

Author Asks



from **Jeff Dolven**,
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- 1 “Speculative music” is the English translation of a Latin phrase, *musica speculativa*, used in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to refer to the music of the spheres: the abstract, unhearable, perfect harmony produced by the planets in their celestial rounds. Its opposite, *musica mundana*, or worldly music, is the stuff we listen to on earth, our songs and our symphonies and our dances. Music of both kinds can be heard from time to time in the poems of this book. Which do you hear when? Do they meet, and what happens then?
- 2 I think a lot about rhythm, and all the poems in the book are written in some meter or other: four-beat (tetrameter), five-beat (pentameter), and occasionally six-beat (hexameter) lines, sometimes loosely iambic and sometimes strictly iambic, and every now and again in triple meters (dactyls and anapests). These rhythms are one variety of the poems’ music. I hope people will ask, as they read: hmmm, why this meter, for this poem? Why does a particular poem play by the metrical rules here, and falter, or rebel, here?
- 3 Another music question: what is the role of song in the book? You can say, roughly, that the five-beat line in English poetry is the line of epic and of tragedy, the noblest genres, and (as literary history goes along) of conversation and of poetic thinking, too. The four-beat line is always closer to song, and most of the songs on the radio are composed in ballad stanzas, four-line units, four beats to a line. When do the songs happen in this collection? What is the difference between the shorter and the longer lines, between singing and talking or thinking?
- 4 The long poem “Horse Lessons” has two characters. Who are they? What is their situation? (What do they have to do with a horse?) And why does only one speak; why is the “you” always silent?
- 5 Another question for “Horse Lessons”: who is supposed to be learning what? Can you say if the lesson, whatever it is, is learned? (How would you know? How do we ever know?)
- 6 And one more for “Horse Lessons.” There’s a good deal of horse lore in the poem, none of it more important than the story of the Trojan horse (the hollow gift horse that the besieging Greeks used to sneak into the walled city of Troy). What does that story have to do with the situation of the poem? (An important version of it is told in *Book IV* of Homer’s *Odyssey*.)
- 7 “The Invention” is subtitled “A Libretto for Speculative Music.” What is the relationship between this ideal of music (see above), the music described by the stage directions, and the singing of the characters? What does it mean to sing in this poem? Alone or together? What is the difference? And what does it mean to sing with the Invention in particular? (What is the Invention, anyway?)
- 8 How would you describe the prose in “The Invention”? Is it the neutral voice of the stage directions? (If this imaginary opera were produced, would it be spoken aloud?) Or is it something more, or different? Is it a reliable guide to the action? What would we (the readers, the audience) do without it? Does it want something from us, or for itself?

