Europeana Research Grants Final Report

Visualising voice: Analysing spoken performances of nineteenth-century French poetry

Source: *Sirène portant une coquille à l'oreille* (Pont de Fragnée, Liège) by Victor Rousseau, 1905; Photo by Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage, KIK-IRPA, Brussels (Belgium), CC BY-NC-SA.

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Poetry is, at its heart, an oral art form - as [Foyle](#) [Young](#) [Poet](#) [Finalist](#) [Catherine](#) [Olver](#) puts it, "there's something about any poem worth the title that asks to be read aloud. Perhaps it's to do with the origin of poetry, as part of oral traditions, or perhaps the act of reading completes the poet's act of shaping their thoughts into words."

As an academic researcher specialising in nineteenth-century French poetry, I'm fascinated by the way in which performance changes the way we read a particular poem. Since 2015, my work has focussed on poetry and performance, through my role as Research Associate on the AHRC-funded [Baudelaire](#) [Song](#) [Project](#), directed by Prof. Helen Abbott at The University of Birmingham.

The Baudelaire Song Project uses digital humanities tools to analyse song settings of the poetry of Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), examining everything from classical French mélodies, to 1980s Soviet rock music, and from chanson, to noughties urban rap. Initially, I was surprised by the huge variety of performances of Baudelaire's poetry in song, and have been fascinated by what such performances might tell us about the reception of his poetry through time.

Within the context of the Baudelaire Song Project, we're particularly interested in the interaction between words and music, and the findings of the research repeatedly demonstrates that we see poetry in a new light, and unearth new readings when we consider it as more than just words on a page. The Baudelaire Song Project, perhaps unexpectedly, uncovered a niche for examining how spoken performances of poetry, too, could alter the way in which we view a particular text, revealing wide-ranging, nuanced interpretations. Receiving a Europeana Research Award in December 2016 allowed me to address this niche in research on poetry in performance, and to launch the Visualising Voice Project which sought to change the way we understand poetry.

The [Visualising Voice Project](#) addresses three key research questions:

- How do features of speech affect the way we read and interpret poetry?
- How can listening to someone else reading a poem shape our own understanding of the text?
- How do our own interpretative decisions colour the way we use our voices when reciting a poem?

How are we using Europeana Collections in the project?

Europeana Collections has a rich body of spoken performances of poems by nineteenth-century French poets, waiting to be discovered, explored, and used for research. These recordings were the key to addressing the lack of studies of spoken word performances of poetry in French, and to kick-starting a more general awareness of how performance affects our interpretation of a particular poem, across a wide range of languages and cultural traditions.

Within the context of this project, I chose to study the performances of three poets from nineteenth-century France whose work is now canonical - Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine (1844-1896) and Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891). Within the body of recordings of works by these poets, I selected the three poems each which offered the greatest number of recordings. Ideally, I wanted to have three recordings of each poem, allowing for comparison.

As it turned out, the spread of poems was not always even, particularly in the case of works by Arthur Rimbaud - Europeana Collections had six recordings of "Ma Bohême", but, perhaps surprisingly, only two settings of the well-known poem "Voyelles". The number of recordings of particular poems held in Europeana partner institutions hints that some poems are more frequently recorded than others and/or more readily available; this raises an important point about the reception histories of these poets through spoken performance. Almost all of the recordings of poems by Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Rimbaud date from between 1948 and 1962. This is concurrent with the growing popularity of spoken-word performances in the post-World War II era (Pardo, 2015). Although it does not provide a complete picture, the information we collected about recordings of poems by Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Rimbaud in Europeana Collections provides important clues as to the reception of the work of these poets through spoken recordings.

How did we design and develop the Visualising Voice site to promote the use of Europeana Collections by researchers and by the general public?

From the very early stages of proposing the project, I wanted Visualising Voice to be a force for "democratising" poetry. Working with web developer Tom Cowley and others, I set out to create a tool which made analysing spoken performances of poetry possible for a general audience, rather than just for academics. When poetry is performed orally, the poem text itself is a bit like a musical score; different speakers, like different singers, or even different pianists, interpret what is on the page in their own, individual way. The Visualising Voice Project sought to show, visually, how speakers in the various recordings had handled aspects of poetry, from pronunciation and stress, to speed of delivery and punctuation.

We were particularly interested in using the visualisations to assess and show the extent to which speakers adhered to the conventions of French versification regarding pronunciation of the mute "e". This is a principal concern of the research I'm involved with as part of The Baudelaire Song Project. Studying the handling of versification in song, we discovered that composers and singer-songwriters were quite free with the "rules" of French versification, often disrupting the conventional syllable patterns in Baudelaire's poetry. Obviously, various changes often need to be made to the delivery of a text, when it is transformed into song, in order ensure a good "fit" with the music. Beyond this, however, there is a trend in nineteenth-century French *mélodie* for according the mute "e" - at the end of a line, or before a vowel - its own note. I

hypothesised that the conventions of French versification would typically be followed in spoken recordings of poetry, where the words have their own rhythm, rather than having to fit to that of music. I was surprised to find that, in fact, in some cases, spoken performers, too, take liberties with the metrical conventions surrounding versification, most notably dropping "e"s on the ends of words before a vowel and/or adding an additional syllable by pronouncing "e"s at the ends of lines.

## What do the visualisations show us?

The Visualising Voice tool allows us to mark the beginning and end of each syllable, creating a timestamp. These timestamps are matched against the waveform, so we can see how the intensity of the voice fluctuates with each syllable. The waveform is dynamic, unfolding above the line, as the recording plays. The larger the text, the bigger the emphasis; so, in Alain Cuny's 1961 reading of Baudelaire's "L'Albatros", we can already see that there is particular emphasis on the second syllable of the word "souvent" ("often") in line one, and on the first syllable of the word "vastes" ("vast"), in the second half of line two.
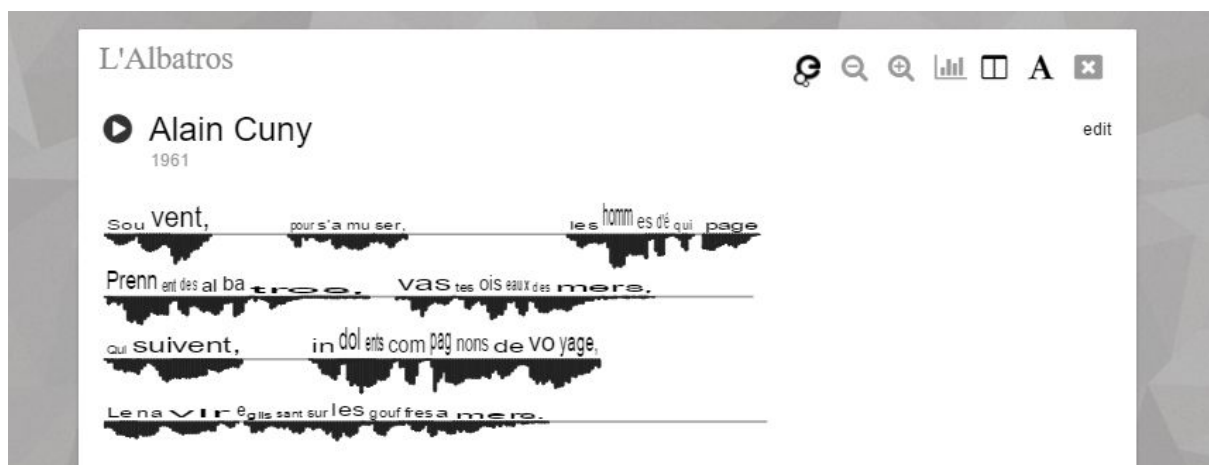
Waveform view of the visualisation of [Alain Cuny, reading Baudelaire's "L'Albatros" in 1961.](link)

We experimented with alternative ways of integrating the recordings with the text of the poem. The visualisation below is a histogram-style view of the delivery of the poem, the width of the bars representing the length of the syllable and the height indicating the intensity. The grey line beneath the text helps us to see how the metre is handled, emphasising breaks within lines. "L'Albatros" is written in 12-syllable lines, known as Alexandrines. From the visualisation below, we can see that Cuny breaks twice in this line, pausing after the word "Souvent", before making a more substantial pause at the caesura, after the sixth syllable. The grey line also allows us to see whether or not the speaker breaks between lines: there is nothing after the final syllable of line one, indicating that Cuny's performance maintains the sense unit, through the use of

enjambment between the first two lines. The grey line, which continues past the end of the text in line two, on the other hand, indicates a pause, with the length of the line showing its duration.
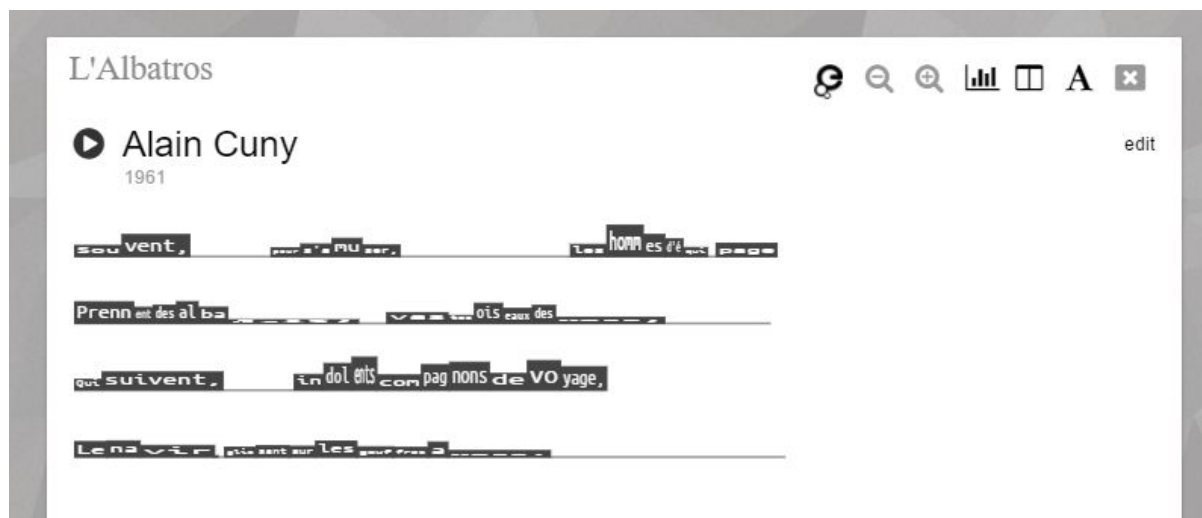
Waveform view of the visualisation of [Alain](#) [Cuny,](#) [reading](#) [Baudelaire's](#) ["L'Albatros"](#) [in](#) [1961.](#)

What is the future of Visualising Voice?

Thanks to the Europeana Research Grants, we've been able to kick-start what I believe is much-needed research into the spoken performance of poetry. Looking forward, we would like to obtain the necessary ethics clearance to allow users to record and upload their own performances. This would make Visualising Voice an even more useful tool in tracing the reception history of nineteenth-century French poetry through spoken performance, using the existing visualisations from the late 1940s - early 1960s as a starting point. We would also be interested in joining forces with scholars who work with poetry in other European languages, to make the project more versatile from a linguistic perspective and to make use of Europeana-based resources in other languages.

Supporting the creation and preservation of digital archives and cultural heritage data is fundamental to the future of scholarship. Working with a non-academic developer turned out to be very advantageous for the project, in terms of ensuring that the Visualising Voice site was accessible for a general audience. We spent a lot of time thinking about user experience, and about how to make the visualisations clear, and simple. Perhaps, surprisingly, I think that the focus on simplicity has made the tool better suited to our own research purposes and it is hoped that, in the future, the site will evolve to integrate more fully with Europeana through the annotations API (currently in beta). In its current form, Visualising Voice sets out to promote the use of

archival materials held by Europeana partner institutions for the purposes of research; beyond this, I hope to have fulfilled the goal of being part of a movement to encourage the public to make use of the fantastic body of archival materials which Europeana Collections makes available, for research, independent study and, of course, for pleasure!

Want to see the Visualising Voice tool live? Visit the project website at the following address: https://visualisingvoice.eu/

References and external links

The Baudelaire Song Project website, www.baudelairesong.org

Catherine Olver, "A Tour of the Poetry Archive",
http://www.poetryarchive.org/guided-tour/tour-archive-catherine-olver

Céline Pardo, *La Poésie hors du Livre (1945-1965),* (Paris : Presses de Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2015)