

*"I was promised on a time, to have reason for my rhyme. From that time unto this season, I received nor rhyme nor reason."* Edmund Spenser

### **Rhymes with Reason**

What is a rhyme? Most simply it is a repetition of identical sounds in two or more words. We tend to focus only on what is the same when we think of rhyme, but there are two essential elements: Something is the same, but something is also different. Consider that we don't think of a word as rhyming with itself. A poem of couplets that used the same word at the end of each pair of lines would be a parody of rhyme, not a real rhyme. It would be dull and unimaginative. So, rhyming does not mean that two words have the same sound; it means that the sound is partly the same and partly different. The second recalls the first, but with a twist. It is a small example of a much broader, even universal, principle in art: there is always a balance of repetition and variety, of the anticipated and the unexpected. Art is the interweaving of creativity within structure.

What is rhyme in music then? Music is also sound, and is also organized into structural units over time. In adapting the concept of rhyme to music, we see it apply over many levels of structure: from notes to figures, phrases and sections; from articulations of single notes to extended variation forms. In rhyming words or lines of poetry, what is different comes first and what is the same comes last. It is often the reverse in music. That which is the same comes first and then is changed at the end, for instance, in phrases that differ only at the cadence, or repetitions that follow an altered dynamic contour after an identical start.

John Philip Dimick, a guitarist, teacher, arranger and early Internet adopter from Portland, Oregon, writes that he often uses this concept. I am indebted to him for his elegant expansion of the idea with both rhyme and reason: "[In the opening of Tárrega's *Lagrima*] *the two phrases should rhyme, not be identical. If the player is really alive to the music, then the phrase should sound a little different on the repeat for having been played once already. It's not new anymore. The repeat should be informed by the first hearing, and therefore be a little different, just as the second sip of wine tastes a little different from the first (if one is making a point of being alive to it): rhyming, but not identical.*

*And this happens organically if one is alive to the music. It's not something that has to be contrived or artificially imposed on the music. One just has to remember to listen and respond. But 'good' guitarists take such pains to be consistent that they overdo it and drill the life out of their playing sometimes or, in worse cases, they never considered this sort of aliveness to be a requirement of good guitar playing."*

### **The Transcription**

Often a transcription is best approached by taking a broad look at the musical texture and devising a consistent strategy that can be implemented throughout. First, look at the music's structure to help plan for the transcription's structure. The transcription will be most effective and transparent when it conveys the musical structure through its choices of fingers and strings. The aim is to keep what is the same in the music the same in the fingering. When the pattern of the fingering reflects the music, it facilitates a performance that is more fluid and natural. The player is then free to shape, through his playing, what is different in the music and in his interpretation, and make it rhyme.

Let's take a look at Johanna Senfter's composition for piano, *Ernste Gedanken* from *Sechs kleine Stücke für Anfänger*. It is built on a one-measure pattern that provides textural coherence and thus allows artful variation. The pattern is a prominent and essential element of the composition and, thus, the fingering ideally will parallel it. Fully 75 percent of the measures follow the pattern of the measure in Figure 1.

[INSERT figure 1 ]

Taking a closer look at this measure, we see that although it is written as two voices, it actually contains three elements:

1. The first two bass notes of each measure (along with the first melody note) establish the harmony.
2. The next two bass notes, on the second beat, are an appoggiatura and its resolution.
3. The melody follows the pattern of one half note plus two eighth notes.

Each of these structural elements has implications for the transcription:

**Bass:** Although written as a single line of eighth notes, the harmonic context implies that the first note is best sounded through at least the first beat of the measure. On the piano this is done with the sustain pedal. On the guitar it is too often done thoughtlessly by not stopping bass notes that should not ring over, but in this case the transcription should actually facilitate the first note sounding for the whole first beat. At a minimum, this means the first two notes should be on two different strings. For example, in measure six the D note is played on the fifth string not the open fourth string where it would be cut short in order to finger the following F note.

**Second Beat:** The word “appoggiatura” comes from the Italian verb *appoggiare*, “to lean upon,” that is, one note leans on the next. It is an unprepared, non-harmonic note on the beat that does not belong to the harmony. It is approached by a leap and usually resolves downwards or upwards by a step into the current harmony. In an effective performance the leaning can take the form of a slight emphasis and lingering on the note. Fingering preferably keeps these two notes closely connected—on the same string wherever possible. In Figure 1, which is taken from measure 5, the B leans on the A. These could be played on two different strings: the open second string and the third string second fret.

However, it is much preferred to have them both on the third string. Notice also that the C bass note on the fifth string can be held through the second beat, providing the context for the biting dissonance of B in the middle voice against C in the bass. Measure 13 is an example of where I could not carry through with this plan. The vagaries of fingers, notes and strings obstructed the plan and the result is a bit makeshift by comparison.

**Melody:** The pattern is a half note plus two eighth notes. The eighth notes either ascend melodically as an upbeat to the next measure, or fall over a large interval. In the former case they would ideally be on the same string as at the start of the piece. When the third beat notes fall over a large interval—and sometimes this interval is *very* large—the figure emerges as a characteristic feature and a primary performance challenge of the piece. How can the player connect these two notes? This problem is not so easily solved as it was in the first two beats. The large leaps, unlike the appoggiaturas, will inevitably fall short of a true legato, but there are several resources available to connect them musically.

The first is to simply keep the melody notes on the same string. This helps connect the notes by matching their timbre and makes it easier to match and modulate their volume and prominence in the musical texture.

In the pattern shown in Figure 1, the last two melody eighth notes are always alone with rests in the bass. This silence focuses attention on the melody and should be strictly enforced in the fingering and the performance.

Last, the guitar has a subtle resource that can be difficult to describe. The terms *portamento* and *glissando* are not always used consistently. Both connect two notes. The former is a continuous slide in pitch between the notes, most characteristically with the voice or a non-fretted string instrument. The latter moves by discrete steps, as when a finger is dragged across the piano keyboard. Technically, a guitar cannot perform a true portamento, but a subtle use of glissando can closely emulate it. Starting with the top note, the fretting finger slides down just the first two or three frets, then shifts to the destination note (sometimes using a different left-hand finger). Pressure on the string is delicately lifted during the motion so that only the slightest hint of the descending notes adjacent to the main note can be heard. The result for the listener is an effect almost identical to a portamento. Although crude, Figure 2 uses standard notation to illustrate the technique.

[ Insert figure 2 ]

There is a risk of overusing this technique, but if done subtly and flexibly, it can add life to the line. And this is the “different” part of our definition of rhyming—the subtly varied performance of similar melodic figures, using the foundation of a fingering that preserves what is the same in the musical structure.

This was a particularly satisfying transcription because the plan could be carried through very consistently without undue added technical difficulty.

## **The Composer**

Johanna Senfter's life spanned a large swath of musical history. Born in 1879, her musical ability was recognized and nurtured from an early age. Beginning when she was 16, she studied composition with Iwan Knorr, and violin, piano and organ with other eminent teachers at the Hoch Conservatory. She became a student of Max Reger in 1908, the same year she composed *Sechs kleine Stücke für Anfänger* from which this issue's transcription is taken. She composed nine symphonies, 26 orchestral works, and concertos for piano, violin, viola and cello. Promising material for guitar transcribers can be found in her many works for solo piano.

Please send your comments, contributions, rhymes and reasons to:

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# Ernstes Gedanken

Sechs kleine Stücke für Anfänger, 1908



*Figure 1*

# Ernste Gedanken

Sechs kleine Stücke für Anfänger, 1908

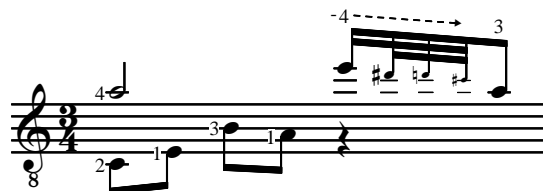


Figure 2

# Ernste Gedanken

## Sechs kleine Stücke für Anfänger, 1908

Transcribed for guitar  
by Richard Yates

Johanna Senfter  
(1879–1961)

**Adagio ma non troppo**

⑥=D

8

4

8

8

12

8

16

8

20

8

② ③

①

③ VII II II

③ ② V<sub>3</sub> ② ③

② VIII II

8 8 8 8 8 8 8 8

24  $\Pi_4$

28

32

36

40

44  $\Pi_4$  VII

48  $\Pi_4$  III  $\Pi_4$