

Jabberwocky

Philip Legge

A note on pronunciation

In his Preface to the 1896 Edition of *Through the Looking-Glass*, Lewis Carroll wrote:

The new words, in the poem “Jabberwocky”, have given rise to some differences of opinion as to their pronunciation: so it may be as well to give instructions on *that* point also. Pronounce “slithy” as if it were the two words, “sly, the”: make the “g” *hard* in “gyre” and “gimble”: and pronounce “rath” to rhyme with “bath”.

As this is not a complete compendium of the unusual words in the poem, the following list is offered as a slightly more beneficial guide.

borogoves : pronounce to rhyme with the two words “borrow groves”
brillig : pronounce “brill” as in “brilliant”, “ig” as in “igloo”
callooh, callay : there are two possibilities for the first vowel, rhyming with the “a” in either “sally” or “saloon”
frabjous : pronounced to rhyme with the first and last syllables of “fabulous”; the “j” is soft
frumious : rhymes with “luminous”
gimble : with a hard “g”, rhymes with “thimble”
gyre : with a hard “g”, rhymes with “wire”
Jubjub : the syllable “jub” rhymes with “pub”
manxome : rhymes loosely with “handsome”; the final vowel probably isn’t meant to rhyme like “dome”
mimsy : rhymes with “whimsy”
mome : rhymes with “dome”, *not* with “some”
outgrabe : the syllable “grabe” should rhyme with “babe”
raths : as noted above, rhymes with “baths”: *not* with “maths”
slithy : as noted above, pronounce the first syllable like the word “sly”
toves : rhymes with “groves”
tulgey : the first syllable rhymes with “bulge”; the entire word would thus rhyme with the neologism “bulge-y”
uffish : like the first two syllables of “sufficient” but with the stress on the first syllable
vorpal : rhymes loosely with “portal”
wabe : rhymes with “babe”
whiffling : rhymes with “piffling”

A note on performance

The first verse is a mirror canon and can be sung the same backwards as well as forwards (in the terms of the *avant-garde*, it is “non-retrogradable”), so if it is at all possible, the first verse should be recorded in high-quality at a rehearsal. Played in reverse at the correct speed and pitch, this verse can serve as an “intonation” to lead the choir into Verse 1, while the backwards language gives the aural equivalent to the reversed writing that briefly confuses Alice, before she hits upon the idea of using a mirror to read it.

The Bass solo in Verse 2 may be sung by all men, but the marking “quasi misterioso” is to emphasise the tremulous fear of the father, contrasted by his higher-pitched elation in Verse 6 where his speech is translated to the Tenors. (Both these utterances are mirrored, but in Verse 6 the “mirror” is also inverted.)

The speed of the compound metre in Verse 2 and continuing into Verse 3 should be judged with enough flexibility to make the semi-quavers in bars 27 and 28 as fast as possible.

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Text for inclusion in programme notes

Jabberwocky, written in the space of a few days in May 2010, is something of a mini-cantata version of Lewis Carroll’s famous poem from *Through the Looking-Glass*, in which the eponymous beast is hunted and slain by a young hero. The hero’s father has a singing rôle in verses 2 and 6, given to a solo bass and the entire tenor section respectively, which musically employ palindromic mirror-writing: in verse 2 the nervous, tremulous fear of the father is represented by an inflected, minor-key arabesque which is identical both forwards and backwards and is unsupported by ambiguous floating harmonies, whereas the triumphant hero’s return in verse 6 gives rise to an extroverted major-key scale passage: here the mirror version of the vocal line is inverted. The central verses 3, 4, and 5 vocally depict the dramatic action: long, loping phrases for the searching out of the foe in verse 3, followed by agitated semiquaver oscillations before the appearance of the whiffling and burbling Jabberwock in verse 4, which is duly dispatched by the heroic treble line in the next verse, ably abetted by the rhythmic hacking and galumphing of the underneath parts.

Verses 1 and 7 frame this little drama with Carroll’s best-known lines “T’was brillig, and the slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe: all mimsy were the borogoves, and the mome raths outgrabe.” Verse 1, not surprisingly, consists of musical mirror-writing and is presented as a short, fast, self-contained overture, to be heard once backwards (exactly like the curious backwards poem that Alice finds in Looking-Glass Land) and once forwards. In Verse 7, the same motif initially heard in the soprano part becomes a reversible two-part canon at the distance of half a bar, while the altos and basses sing a slow, non-retrogradable accompaniment to finish the work in subdued and elegaic fashion.

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Lewis Carroll

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Verse 1 (tutti, Allegro)

'Twas bril-lig, and the sly - thy toves Did gyre and gim - ble in the wabe:
 rats out - raps the mome and the goves, - or - od the were - sa - mim !!A

'Twas bril-lig, and the sly - thy toves Did gyre and gim - ble in the wabe:
 rats out - raps the mome and the goves, - or - od the were - sa - mim !!A

All mim - sy were the bo - ro - goves, and the mome rats out-grabe.
 in the ni ble - mig and gim and gyre and toves sly - thy and the gil - lrit aswT'

All mim - sy were the bo - ro - goves, and the mome rats out-grabe.
 in the ni ble - mig and gim and gyre and toves sly - thy and the gil - lrit aswT'

Verse 2 (solo, Andante)

p
 bouche fermée Bass solo (quasi misterioso)

"Be-ware the Jab-ber-wock, my son! The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!

Be - ware the Jub-jub bird, and shun The fru - mi-ous Ban-der-snatch!"

Verse 3 (tutti, l'istesso tempo)

mp He took his vor - pal sword in hand: Long time the manx-ome foe he
mp He, He took his vor - pal sword in hand:
mp Tutti He took his vor - pal sword in hand: Long time the manx-ome foe he
mp He, He took his vor - pal sword in hand:

20

sought— So rest-ed he by the Tum-tum tree, the Tum - tum tree,
 Long time the manx-ome foe he sought— So rest-ed he by the Tum-tum tree,—
 sought— So rest-ed he by the Tum-tum tree, So rest-ed he by the Tum-tum tree,
 Long time the manx-ome foe he sought— So rest-ed he by the Tum-tum tree,—

23

So rest - ed he by the Tum - tum tree, And stood a while in thought.
 he by the Tum - tum tree, And stood a while in thought.
 So rest - ed he by the Tum - tum tree, And stood a while in thought.
 he, Tum - tum tree, And stood a while in thought.

25 Verse 4 (un poco agitato)

And, as in uff - ish thought he stood, the Jab - ber-wock with eyes of flame, Came
 And, as in uff - ish thought he stood, Jab - ber-wock with eyes of flame, Came
 And, as in uff - ish thought he stood, the Jab - ber-wock of flame
 And thought Jab eyes Came

27

whiffle and burb - led as it came!_____

whiffle burb - led as it came!_____

whiff - ling through the tul - gey wood, and burble burble burble burble burble burble burble burble burble!

whiff - ling through the tul - gey wood, and burble burble burble burble burble burble burble burble burble!

Verse 5 (marcato)

29

One, two! One two! And through and through The vor - pal blade went snick-er-snack!

One, two! One two! One two! One, two! One, two! One, two! snick-er-snack!snick-er-snack!

One, two! One two! One two! One, two! One, two! One, two! snick-er-snack!snick-er-snack!

One, two! One two! One, two! One, two! One, two! One, two! snick-er-snack!snick-er-snack!

31

He left it dead, and with its head He went ga - lumph - ing back!_____ ga-lumph!

He left it dead, left it dead, left it dead, left it dead, Ga-lumph, ga-lumph, ga-lumph, ga-lumph!

He left it dead, left it dead, left it dead, left it dead, Ga-lumph, ga-lumph, ga-lumph, ga-lumph!

He left it dead, left it dead, left it dead, left it dead, Ga-lumph, ga-lumph, ga-lumph, ga-lumph!

33 Verse 6 (tutti, meno mosso)

p
bouche fermée

p
bouche fermée

mf

"And hastthou slain the Jab-ber-wock? Come to my arms, my beam-ish boy! O frab-jous day! Cal-looh! Cal-lay!" He

p
bouche fermée

36 Verse 7 (tutti, Adagio)

mp

'Twas bril-lig, and the sly - thy toves Did gyre and gim - ble

p

'Twas bril - lig, and sly - thy toves gim - ble

mp

chor - tled in his joy. 'Twas bril-lig, and the sly - thy toves Did gyre and

chortle chortle chortle chortle chortle chortle chortle 'Twas bril - lig, and sly - thy toves

40

dim. *pp*

in the wabe: All mim-sy were the bo - ro-goves, And the mome raths outgrabe.

dim. *pp*

in the wabe: mim - sy bo - ro-goves, And the mome raths out - grabe.

dim. *pp*

gim - ble in the wabe: All mim-sy were the bo - ro-goves, And the mome raths out-grabe.

dim. *pp*

the wabe: mim - sy, And the mome raths out - grabe.