

## P Tagg: Entry for EPMOW — melisma

**melisma** string of several notes sung to one syllable.

*Melismatic* is usually opposed to *syllabic*, the latter meaning that each note is sung to a different syllable. *Melismatic* and *syllabic* are used relatively to indicate the general character of a vocal line in terms of notes per syllable, some lines being more melismatic, others more syllabic. A sequence of notes sung staccato to the same syllable, for instance ‘oh - oh - oh - oh - oh’ in *Peggy Sue* (Holly 1957) or *Vamos a la Playa* (Righeira 1983), does not constitute a melisma because each consecutive ‘oh’ is articulated as if it were a separate syllable (*staccato* = detached, cut up). A melisma is therefore always executed legato, each constituent note joined seamlessly to the preceding and/or subsequent one (*legato* = joined). Since inhalation before the start of a new phrase constitutes a break in the melodic flow, no melisma can last longer than the duration of one vocal exhalation. Since several notes are sung to one syllable within the duration of one musical phrase, long note values are uncommon in melismas.

Melismatic singing differs more radically than syllabic singing from everyday speech in that it is uncommon to change pitch even once, let alone several times, within the duration of one spoken syllable. When such spoken pitch change does occur in English, for instance a quick descending octave portamento on the word ‘Why?’, it tends to signal heightened emotion. Together with the general tendency to regard melody as a form of heightened speech transcending the everyday use of words (see MELODY §1.2), it is perhaps natural that melismatic singing is often thought to constitute a particularly emotional type of vocal expression. Such connotations are further underlined by the fact some of the most common words to be sung melismatically in English-language popular song are exclamations (e.g. ‘oh!’, ‘ah!’, ‘yeah!’; see Vitone 1998) or emotionally charged concepts (e.g. ‘love’, ‘feel’, ‘alright’, ‘pain’, ‘fly’, ‘goodbye’, ‘why?’).

Melismas occur in most musical cultures, for instance in the muezzin’s call to prayer, in RAI music (e.g. Khaled 1992), in the *alap* sections of Northern Indian *dhrupad* performances (e.g. Dagar), in the Saami *jojk* (see Edström 1977), in the Russian *bilini*, Ukrainian *duma*, Romanian *doina*, etc. (see Ling 1997:84-9, 106-7). They also occur in most plainchant settings of *Alleluia* and *Kyrie eleison*, as well as at particularly emotional points in arias from the European opera and oratorio repertoire. While Lutheran chorales are largely syllabic, a significant minority of low-church hymns do feature melismatic passages (see example 1).

Ex.1 *Jesus Christ is Ris'n Today* (Methodist Hymn Book, 1933, no. 204)

The musical score for 'Jesus Christ is Ris'n Today' is presented in two staves. The first staff is the vocal line, and the second is the piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: 'Je - sus Christ is ris'n to - day — Al — melisma — le — lu — ia!'. Above the vocal line, a double-headed arrow labeled 'Syllabic' spans the first five notes, and another double-headed arrow labeled 'Melismatic' spans the last five notes. A smaller arrow labeled 'melisma' points to the 'Al' syllable. The piano accompaniment consists of a simple harmonic accompaniment in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand.

Particularly influential on the development of melisma in Anglo-American popular song are various florid, highly ornamented, often pentatonic vocal traditions originating in the British Isles (e.g. Hebridean 'home worship' — see Knudsen 1970 and HETEROPHONY), i.e. the sort of vocal delivery found in Gaelic keening (*caoine*) and slow, solo ballad singing in the *sean-nós* style (e.g. Moloney 1973, also ex. 2).

Ex.2 Extract from *Cuil Duibh-Re*, as performed by Diarmuid O'Súillebháin (transcr. Tomás O'Canainn, repr. in Ling 1997:92).

The musical score for 'Cuil Duibh-Re' is a single staff in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (D major). The lyrics are: 'Na tull - te coimheas - car de bharr liag - reach gan ceó — glan niamh'. The melody is highly ornamented with many grace notes and slurs, particularly in the latter half of the phrase.

These 'old' ways of singing appear to have been the antecedents of the florid vocal lines produced by the Old Baptist and similar 'dissenting' congregations of the USA's middle south (e.g. Watson 1964; see also ex. 3 and Wicks 1989).

Ex.3 Extract from *Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah*, Old Regular Baptist congregation; adapted from transcr. in Wicks (1989:73).

The musical score for 'Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah' is a single staff in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F# major). The lyrics are: 'Hold — me with thy power-ful hand — Hold — me with — thy — power - ful — hand'. The melody is highly ornamented with many grace notes and slurs, particularly in the latter half of the phrase.

Such vocal techniques have strongly influenced the popular music of both white and black US Americans, the former through white gospel music into songs by Country artists like Dolly Parton, Emmylou Harris, Bonnie Raitt and George Jones (see Wicks 1989), the latter through black gospel singers into the mainstream of the international pop music market. The protracted, proclamatory 'We - - - - - ll!' at the start of *Shout* (Isley Brothers 1959; Lulu 1964) provides an early example of the black gospel melisma in Anglo-American hit recordings. Similar melismas were not uncommon in Motown vocal lines (e.g. 'Mr Po-o-o-o-stman', Marvelettes 1961 and Beatles 1963, see COUNTERPOINT), nor in Merseybeat influenced by gospel styles (ex. 4-5).

Ex.4 Beatles: *Not A Second Time* (1963).

Ex.5 Searchers: *Goodbye, My Love* (1965).

Since the types of melisma mentioned here have, since World War II, been most widely disseminated through recordings made or influenced by African-American artists, it is often assumed that such melismatic techniques are of West African origin. However, since, for example, none of the forty music examples in the chapters dealing with vocal lines in African music (Nketia 1992:147-174) contain syllables set to more than two separate notes, the popular assumption that melismatic ornamentation is inherently ‘black’ must be challenged in the same way that the identification of the BANJO (an instrument of African origin) with ‘white’ music must be regarded as historically inaccurate (Tagg 1989).

In recent decades pentatonic melismas deriving from gospel traditions have become very common in recordings by such solo divas as Whitney Houston who, for instance, on the word ‘much’ in the phrase ‘I wish I didn’t like it so much’ from *So Emotional* (Houston 1987), launches into a florid pentatonic melisma consisting of at least six short separate notes each time the phrase occurs in the lead-up to the chorus. These virtuoso techniques had become such a mannerism of abandon by the 1980s that they were easily parodied, for example by film composer Nile Rodgers in the ‘Soul Glow’ shampoo jingle from the Eddy Murphy movie *Coming to America* (1988), or by Frank Zappa who, in *You Are What You Is* (1981), set prosaic concepts like ‘appropriate’ and ‘the post office’ to ecstatically delivered pentatonic gospel melismas.

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