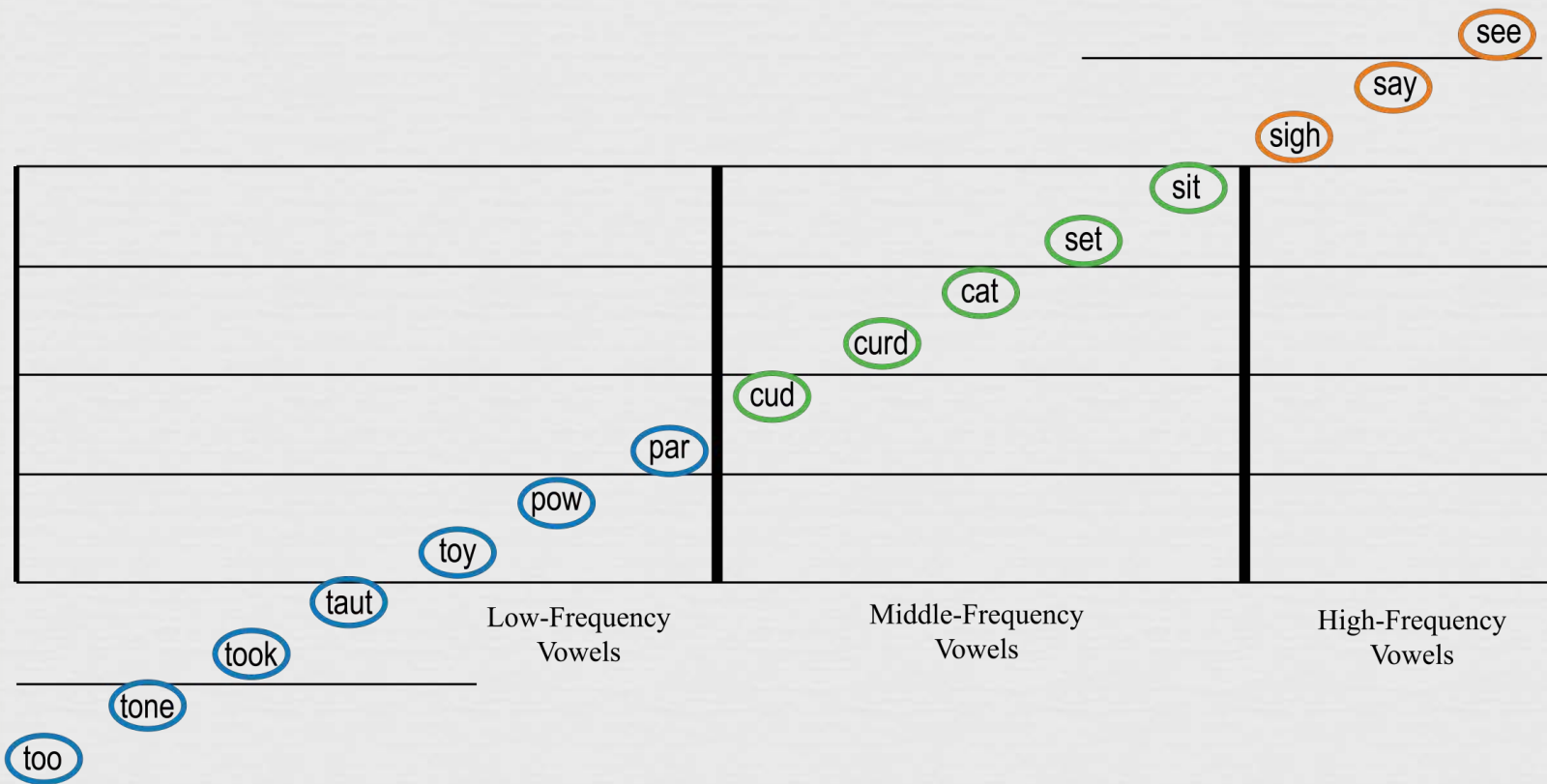
Soundscape: Vowels

If we think of vowels as musical notes, we can present them as a musical scale.

Like musical notes, these vowel sounds are rooted in their relative frequencies – that is, the number of completed alternations in a soundwave per unit of time.

High frequency sounds have a larger number of alternations, low frequencies a smaller number.

Soundscape: Vowels



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In late winter
I sometimes glimpse bits of steam
coming up from
some fault in the old snow
and bend close and see it is lung-colored
and put down my nose
and know
the chilly, enduring odor of bear.

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I sometimes glimpse bits of steam
coming up from
some **fault** in the **old snow**
and bend **close** and see it is **lung-colored**
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the chilly, enduring **odor** of bear.

Low Frequency

In late **winter**
I **sometimes** **glimpse** bits of steam
coming **up from**
some fault in the old snow
and **bend** close **and** see **it is** lung-colored
and put down my nose
and know
the **chilly**, **enduring** odor of **bear**.

Middle Frequency

In **late** winter
I sometimes glimpse bits of **steam**
coming up from
some fault in **the** old snow
and bend close and **see** it is lung-colored
and put down **my** nose
and know
the **chilly**, **enduring** odor of bear.

High Frequency

Soundscape: Vowels

Over all the hills now,
Repose.
In all the trees now
Shows
Barely a breath. Birds are through
That sang in their wood to the west.
Only wait, traveler. Rest
Soon for you too.

Over **all** the hills **now**,
Repose.
In **all** the trees **now**
Shows
Barely a breath. Birds **are through**
That sang in their **wood to** the west.
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Low Frequency

Over **all the hills** now,
Repose.
In **all the trees** now
Shows
Barely **a breath**. **Birds** are through
That sang in their wood to **the west**.
Only wait, **traveler**. **Rest**
Soon for you too.

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Over all the hills now,
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High Frequency

Soundscape: Vowels

Nothing is so beautiful as Spring—
When weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush;
Thrush's eggs look little low heavens, and thrush
Through the echoing timber does so rinse and wring
The ear, it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing....

Nothing is **so** beautiful as Spring—

When weeds, in wheels, **shoot long** and lovely and lush;
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High Frequency

Soundscape: Interruptions

Consonants

In speech, consonants are like percussive sounds in music. They interrupt or punctuate the notes – that is, the vowels.

The whole rising-and-falling pattern of vowels in any poem is affected by the constraining patterns of the poem's consonants.

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Rests

There are also “rests” in poems – pauses – those moments of silence that can be indicated in a number of ways: a period (full stop), a long dash or comma (full or half stop), the generally shorter rest of a line ending, and so on.

Poets in the last century began leveraging the visual qualities of typography to capture even subtler silences in verse.



e. e. cummings
[in Just-]

in Just-
spring when the world is mud-
luscious the little
lame balloonman

whistles far and wee

and eddieandbill come
running from marbles and
piracies and it's
spring

when the world is puddle-wonderful

the queer
old balloonman whistles
far and wee
and bettyandisbel come dancing

from hop-sotch and jump-rope and

it's
spring
and

the

goat-footed

balloonMan whistles
far
and
wee

Robert Bly on His Invention of the “Ramage”

From Bly's preface to *Turkish Pears in August*

A few years ago, I began to hear inside the stanza individual sounds such as *in* or *air* or *ar* call to each other.

[...]

Hearing these cries put me into a new country of poetry. I was not hiking among ideas or images or stories, but among tiny, forceful sounds. What would happen if I adopted *in* or *ar* as the center of a poem? Decisions on content would then depend on that. I let that happen. For length, I settled on eight lines, which is larger than a couplet but smaller than a sonnet.

[...]

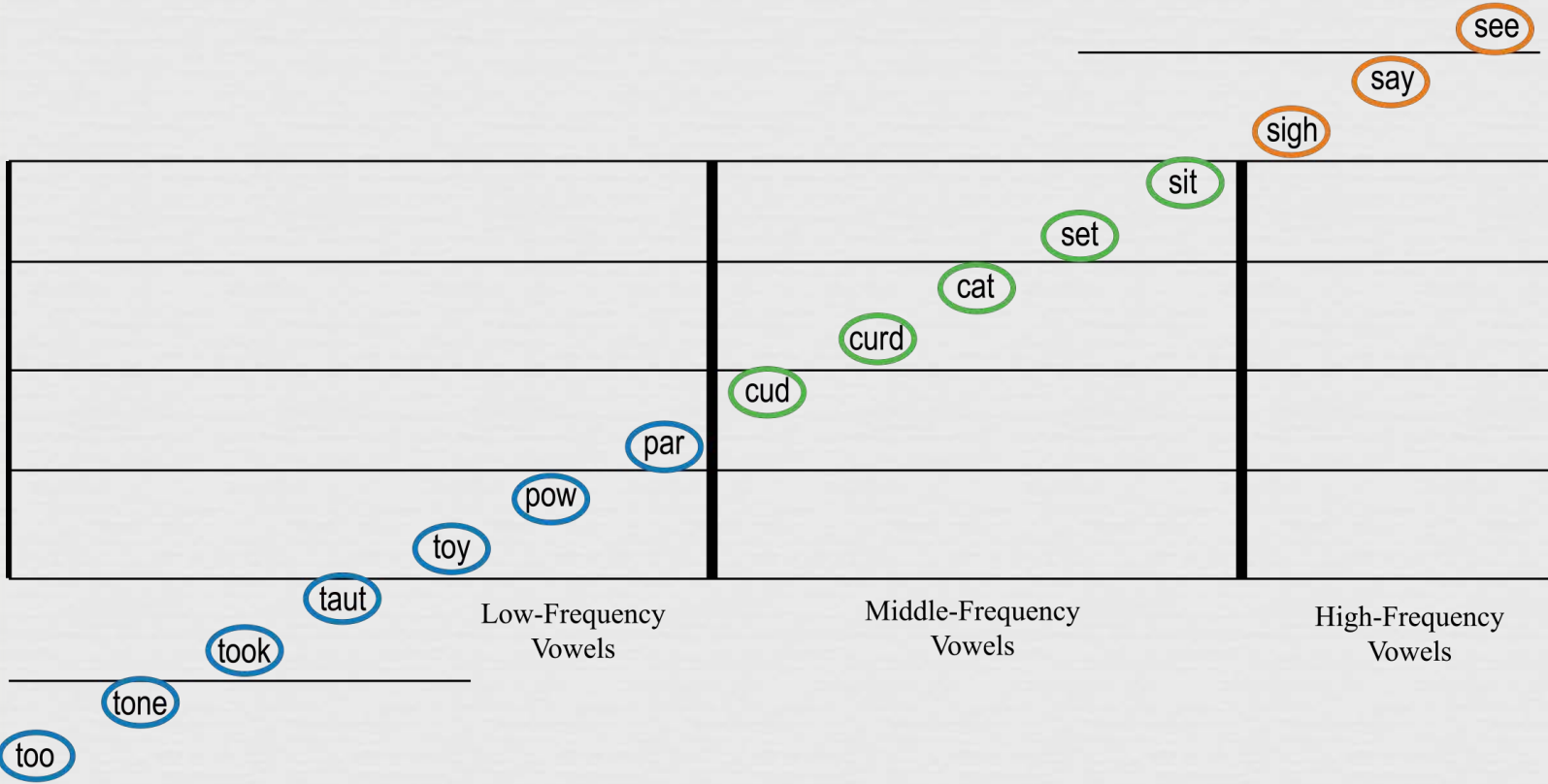
I eventually accepted *ramage* as a title for this brief poem.

“Wanting Sumptuous Heavens,” by Robert Bly

No one grumbles among the oyster clans,
And lobsters play their bone guitars all summer.
Only we, with our opposable thumbs, want
Heaven to be, and God to come, again.
There is no end to our grumbling; we want
Comfortable earth *and* sumptuous heaven.
But the heron standing on one leg in the bog
Drinks his rum all day and is content.



Create Your Own Ramage



Joe's Information

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