

## SEMI COLONS AND SEMI QUAVERS

Having a chat with a professor of English I asked him how the English Department was doing. He explained that he was temporarily in charge of the Music Department. This opened the door to a witticism worthy of Basil Brush. "So", I said, "you have exchanged semi colons for semi quavers." BOOM BOOM!

It reminds me of my time in the sixth form. For a while I used every form of punctuation mark that I could, always taking care to demarcate my sub-ordinate clauses with commas. This included the use not only of the dash but also the colon-dash. I never, of course, followed a colon with a capital letter unless it was reported speech or a proper noun. To see journalists doing that today makes me scream, as does 'meet with'. What is the 'with' for?

Well, one day my history teacher, Denis (one 'n') Martin, who had for ages been telling me that my essays were far too long, put a stop to my punctuational profligacy. "Jones", he said, "reading an essay by you is like reading Morse Code."

At the same time I was listening rather a lot to Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto (David and Igor Oistrach). If only, I thought, I could write an essay like that. A theme would be clearly established but then it would take the reader somewhere slightly different. The tempo would change unexpectedly and much use would be made of both pedals. Dissonance would be resolved into consonance or it might, unexpectedly, be the other way round, leaving a reader to search for their own resolution.

Bernard Shaw had good advice to writers.

You want to learn to write? Then write!

You might think of Shaw as a playwright. He made his name as a music critic. That meant deadlines, a defined number of column inches, no redundant words and never deceiving your reader. Writing is a craft. To get it right you must be prepared to get it wrong.

Possibly the most stressful writing I have ever done was the setting of examination papers. I did not know my readers. I could easily confuse them. Do you remember that moment when you took your first glance at a paper and your heart leapt up when you saw just what you wanted to be asked in the first sentence of a question? Then you read the second sentence and despaired.

We all have a voice. Sometimes that voice is overly trained by someone else. Last year I re-read a masters dissertation by one of my students from twenty years ago. I was the supervisor but we had very little time together because she had to leave the

country in a hurry. "This methodology chapter looks strange", I thought. "It does not follow the normal pattern". By the time I finished it I was very impressed and realised why, all those years ago, it had been singled out for praise. It was the voice of the student. It was not a regurgitation of what I had told her. It was original and it provided me with perspectives that I had not anticipated.

School teaching today does not entice me. Plans are more important than pleasure. Under New Labour there was criticism that the curriculum lacked creativity. "Something must be done about it". It was. Creativity was timetabled. The bell goes: "Right children begin being creative.". The bell goes again: "Now children, stop being creative."

And after that I can no longer tell the difference between consonance and dissonance.

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