

RESEARCH

## Musical Sequences in Comics

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Critical attention paid to the media of music and comics has historically focused on parallels between the temporal rhythm and pacing of music and the implied rhythm and temporality of comics (Eisner 2008, Godek 2007). Recent attention has begun to focus on both comics' potential to represent the character of music (Whitted 2011) and the effects of musical images and themes on comics' narratology (Peters 2013).

I suggest that analyses of comics that combine the traditional interplay of image and word with the use of elements of musical notation are able to shed further light on each of these areas, via the connotations and conventions of symbols pulled exclusively from the realms of music, and their integration with the other elements of the page in sequence.

Creators Bryan Lee O'Malley, Alan Moore and David Lloyd, and Dave McKean have each produced sequences that lean heavily on conventions of musical notation to convey performances across multiple panels and pages. The use of notation and its variants is dictated by both the style of music being represented and the wider styles and themes of the comics. *Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little Life* (2004; *Scott Pilgrim* hereafter) uses chord diagrams and streams of simple guitar chords to convey the raw garage rock of its protagonist's band. *V for Vendetta* (1983) features accurate streams of vocal notation to accurately depict its music hall-style performance and Dave McKean's *Cages* (2009) abstracts traditional notation to convey the improvised jazz performance of its ninth chapter.

The addition of musical elements in each of the examples represents a significant intervention into comics' traditional dichotomy of word and image. While each borrows from the language of music, breaking notation down into elements that combine more readily with word and image on the page, the examples each maintain the otherness of music, via the use of separative strategies such as the occupation of the margin and the use of depth. This separation has a marked effect on the sequencing of the comics via both the rhythm and timings inherent to notation and the continuity between the music and the panels and between the musical sections themselves over multiple pages. The result in each is an encompassing and pervasive depiction of music, loosely comparable to a film's soundtrack.

*Scott Pilgrim* features a musical sequence containing two different conventions of notation: guitar chords and chord diagrams (Figure 1). The chords occupy two single interpanel spaces of a double page spread, which together, envelope a stretched central panel in which the band 'Sex Bob-bomb' can be seen performing. The chords are informed by a small caption box in the upper-left section of the page where an omniscient narrator instructs the reader to play along: 'Hey kids now you can play along with Sex Bob-Bomb at home! It's easy because they're kind of crappy... Look this whole song only uses three chords!' (O'Malley 2004: n.p.). The narrator also offers chord diagrams demonstrating finger positioning, and provides loose instructions as to how the band should sound: '4/4 rock, fast, hard, sloppy' (O'Malley 2004: n.p.).

Chord diagrams are a convention of guitar tablature, a form of musical notation that diagrammatically represents the frets and strings of the instrument being played. This being said, it is popular among beginner guitarists, but beyond reinforcing the lack of musical ability of the band, the call to action on the part of the narrator serves as a self-conscious acknowledgement of the absence of sound in comics. This indicates to the reader that without their input the music cannot progress, openly inviting their engagement. In this sense, the reading experience is comparable to 'playing along at home.'

These types of notation are primarily demonstrative or operational. The specific qualities of the music being represented are implicit, and are to be found via the (re)pro-



Figure 1: O'Malley, B L (2004: n.p.) *Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little Life* (Portland, OR: Oni Press). © 2004 Bryan Lee O'Malley

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duction of the music itself, which would generally be supported by a prior awareness of the song being performed. As this song doesn't exist in any audible way, when the narrator suggests that the music should be 'sloppy,' sloppy is all it can be, as the specific qualities of the music can only be based on the reader's interpretation.

This avoidance of definitives is also evident throughout chapter nine of Dave McKean's *Cages*, entitled 'Chromatic Scale', which toes a similar line between relying on the

conventions of notation to convey the presence of music and submitting to the limitations notation places on the music itself. The majority of the musical content in *Cages* is produced by Angel, a seemingly all-knowing jazz musician whose outlook on music approaches the spiritual (figure 2). While jazz is a constant presence throughout *Cages*, it is arguably never more prominent than in chapter nine in which Angel guides the reader through each stage in the chromatic scale.

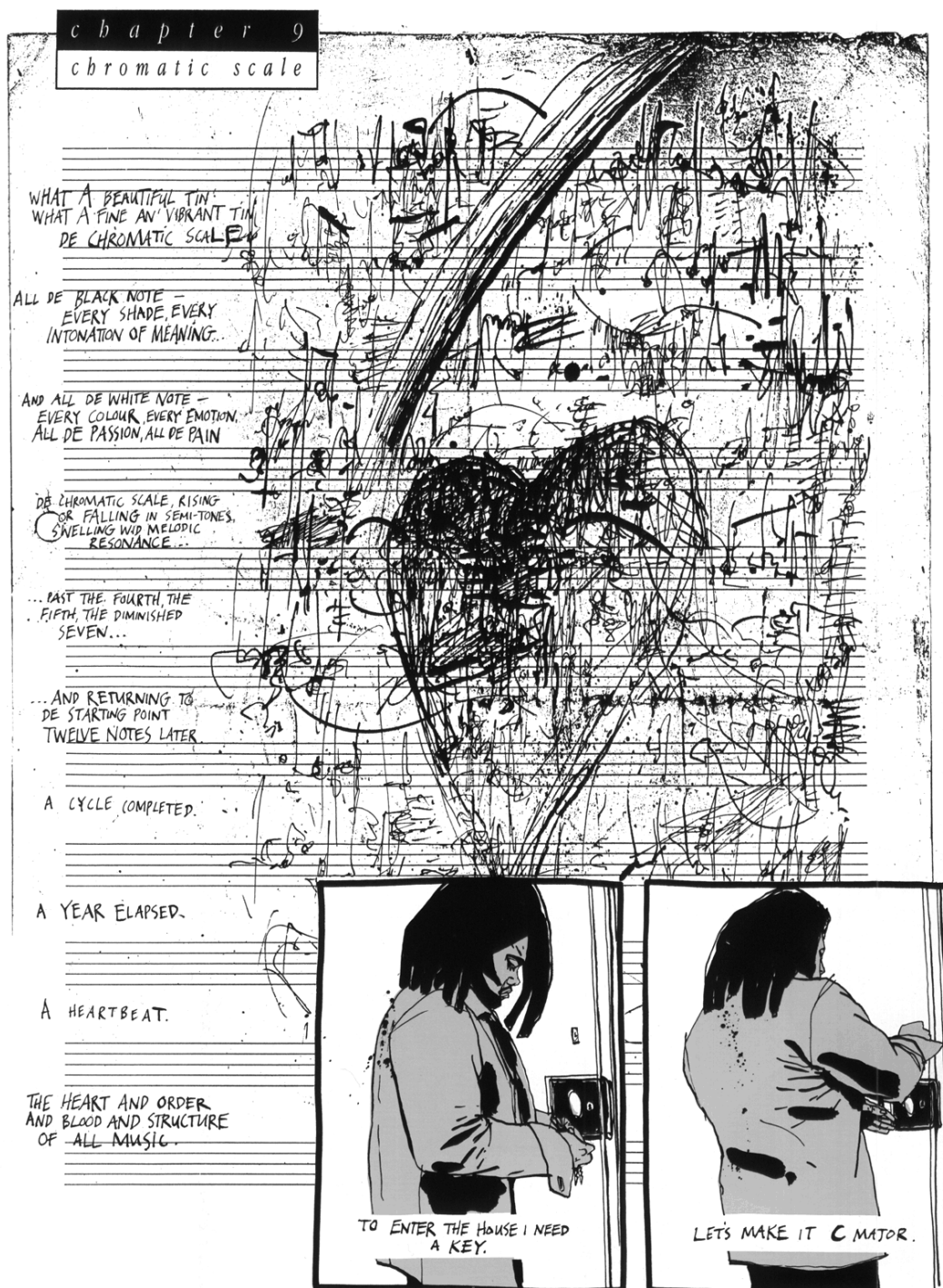


Figure 2: McKean, D (2009: 353) *Cages* (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics). © 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1996, 1998 Dave McKean

Manuscript paper is used as a backdrop to the framed panels, yet the conventional arrangement of musical symbols in an ordered sequence, which gives notation meaning, is flouted. McKean instead opts for a more sporadic and abstract arrangement of ambiguous musical notes. These often blend with abstract images that illustrate and elaborate on Angel's accentuated written musings as he improvises his way through the connotations of each pitch in the scale: 'WHAT A BEAUTIFUL TIN' WHAT A FINE AN' VIBRANT TIN' THE CHROMATIC SCALE' (McKean 2009: 358). Despite appearing to be handwritten, this representation of speech in its phonic form confirms the vocalised nature of Angel's words which combine with the other handwritten/drawn symbols and imagery on the manuscript paper to characterise the music.

Philip Ball (2010) suggests that notation in jazz has generally been reductive as the music is 'all in the performance' (Ball 2010: 407). As such notation 'tends to suppress what cannot be notated: gliding or microtonally pitched notes, elastic rhythms, subtle expressive gestures, and improvisation' (Ball 2010: 403). Thus, for Angel, notation could be viewed as a cage in itself.

While musical notation has historically been used to preserve music, it is fair to say that in this case, the manuscript paper and its combinations of musical symbols, images and words have been used to preserve the *feel-*

*ings* associated with the notes being referenced. Thus, as Tong (1996) suggests, this manner of representation is a means of describing music without limiting it in the process (Tong, 1996), by pinning it down on paper. In this sense the music in *Cages* operates on a *conceptual* level, whereas the presence of music in *Scott Pilgrim* and the next example, Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta* (**figure 3**) are more *actualised*.

In *Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel* (2009), Annalisa Di Liddo notes the prominence of theatricality throughout *V for Vendetta* and the wider work of Alan Moore:

Most of his works are characterized by a more or less evident performative aspect: *V for Vendetta*, of course, probably features the most persistent theatricality, with its masked hero, vaudeville-like intermissions, and constant reminder that "all the world's a stage" (Di Liddo 2009: 168).

The prelude section of *V for Vendetta's* 'This Vicious Cabaret' chapter qualifies as one of the aforementioned vaudevillian or, given *V for Vendetta's* British setting, music hall style intermissions, turning the page on its axis for the duration of the musical performance. Here accurate streams of notation run below sets of two-panel strips,

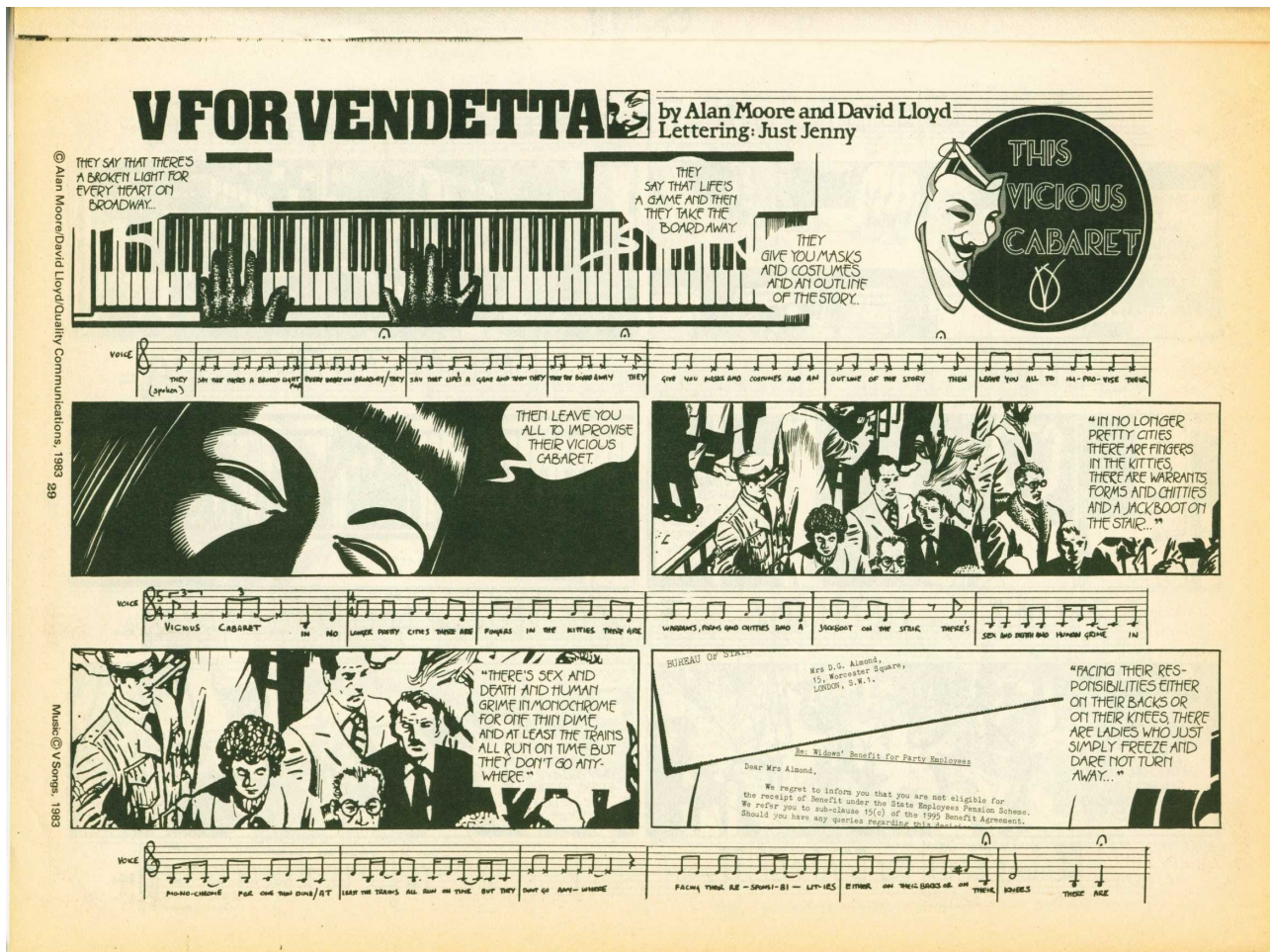


Figure 3: Moore, A and Lloyd, D (1983: 29) *V for Vendetta*. *Warrior*, #12 (London: Quality Communications Limited). © Quality Communications Ltd. 1974, 1983

that oscillate between showing the character of V as the performer 'outside' of the music and images depicting the lyrical content 'inside' the song.

Musical notation has been thought to be fundamentally linked to performance. Manoa Finston (2007) suggests that notational systems may be thought of as mediated reproductions or material substitutions of temporal performative events that she likens to mimesis (man's natural tendency to imitate) which for Aristotle, concerned oral elements:

This consideration simply asserts that other forms of media (music, text) operate by the same principles of imitating or re-presenting an initial action to achieve a desired effect. This seems a useful and important way to frame the dynamics of notation. [...] As in the Aristotelian model, the imitation itself evokes a particular sensation linked to the original (Finston 2007: n.p.).

This also seems a useful way to view notation in the context of *V for Vendetta*. Formal elements of comics such as speech balloons, thought balloons and sound effects were famously omitted from the comic, upon David Lloyd's suggestion, to facilitate mimesis. Moore suggested that it 'made everything much more real and documentary' (Moore and Baker: 27). Use of notation can thus be seen as an extension of this principle, in that, by nature, it represents music note for note. The particular 'sensation' noted by Finston (2007) might be attributed to the iconic-diagrammatic nature of musical notation, which represents the structure of music via its own conventions and enables notation to be experienced as a 'single, continuous thing' (Treitler 1982: 240), akin to both music and comics. In this sense, in *V for Vendetta*, the notation necessarily becomes part of the performance itself.

Will Eisner (1985) suggested that comics can be compared to passages of music as both use time in their expression:

A comic becomes 'real' when time and timing is factored into creation. In music or other forms of auditory communication where rhythm or 'beat' is achieved, this is done with actual lengths of time. In graphics the experience is conveyed by the use of illusions and symbols and their arrangement (Eisner, 2008: 30).

While this true for comics, it is also true of music when represented graphically, as notation must also represent timing and rhythm via space. This shared temporal quality makes it possible for the musical and framed elements to progress synchronously, both separately and in tandem, via the creators' attempts to reconcile the music with the panels' contents. Furthermore, the examples using functional forms of notation provide additional rhythm and pacing cues to those traditionally used in comics.

While the reader is presented with a whole song in *Scott Pilgrim*, the images are more intermittent, representing significant periods of the song's duration at once. This is especially true of the stretched central panel. The musi-

cal elements are largely responsible for the sequence's rhythm and pacing. Round (2007) suggests that the perception of timing in comics is often based on intertextuality. This is also applicable to the guitar chords that run throughout the sequence which, as suggested, generally assume a knowing reader/user. That being said, it is far more likely that rhythm and pacing cues will be taken from the reader's closest approximation to the music that the sequence is parodying: garage rock.

However, despite the reader's best efforts to traverse the sequence as requested by the narrator, they are rebuffed at the conclusion of the song when Stephen remarks, 'Man that was way too fast' (Scott Pilgrim 2004: n.p.), suggesting that any reading of the music is only as reliable as the musicians producing it. While traditional musical notation would provide a more elaborate depiction of music, providing the reader is well-versed in reading sheet music, it would also lead to an excess of structure, one that is not fitting of the raw nature of the band.

The stretched central image is linked to every other element of the page by the occupied margins, which themselves are joined by beams of white light employed to represent the musical tones each character is producing on his/her instrument. The lightning-reminiscent beams bestow an energetic quality on the sequence and supply a sense of pervasiveness through the illusion of depth.

By linking the music to the margin, a sense of simultaneity is produced, allowing the band to perform as a unit, as the five close-up panels at the bottom skilfully suggest a counterintuitive level of discord between each member, owing to their inexperience. The margins provide the gravity of the sequence, pulling each of the disparate components of the page into one workable whole and compensating for a level of 'oneness' that would be obvious to the reader if they were watching/hearing a musical performance as opposed to reading one.

In *V for Vendetta*, the lyrics provide a bridge between the panels, which intermittently cut back to V playing the piano. The diegetic status of the music is confirmed via the repetition of V and the reproduction of the lyrics *within* the panels, which serve to provide continuity as an additive to that provided by the overarching notation. The lyrics are presented in speech balloons when V is visible, as opposed to captions when the panels convey the content of the musical number, bestowing the effect of a voiceover on these sections.

The running notation is enough to make any reader aware of the presence of music, but it could potentially provide a reader that is well-versed in reading sheet music with additional information pertaining to the vocal style of the sequence, including rhythm and timing cues. However, the speech balloons require the reader to fixate at least momentarily on the panels, rather than following the sequence of music and 'skimming' the images. Thus, there is a balance between maintaining the fluidity of the sequence by adhering to the relative dimensions and conventions of manuscript paper and ensuring that each section of the song, indicated by the lyric sections within the panels, are appropriately matched to the images that they represent/ are represented by.

While *Scott Pilgrim* and *V for Vendetta* invoke musical notation's timing, *Cages* draws on the symbolic qualities of each pitch in the chromatic scale to guide the reader through a period of time in the lives of its characters. As in *V for Vendetta* the relationship between the musical and the framed elements in sequence is one of mutual contextualisation. The chapter commences with Angel's vocalised introduction to the chromatic scale, corresponding to his appearance in the two panels imposed on the manuscript paper, where he decides that this particular instance of the scale will be in the key of C major.

As the chapter progresses, the musical elements occupy varying amounts of the page, loosely indicating the rhythm and salience of the music as it combines with the framed panels. For example, the 'nervous' tones of D-flat major and minor (McKean 2009: 356) see precariously placed hands hovering above a piano in two unframed spaces between an otherwise regular three-by-three grid. As the controversial author Jonathan debates whether or not to venture outside, the 'music' is comparable to a minimalistic horror film soundtrack.

Angel later describes the 'empty' tone of G-sharp, as an 'eight note wasteland' (McKean 2009: 368) which sees the top half of the page occupied by blank manuscript paper as Angel's visual counterpart wanders the deserted streets following a riot in the panels below. At this point, as the reader is accustomed to how the music and framed panels interact, McKean is able to use the absence of music itself to describe its qualities. So, while the framed panels are reliant on the contextualisation of the musical elements, they are able to sanction Angel's otherwise arbitrary observations.

In both *Cages* and *V for Vendetta* the perception of depth is created via the transposition of manuscript paper, which creates two visually distinct layers in each, producing two tracks of continuity. In both examples the distinction makes it possible to read the musical sections as a form of sequence in themselves. In *Cages*, each additional instance is a stage in the chromatic scale but these sections are punctuated by passages that do not employ any musical elements for pages at a time. In *V for Vendetta*, the breaks in the progression of the notation by the two-panel strips are more systematic, to the extent that if the panels were to be removed, a functioning page of sheet music would remain. Such examples show that the integration of musical elements does not simply concern linear sequences, but also translinear relationships between the musical passages over multiple pages.

The inclusion of conventions of musical notation in the comics featured represents a significant addition to comics' traditional blend of image and word. Each of the creators has manipulated elements of notation to convey specific musical performances in a manner in keeping with the styles and themes of their comics. The incorporation

of music has a large effect on the sequencing of the comics, owing to the shared temporal quality of comics and notation, which enables the enveloping musical elements to progress in tandem with the framed sections. While this affects the sense of temporality in each of the sequences via notation's ability to convey rhythm and timing, music also has a pronounced effect on page layout, which has been made to correspond with the musical conventions borrowed, so that the various elements of the page can be reconciled in sequence.

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