CAESURA AND MELODY

STEFAN HAGEL
Wien

Theory

Usually, metricians treat caesura as a statistical phenomenon only. In any given verse, frequencies of word end are calculated for all positions; and if we encounter a word boundary in a specific verse at a location where word end proves frequent, this will be regarded as a caesura. Apart from statistics, different assumptions can be, and have been, made about the prosodic nature of caesura in Ancient Greek.

One is that caesura was expressed by a pause, as it can be the case in stress-timed languages. A pause in the course of the verse is, however, not compatible with quantitative metre, whose inherent rhythm it would necessarily destroy. Of course, this applies only to caesuras within fixed rhythmical units. The assumption of pauses between such units, defined by obligatory word end, be they verses or cola, are not only possible but indeed very likely, especially in lyric metres. Anceps syllables are notorious indicators of such pauses. But I would not call this type of boundary a caesura in the metrical or rhythmical sense; I would prefer simply to speak of pauses.

Another possible assumption is that minimal prolongation of pre-caesural syllables would lead the hearer to the perception of a prosodic boundary. These prolongations may well be assumed to have been in a temporal range which would not disturb the rhythm. In modern performance of poetry we are accustomed to such prolongations, and so we are in vocal and even instrumental music. We should certainly be aware of this possibility for ancient verse, too, all the more as there might be statistical evidence for it. Anyway, speakers of a

mora-timed language as Ancient Greek are likely to have perceived much more subtle aberrations from strict rhythm than we do; so we should use this device sparingly in reconstructions of performance.

It is also conceivable that caesura had no measurable representation in performance at all, that it was created only in the mind of the audience, who combined recognition of sense units with metrical expectation created by custom. This assumption will hold just as long as no prosodic implementation of caesura is made plausible. But there is another possibility, which this paper will present: caesura as a melodic phenomenon.

To consider this, we have to start from the pitch nature of ancient Greek word and sentence accent, as it has been worked out in admirable clarity by Devine and Stephens [1]. Each Greek accentual unit, be it a single word or an accented word plus appositives, bore a typical frequency contour, consisting of a rising and a falling part (cf. Diagram 1) [2]. The upper turning point was the point of accent, which eventually came to be marked graphically. Chaining such units together resulted in a wave-like frequency pattern, where the upper turning points mark the accents while the lower turning points mark the boundaries between accentual units, namely lexical words or appositive groups.

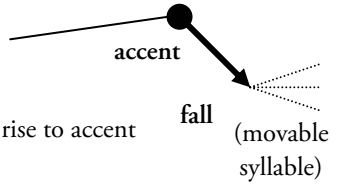


Diagram 1. — *The accentual excursion.*

Longer chains of this type became separated into units such as minor and major phrases (cf. Diagram 2). While speech frequency generally tended to fall from initial high to final low frequency in the course of the utterance, the boundaries between such larger units were marked by reset or boost to higher frequency again.

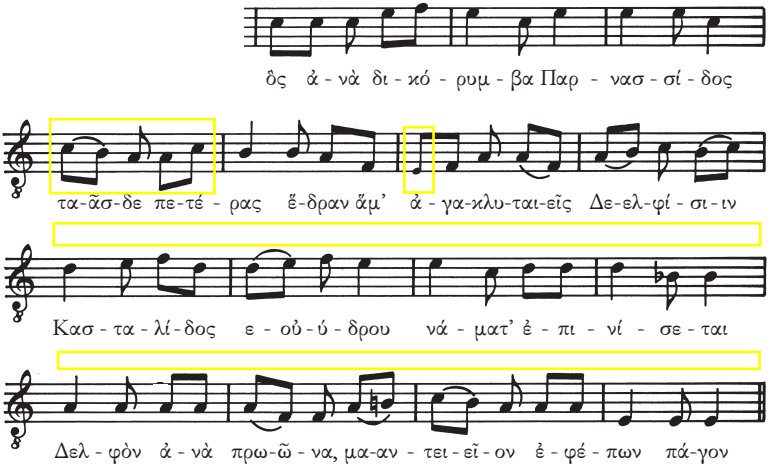
1. Devine/Stephens 1994, 157–194, 350–375, 429–432, 435–451, 494–497.

2. An oxytone, lacking a falling part, added to the following pre-accentual rise, which resulted in a more pronounced rising contour.

Practical Applications

In the second part of this paper, let us concentrate on possible applications of a theory of melodic caesura. First of all, it goes without saying that in modern performance any approach to the sound of ancient poetry will fail if one does not take into account the nature of pitch accent, not only at the level of the word, but also of the sentence melody. But we might exploit our knowledge of the melodic nature of caesura also in some more specific ways.

The first to consider is a rather theoretical one: if we have a text preserved together with its musical setting, the latter might be of some help in determining the position of caesuras. As we are seldom in this lucky position, one example must suffice (and maybe it is also the only one).



Example 2. — *End of the first part of the First Delphic Paean. (Pöhlmann 1970, 19.6–8)*

Example 2 is taken from the end of the first part of the First Delphic Paean. This piece is written in a continuous paeonic rhythmic flow that does not lend itself to a metrical analysis into smaller units, such as verses[9]. If the editors punctuate the text at all, they print a comma after ἐπινίσεται, even if this leads to difficulties with the translation. Why they do so, we can only guess. Presumably they have been guided by the rhythmical movement, interpreted

9. For a rhythmical analysis, see Hagel 2000, 133–164.

by ears accustomed to European music. The melody, however, continues to fall until πρῶνα, and only then sets out to a last contour. According to our theory we would take this as a strong clue, that the syntactic unit, too, does not find its end before πρῶνα. So ἀνὰ πρῶνα should not qualify the participle ἐφέπων but the main verb ἐπινίσεται. If interpreted in this way, ἀνά keeps its full meaning, just as it did some lines before: it is not from the mountainside, that Apollo is approaching his holy precinct. Instead, he is using the same way as the human procession, which leads to the temple from below. How reasonable this interpretation is, becomes clear when we take a closer look to the preceding text. The maidens of Delphi, the hymn states, are accompanying the god – but it is hard to see how they should have been able to go 'over the twin peaks of this crag of Parnassus' [10].

Another possible application of our theory concerns those who try to compose melodies of ancient flavour to ancient texts. For such a task, a musical understanding of caesura is certainly valuable: wherever we are able to determine the location of caesura with certainty, it provides at least a clue to the overall melodic structure. A weak clue this will be, admittedly, but at least something to start from, and something that most probably should be taken into account.

The third and last application, which shall be presented in this paper, is the reconstruction of the melodic patterns of early epic verse, which has been a focus of our research in Vienna for several years. Since oxytones are connected with rising pitch as opposed to caesura, it has proved possible to deduce colometric patterns directly from the distribution of oxytones in the verses. Instead of a discussion of technical details [11], some examples of colometric structures may suffice here. These are obtained from the distributions of accents in certain samples of verses, where rising and falling tendencies for all verse positions combine to schemes of verse-melodic structure, compiled by the computer to intuitive diagrams.

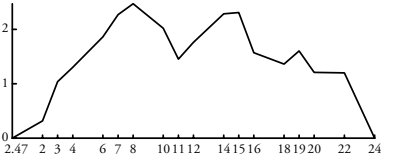


Diagram 3. — *Iliad, 'average' verse melody.*

10. From the translation by West 1992, 289.
11. See Hagel 1994. An extensive publication is in preparation.

Diagram 3 shows the scheme we get when calculating the average of all verses in the Iliad. The middle caesura is clearly visible as a significant incision, to which both of its types contribute: the penthemimer at 10 morae as well as the trochaic caesura at 11 morae. The rise to the second half of the verse ends abruptly at the bucolic dieresis (16 morae), which is, however, not followed by another marked melodic rise. Instead, the melodic line continues to fall until the end of the verse. This average line accords well the colometric structure of the hexameter as one would outline it in general. But the melodic tendencies inherent in that ancient oral verse are liable to great variation, according to different syntactic or colometric patterns.

To filter groups of verses with coherent colometric structure out of the texts, we can make use of the punctuation as given by the editor. Admittedly modern punctuation is by no means necessarily reflecting what might have been caesura in original performance, but at least it is a useful guide to sentence end, and after all even a useful approach to minor syntactical boundaries given that we are working with large sample sizes.

So we may, for instance, calculate the melodic tendencies inherent in the group of those verses that have punctuation at the bucolic dieresis but lack punctuation at verse end. This is the machine-readable approximation to strong enjambment after bucolic dieresis. The result of such an evaluation is shown in Diagram 4.

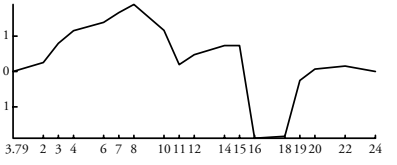


Diagram 4. — *Strong enjambment.*

Here the middle caesura is still present, but the bucolic dieresis clearly prevails, its enforced colometric function being reflected in melody. We encounter also the opposite phenomenon of melodic caesura at the verse end, namely a rising slope without subsequent fall: the melody is just as incomplete as the syntax and both come to their common end only in the next verse.

An altogether different case is the so-called periodic enjambment, where additional information is added at the beginning of the verse to a preceding verse with complete syntax. We can approach this type by calculating the

melodic average tendencies of all those verses that have punctuation before or in trithemimer (6), and that follow a verse with sentence final punctuation neither at its end nor at the bucolic dieresis. In this sample, periodic enjambment is reflected melodically by a small, presumably low pitched excursion of its own just at the beginning of the verse (Diagram 5), immediately followed by its main caesura: the subsequent span between the enjambed colon and the normal middle caesura is obviously not sufficient to carry yet another complete colon. So the middle caesura is overridden and the overall colometric structure still appears to be bipartite. In this case, the melodic line tells us more than the statistical evaluation of word boundaries would do: these still observe the usual patterns which include word end after 10 or 11 morae in nearly all cases, and thus would not reveal the superimposed structure.

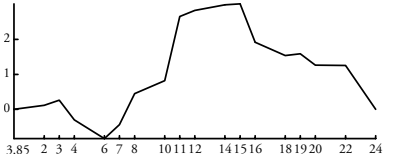
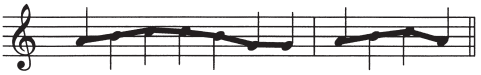


Diagram 5. — *Periodic enjambment.*

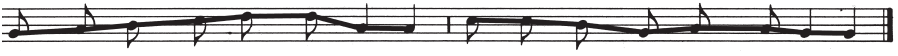
It is quite intriguing that we encounter an example of exactly the same melodic stylisation that we have inferred for Homeric song also in the Delphic hymns, dating from so many centuries later. In Example 1 above, the epithet χρυσεοκόμαν stands as an 'afterthought' to Φοῖβον before, just as many epithets in the Homeric texts do in the case of periodic enjambment. The sentence is perfectly complete already with the preceding μέλψητε, and we observe that the melody has also reached its lowest note there. The following χρυσεοκόμαν is then set to a small low-pitched melodic contour (followed by a sudden rise to the next syntactic unit), exactly as our statistics have suggested for periodic enjambment in the Homeric texts, originally performed half a millennium before.

A quick comparison with some melodies that are available from other epic traditions reveals that there may be some basic common features, but also how outstanding the art of the ancient bards must have been. Especially well-documented are the songs of the South-Slavic guslari [12]. To a simple ten-syllable

12. For the South-Slavic tradition I am much indebted to information provided to me by Georg Danek.



Example 4. — *Chanson de geste. (Reichl 2000, 236f.)*



Example 5. — *Kalevala melody. (Wiora 1966, 20)*

In any case we are able to observe an interrelation between the metrical/syntactical unit and the melodic excursion, which is correlated with low-pitched incisions at caesural locations and verse boundaries. And it will be safe to conclude that this feature reflects not a historical relationship of the traditions cited, but a cross-linguistic phenomenon, that found its way into musical renderings of the frequency contours of spoken language, especially in epic song with its notorious prominence of text above music.

It will, however, be noticed, that the above examples are taken from traditions whith metrical structures far less complex than the dactylic hexameter, which include for instance not more than one caesura, whose position is fixed. Such restrictions are necessary if in a given tradition all verses are sung to much the same melody. For the hexameter, this is impossible: not only forbid the ever changing colometric patterns the application of a constant melodic scheme; even at the level of the syllable each verse must have had its specific melody, just because the patterns of accents are never the same. And that the original performance followed these patterns is obvious, because we have already seen that the accents were distributed according to desired melodic trends at least to a certain extent.

So we must conclude that the Homeric bard had to design an individual melody for each verse, and that he devised text and melody at once, in the same act of improvisation, as long as the oral tradition was still alive. The melodies created thus would likely have fallen short of what modern listeners would call music, being the mere stylisation of accent and sentence melody in a limited tonal range, without contributing very much to interpretation. The original audience will of course have been trained in taking melody as an indicator of colometry and caesuras. So the entrancing rhythmic flow of performance, embracing both poet and audience, could go on unchanged for hours and hours, most probably in a continuous interplay between sung line and short

Pöhlmann, E. (1970) — *Denkmäler altgriechischer Musik*, Nürnberg.
Reichl, K. (ed.) (2000) — *The Oral Epic: Performance and Music*, Intercultural Music Studies 12, Berlin.
West, M. L. (1981) — 'The Singing of Homer and the Modes of Early Greek Music', *JHS* 101, 113–129.
(1992) — *Ancient Greek Music*, Oxford.
Wiora, W. (1966) — *European Folk Song: Common Forms in Characteristic Modifications*, Cologne/London.

Figures are from:

Example 1–2: Hagel 2000.

Example 3–4: Reichl 2000, with modifications.

Exemple 5: Wiora 1966, with modifications.