

Rainer Maria Rilke

Notes on the Melody of Things

(Notizen zur Melodie der Dinge)



'Power of Music' (1852) - Louis Gallait (Belgian, 1810 – 1887), [Artvee](#)

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Introduction

Rilke's 'Notes on the Melody of Things' derives from his relationship with Lou Andreas-Salomé, the Russian-born psychoanalyst, well-travelled author, narrator, and essayist, who was a friend of Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche and who introduced Rilke to the latter's philosophy (Rilke and she first met in the summer of 1897), and also, his visits to Venice in early 1897, and Florence in 1898, where he saw and studied examples of Italian Renaissance painting. His experiences of live theatre further inform the work.

Among their themes, Rilke's 'Notes', explore the issue of our relationship to the natural world, and to each other, and the aims, achievements, and shortcomings of artistic endeavour, especially as regards theatre and the visual arts. The stage, in particular, signifies here the world of human activity in which our drama is played out, consciously or unconsciously, against the natural and universal backcloth. The 'melody of things', he claims, is that background to human existence, that melody, which we must understand in order to fully comprehend life.

The artist Marco Basaiti (c1470-1530), whom Rilke mentions, was, for those not acquainted with his paintings, a younger contemporary of Giovanni Bellini, whose works were a strong influence on his own. Among those attributed to him, of particular interest are the two panels 'Saint James the Apostle', and 'Saint Sebastian Abbot', in the Accademia, Venice (since 1814). They are side panels from a triptych whose central panel is not extant, and in them the figures, though separate, are portrayed as if standing on a continuous stone platform in front of a continuous landscape, interrupted only by the frames, and the absence of the central panel. Hanging side by side, the pair exemplify Rilke's point (see his Note XIII, and Note XVII) about separate existences which, though apart and seemingly isolated, nonetheless share a common background.

In this translation, the headings are the translator's and not Rilke's, and are provided simply in order to assist in identifying the placement and significance of each of his notes.

Note I: ‘We Are at The Very Beginning’

We are at the very beginning, you see. As if before all. With a thousand and one dreams behind us, and not a single thing done.

Note II: ‘Become a Beginner’

I cannot conceive a more blessed knowledge than this: that one must become a beginner. Someone who writes the first word after a pause that was centuries long.

Note III: The Background to Humanity

What comes to mind when I reflect on this, is that we humans are still painted on a gold background like primitive peoples. They stand before something indefinite. Sometimes before gold, sometimes, too, before grey. Sometimes in the light, but often with an unfathomable darkness behind them.

Note IV: Recognising the Individual and the Background

This, you understand. In order to recognise someone, you needed to isolate them from their surroundings. But after long experience of them little effort is required to relate to their individual features, yet take a mature view of their broader gestures.

Note V: The Example of Italian Trecento Painting

Compare a painting from the Trecento (*the fourteenth century*), on a gold ground, with one of the numerous later compositions by the early Italian masters, in which the figures become a Sacred Conversation assembled in front of the luminous landscape, in the bright Umbrian air. Each is isolated against the gold background, yet the landscape behind them shines like one shared soul from which they draw their smiles and their love.



'Madonna and Child' (ca. 1326) - Simone Martini (Italian, 1284-1344), [Artvee](#)

Note VI: Seeking the Common Landscape

Then think about life itself. Remember that people gesture a great deal and utter incredibly many words. If only they were able to be, for a while, as quiet and as rich in themselves as the artist Marco Basiati's beautiful saints, would you not also discover behind them the landscape common to them all.

Note VII: The Recognition of Another Person

And there are also instants when a person stands quietly and clearly before you in all their glory. Those are rare moments of celebration you never forget. You *love* that person from then on. Which means you are seeking to realise the outlines of their individuality as you beheld them at the time when you *recognised* them, to trace them with tender hands.

Note VIII: The Mission of Art

Art does the same. It is a broader, more immodest love. It is God's love. It cannot stop at the individual, who is only the gateway to life. It must wander about within. It must not grow weary. In order to be fulfilled it must labour there, where all – are *One*. When it gives itself to that *One*, limitless wealth is granted to all.

Note IX: What Theatre Seeks to Achieve

How far from achieving this state art is, can be seen on the stage, where art says, or wishes to say, how it envisages life, not as the individual in an ideal calm, but as movement and interaction between several characters. It simply results in people standing beside each other as they did in the Trecento, leaving it to them to befriend each other against the grey or gold of the background.

Note X: 'Throwers Who Cannot Catch'

And this is why it is so. They seek to reach each other through words and gestures. They almost dislocate their arms their gestures fall so short. They make infinite efforts to hurl the syllables at each other and still fail badly.

Throwers who cannot catch. So, time passes in stooping, groping for the ball – for what life is.

Note XI: 'Each of Us Lives on a Different Island'

And art has done nothing but show us the confusion in which we often find ourselves. It has made us fearful instead of quietening and calming us. It has proved that each of us lives on a different island; only the islands are not far enough apart for us to remain isolated and uninvolved. One person can trouble or frighten another, or pursue them with a spear – but is unable to help them.



'Villa by the Sea' (1871 – 1874) - Arnold Böcklin (Swiss, 1827-1901), [Artvee](#)

Note XII: Accidental Encounters

From island to island there is only one possible path: by leaping dangerously where oneself, more than just one's feet, is at risk. An eternal hopping back

and forth arises, during which accidents and absurdities occur, because two may leap towards each other at the same moment, so that they meet each other, only in the air, yet after that arduous encounter one is quite as far from the other – as before.

Note XIII: Bridges to One Another

That is hardly surprising; since, in fact, they are bridges leading to one another; over them they advance, beautifully festive, in their passage, not *within* us, but behind us, as in some landscape painted by Fra Bartolomeo or Leonardo. So it is that life itself is intensified in the individual person. From peak to peak, however, the path runs through the broadest of valleys.

Note XIV: Or Akin to Marionettes

Therefore, when two or three people meet together, they are not together as yet. They are like marionettes whose wires are held in different hands. Only when a single hand directs all, does a common purpose grip them which forces them to bow low, or to strike someone. And so, their human power lies there, where the wires terminate in the hand that holds them.

Note XV: ‘The One Mutual Homeland’

Only in the selfsame hour, in the selfsame storm, in the one room where they meet together, do they find one another. Only when there is a common background behind them do they begin to communicate with one another. They must be able to refer to the *one* mutual homeland. They must show one another, as it were, the credentials they bear with them, whose whole meaning is sealed by the selfsame authority.

Note XVI: The Common Melody

Be it the murmur of the lamp, or the voice of the storm, the breath of evening or the moaning of the sea that surrounds you – a broad melody always wakens behind you, woven from a thousand voices, which only has space for your solo part here and there. To know *when you have to chime in*, that

is the secret of solitude: just as it is the art of true intercourse: letting yourself descend from the highest word to the one common melody.

Note XVII: Marco Basaiti's Saints

If Marco Basaiti's saints had anything to confide, other than their blissful coexistence, they would not be in the foreground of the scene, where they stand extending their gentle slender hands. They would step back, become smaller and, deeper in the attentive landscape, advance to meet each other, over the tiniest of bridges.



'Saint Anthony the Great and Saint James the Greater' Marco Basaiti (1470–1530),

[Wikimedia Commons](#)

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Note XVIII: Foreground and Background

In the foreground, we too are like them: yearning, raising hands in blessing. Our fulfillment takes place afar in the shining background. There, is motion and will. There, the stories happen, of which we are the shadowy titles. There, is our coming-together and our leave-taking, our consolation and our sorrow. There, we *are*, while, in the foreground, we come and go.

Note XIX: Mourning May Unite Us

Recall those you have found gathered together, yet without participating in the same experience. Relatives, for example, who mourn a dearly beloved person beside the deathbed itself. One is alive with this, one with that profound memory. Their words pass each other by, without the one acknowledging the other. Their handshakes fail in the first confused encounter – until the pain, behind them, broadens. They sit, foreheads lowered, and are silent. It murmurs above like a forest. And they are closer to one another than ever before.

Note XX: Many No Longer Hear

Usually, unless intense pain silences all alike, one person will hear more, another less of the powerful background melody. Many, even, may hear it no longer. They are like trees that have forgotten their roots, and think that the rustling of their branches is now their life and their strength. Many lack the time to listen. They cannot endure being present for an hour. These are the wretched homeless ones, who have lost their sense of being. They strike the keys of their days, yet forever play the same lost and monotonous sound.

Note XXI: The Individual and the Hour

Thus, if we wish to be initiates of life, we must take two things into consideration: first the great melody, in which things and fragrances, feelings and past hours, twilight and yearning participate – and then, the individual voices that complement, and complete this sounding choir.

And a work of art means: that, in order to create the image of a broader life, of something beyond today, for all and for always, an hour of potential

experience, then the two voices, that of the given hour, and that of the group of people within it, must be set, and balanced against one another, in exactly the right proportions.

Note XXII: The Artist's Essential Task

To achieve this purpose, one must have already recognised the twin elements of the 'melody of life' in their primitive form; one must have separated the sea's rhythm from the roaring tumult of the waves, and unwound the living thread from the tangle of daily conversation which has caught up others within it. One must have set the pure colours next to each other, so as to learn their conflicts and harmonies. One must have neglected many things, for the sake of what is important.



'Ruin by the Sea' (1881) - Arnold Böcklin (Swiss, 1827-1901), [Artvee](#)

Note XXIII: The Visible Theatre and the Invisible Reality

Two people who are silent to the same degree, have no need to speak for hours about their 'melody'. It is theirs; it is that of themselves which they hold in common. It is like a burning altar between them, whose sacred flame they feed, reverently, with rare syllables.

Were I to place these two, in their unpremeditated state of being, on stage, it would be obvious to me what I was doing, displaying two lovers and trying to explain why they were happy. But the altar would be invisible, behind the scenes, and so no one would know how to explain their strange sacrificial gestures.

Note XXIV: The Audience's Task, or the Artist's

There are, then, but two ways forward:

Either: the characters must rouse themselves and, with many a word and confusing gesture, try to speak what they have previously lived.

Or: changing nothing concerning their deeper activity, I must try myself to speak the words, saying: 'Here is an altar on which a holy flame burns. You yourselves can see the radiance on these two faces.'

Note XXV: The Altar Flame

It strikes me that the latter alone is the path of art. Nothing fundamental is lost; no mingling of elements mars the straightforward sequence of events if I portray the altar, that unites these two separate characters, such that all can see it, and believe in its existence. Much later, it will need no effort of will on the part of those watching to behold the pillar's flame, and I will need to add nothing further. Much later.

Note XXVI: The Problem of Portraying the Background

But all this concerning the altar is merely a parable, and a very imperfect one at that. The action is about the scene's shared moment, that in which the characters speak and express themselves. The song, which in life corresponds to the thousand voices of the day or the night, the murmur of the forest, or the ticking of the clock and its hesitant chimes, and remains behind

us; that fuller choir, in the background, which determines the rhythm and tone of our words; cannot, initially, be made comprehensible on the stage through using the selfsame means.

Note XXVII: Theatrical ‘Atmosphere’

Because what is called ‘atmosphere’, which in newer pieces is partially effective, is only a first imperfect attempt at allowing the landscape behind the characters to shine through the characters, words and gestures; an attempt unnoticed by most, and which, arising from quieter intimacy, may remain unnoticed by all. A technical amplification of individual sounds or lighting is ridiculous, because out of a thousand voices it highlights only a single one, so that the whole action hangs by a single thread.

Note XXVIII: Achieving a Balance

Justice, towards the background song, is only achieved if one applies it in its all-encompassing entirety, that is also, initially, to the theatrical means employed; which again seems impractical in the light of the audience’s mistrust. A balance can only be achieved through strict stylisation. Namely, if one plays the melody of infinity on the same keys upon which the hands of the action rests, which means, to tune down the greater wordlessness to words.

Note XXIX: The Limitations of Representation on Stage

Which, in turn, is nothing more than the introduction of a chorus that quietly unfurls itself behind the bright flickering of verbal interchange. Because the silence, in all its breadth and meaning, continually works away, the words in front appear as its natural complement, and a well-founded representation of the song of life can be achieved, which would otherwise, through the inability to represent a fragrance or hidden feelings on stage, seem impossible.

Note XXX: An Example of Representation Nonetheless

I would like to give a very brief example –

It is evening. A small room. At a central table, two children sit opposite each other in the lamplight, leaning reluctantly over their books. They are both far, far away. Bowing over their books they 'escape'. Every now and then they call to each other, so as to prevent themselves from becoming lost in the vast forest of their dreams. They embrace colourful and fantastic fates in this narrow room. They struggle and are victorious, return home and marry. They teach their children to be heroic. Probably they even die. I am stubborn enough to think that will do for a plot!

Note XXXI: The Influence of the Background on the Individual's Fate

But what would this scene be without the singing of the bright old-fashioned hanging-lamp, without the sighs and groans of the furniture, without the storm blowing round the house? Without all that dark background through which they draw the threads of their fate? How different those children would be, if they were dreaming in the garden, or by the sea, or on the terrace of a palace. It is no matter whether one embroiders in silk or wool. One needs only know that, on the yellowed canvas of evening, they repeat the few clumsy lines of the uncertain meandering pattern.



'Spring Day (The Three Life Ages)' (1883) - Arnold Böcklin (Swiss, 1827-1901), [Artvee](#)

Note XXXII: A Flow of Voices

I am thinking now of allowing the whole melody to sound out in the way that the children hear it. A silent voice must hover over the scene, and then, at an unseen sign, the tiny children's voices must enter, and drift along, as the broad stream rushes through the narrow twilit room, flowing from infinity to infinity.

Note XXXIII: The Role of the Background Chorus

I know many scenes like this, and ones wider in scope. Given a more explicit, I mean more universal, stylization, or a deliberate hint of that same, the chorus finds room within the scene itself, and acts too, through its watchful presence; or its role may be limited to that voice which, broad and impersonal, rises from the ferment of the collective moment. In any event, a wiser knowledge lives within it, as in the ancient chorus; not because it decides when the action occurs, but because it is the ground from which that quieter song is released, and into whose lap it finally, and more beautifully, falls once more.

Note XXXIV: Non-Realistic Representation as a Transitional Step

In the case of theatre, I think stylized, that is, non-realistic representation, is merely a transitional step; because the art that will always be most welcome on the stage is: life-like and 'true' in the external sense. Yet it is the path to a self-deepening, inner truth; to recognising and understanding the fundamental elements. One will understand the basic motives behind serious experience more clearly, and learn to employ them in a more original way, and thus draw closer again to the realistic, the temporal actuality. But not in the same manner as before.

Note XXXV: The Effort is Worthwhile

The effort seems to me necessary, otherwise knowledge of the finer feelings, won through long and serious work, forever loses 'nobility' amidst the noise of the stage. And that is a shame. On the stage, if it occurs in an unbiased and unforced way, new life may be proclaimed, which also means that it is

conveyed to those who know nothing of one's own gestures based on one's passion and strength. They may not be converted by the scene. But they may at least experience that it exists in our time, and close to us. That is success enough.

Note XXXVI: 'A Definite Place'

For it almost has the importance of a religion, this understanding: that once one has heard the melody of the background one is no longer at a loss with words, or indecisive. There is a carefree sense of security in the simple conviction of being part of a melody, that is of rightly possessing a definite place, and a responsibility to pursue a body of work, on which the least can work as much as the greatest. Not feeling superfluous, is the first prerequisite for conscious and quiet development.

Note XXXVII: Gaining Nothing In Return

All conflict and error derive from the fact that people see only what they have in common between themselves, instead of seeking it in the things *behind* them, in the light, in the landscape, in birth and death. They lose themselves and gain nothing in return. They intermingle, unable to unite. They hold on to each other, and yet, being indecisive and weak, fail to secure a foothold; and, in these acts of mutual support, they choose to spend their whole strength, such that, externally, no tremor of the waves can be perceived.

Note XXXVIII: The Root and the Fruits

But every commonality presupposes a series of differentiated, solitary beings. Before they existed, it was merely a whole lacking relationship; there, before them, and neither impoverished nor rich. At the moment when various parts of the maternal whole separate out, it stands in contrast to them; because they develop from it. Yet it never lets them fall from its hands. Even if the root knows nothing of the fruits, it nonetheless nourishes them.

Note XXXIX: ‘We are like Fruits’

And we are like fruits. We hang high, on strangely-distorted branches, and endure many a breeze. What we possess, is our ripeness, sweetness, and beauty. But the power to own them flows through the tree from a *single* root that has spread across worlds within all of us. And if we want to bear witness to that power, we must each deploy them in the most solitary manner. The more solitary, the more solemn, poignant and powerful their commonality.

Note XL: Solitariness

And it is precisely the most solitary people who possess the greatest share of what we have in common. I said earlier, that some hear more, others less, of the broad melody of life; they also, accordingly, have a smaller or lesser role in the great orchestra.

Whoever heard the entire melody would be the most alone, and yet at the same time would most belong. Because they would hear what no one else hears, yet only because they, in their *completion*, would have understood what the others hear only vaguely and incompletely.

The End of Rilke’s ‘Notes on the Melody of Things’