



## Commentary on Justin London's MTO 0.2 article

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REFERENCE: [mto.93.0.2.london.php](http://mto.93.0.2.london.php)

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[1] Like many of his other illuminating writings on these topics, Justin London's "Loud Rests and Other Strange Metric Phenomena (or, Meter as Heard)" in MTO 0/2 cogently presents some of the problems that have held center stage in writings on rhythm and meter in recent years (and probably for centuries in one or another form). But London's proposed solution to some of these problems via the notion of a "dynamic model" in which listeners interact with acoustic signals from the music they are hearing lacks a crucial component. London posits that we can avoid some of the severest problems of various metric theories by adopting a participatory attitude—as he says in paragraph 12, "let's tap our feet and count along."

[2] The question he fails to address is: How do we know when to begin to count? Consider his one-line tune from paragraph 6: C-D- E-F-G-A (r) D-E-F-G-A-B♭ (r) B-C-B-C-B-C (r) D-C-B♭-A-G-F, "where the duration of each pitch is an 8th note, and each rest two eighth notes (rests are indicated by (r)), at a tempo of a quarter-note = 100."

[3] I was stymied by this example for for some time before being able to resume reading London's article. At first, I assumed I was going to create this (as a performer, of course!—I'll return shortly to the differences between meter for the performer and the listener) with no preconceived meter and let the tune create its meter for me as I went along (in effect, I was role-playing having a split personality and being a performer and listener simultaneously). At first, I found myself grouping eighths in pairs starting on a strong eighth. The recurring pattern of six eighth-notes plus two-eighths rest made it clear by the end of the second string of notes that I was dealing with a periodicity of four quarter-notes worth of music. (By the way, I did have to impose that metric decision on the music retroactively from the end of the second string of notes.) The resulting harmonies and nonharmonic tones that were implied by my beginning on a strong eighth led me to question whether this was a common-practice-period tonal melody at all. As I "tapped my feet and counted along" in this manner, I was hardly hearing the melody that London presents later in that paragraph. I was hearing his pitch-string, but not his melody in the sense of the pitch-string organized by meter (and, consequently, harmony; I agree with Heinrich Christoph Koch's two-century old assertion that changing the placement of the beat changes the harmonic structure, and hence the nature of a phrase itself).

[4] I was unsatisfied with this first rendition, not least because I didn't think that London's previously-stated apology for producing "banal" examples posited such a weird melody. So I tried beginning with an upbeat eighth, still retaining the implicit  $\frac{3}{4}$  structuring. Once again, I ended up with a melody structured quite differently from the way London structures the pitch-string at the end of his paragraph.

[5] How does London explain how we know when to begin counting? Essentially, he provides us with a score to the melody with the metrics indicated (near the end of paragraph 6). London implies that he has not provided a score, but instead has invoked our commonly-recognized metric pattern of "sol-la-ti-DO." But this begs a host of questions. I will leave aside how we know to draw upon this particular pattern, when other common scale-step patterns beginning with two rising whole tones and semitone are just as possible. I will restrict myself to two questions even more primitive than that one: How do we know that the melody begins with an upbeat? And even more deeply, what evidence is there that when this melody begins we know that the first note is "sol?" Without knowing that, we cannot know to invoke London's pattern.

[6] Musical scores are sets of instructions for performers. And composers of tonal music included metrics in their scores to

preclude precisely the sorts of problems I had in trying to figure out how to perform London's melody. Performers must know where the accented beats are located, or else they will not know how to perform the music. Imagine trying to put into effect Leopold Mozart's instructions to begin measures with downbows if you didn't know where the downbeats were!

[7] But listeners have to figure out where the beats are *without* scores (an issue I have addressed in "Notated and Heard Meter," in *Perspectives of New Music* 24 [1986]: 116–129, as well as in my *Rhythms of Tonal Music* [Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986]). It is no accident that composers are usually a lot more friendly to listeners than London was to his hypothetical physicist, generally providing accompaniments, durational differentiations, textural differentiations, dynamic differentiations, and the like at the beginnings of pieces to allow the listeners to establish the metric grid so that they can indeed "tap their feet and count along." In other words, composers provide a variety of criteria for differentiating events from one another. Whether one wants to call those criteria *accents* (as distinct from *metric* accents), as I have done in my book on rhythm, or use some other conceptualization or locution, these criteria are necessary. To fail to consider them is to fail to consider the differences between scores as instructions for performers and sounding music as an adequate source of information for listeners.

[8] A final note: since I have not yet been able to get my PC to read the GIF file with examples, I read London's melody cited above in the tablature notation that appears in paragraph 6 of his article, not in a staff notation that he may have provided in the GIF file. As a result, I could not draw upon my long experience in sightreading staff notation to survey quickly the entire melody in one fell swoop—I was forced to create the melody note by note as it occurs. I believe that we theorists are so adept in reading musical notation that in addition to failing to appreciate fully how scores are instructions for performers and not for listeners, we also often fail to realize how easily we use visual cues to create a synoptic perception of a passage instead of a diachronic perception that is closer to what a listener receives.

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