Hip-Hop Hexameter: Memorizing Vergil with a Beat

Andrew W. Sweet
*The Foote School, CT*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://crossworks.holycross.edu/necj](https://crossworks.holycross.edu/necj)

**Recommended Citation**
Available at: [https://crossworks.holycross.edu/necj/vol42/iss2/5](https://crossworks.holycross.edu/necj/vol42/iss2/5)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by CrossWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in New England Classical Journal by an authorized editor of CrossWorks.
Students file into the classroom and take their seats. I ask, “Who is ready to recite the poem?” Most of their hands shoot up quickly, and the chosen student bounds happily to the front of the room, where he loads and plays a music file. Heads start to bounce, and the student begins reciting the poem. This is Hip-Hop Hexameter, a method I created three years ago to help students understand dactylic hexameter using looped beats. I teach at the Foote School, a K-9 independent school where all students take both Latin and a modern foreign language in grades 7-9. Each year, these students memorize at least one piece of poetry in both of their foreign languages classes and English class. I am able to spend six 42-minute periods teaching my students about Latin poetry and helping them memorize a piece of ten to fourteen lines. The project began with one group of 9th graders who were studying the opening of the *Aeneid* in an Honors Latin II class, and the results were so encouraging that I have also used this method to introduce 8th graders to dactylic hexameter for the past two years.

---

1 A version of this paper was presented at the 108th CANE Annual Meeting in Manchester, NH, and I am grateful to all of those who gave me comments and feedback. I would also like to thank NECJ’s anonymous referee, Tina Hansen, Debra Riding, and John Turner for their insightful suggestions on an earlier draft of this article.
The first goal of the project is to help students not only to understand but also to experience the difference between the quantitative meters of Classical Latin and the accentual meters of English. I found that one traditional method of teaching Latin in meter, heavily emphasizing the metrical stress on the ictus, helped my students lengthen the long syllables but still left them with the impression that the placement of the stress accent was the defining feature of ancient verse. Therefore, I decided to try a new way of presenting Latin poetry to them. Because all of my students have a basic familiarity with musical notation, rendering long and short syllables as notes is a more effective way to present syllable quantity. It also helps them understand that Latin poetry is meant to be read aloud and performed.

The second goal of the project is to make memorizing Latin poetry both easier and more fun. Although the method described here could work for any type of musical accompaniment to ancient poetry, hip-hop, or rap music, is uniquely suited to this purpose. Hip-hop is characterized by spoken words over repeated rhythmic patterns. It has become a genre of pop, and students encounter it every day, both when listening to their own favorite songs and also in commercials. Connecting Latin poetry to music that students enjoy and know well gets them excited to recite the poetry. Not only are students deeply familiar with hip-hop, but it is also the most common type of formal poetry today. In fact, as Adam Bradley explains:

> The beat in rap is poetic meter rendered audible. Rap follows a dual rhythmic relationship whereby the MC is liberated to pursue innovations of syncopation and stress that would sound chaotic without the regularity of the musical rhythm. The beat and the MC’s flow, or cadence, work together to satisfy the audience’s musical and poetic expectations: most notably, that rap establish and maintain rhythmic patterns while creatively disrupting those patterns, through syncopation and other pleasing forms of rhythmic surprise.³

Ancient poetry also has a kind of dual rhythmic relationship. A Roman listening to the Aeneid would have understood and felt the basic rhythm of dactylic hexameter; he would have been able to appreciate the clever ways in which Vergil played with his expectations. A beginning Latin student, however, does not have an internal sense of hexameter rhythm. Playing a beat along with the recitation externalizes

---

2 See Mahoney for a critique of this method, which she calls “scanning aloud” (2001, pp. 396–397).

this rhythm, helping anyone to hear and appreciate the artistry involved in both the composition and performance. The performances themselves become enjoyable opportunities for students to exhibit their own interests, talents, and creativity, as well as show their knowledge of ancient poetry.

The project itself begins with the students reading at home and discussing in class the introduction to Adam Bradley’s *Book of Rhymes: the Poetics of Hip Hop*, which helps them look at hip-hop music as formal poetry. Next, I present them with a text of the first eleven lines of the *Aeneid* that includes scansion. The students learn the rules for when syllables scan long or short, but the focus of the project is reading Latin aloud rather than scanning lines of poetry. To encourage them to read with the natural word stress rather than to stress the first syllable of every foot, I have marked the stress accent on their text, in blue when the natural stress falls on the first syllable of each foot and in red when the stress is not on the first syllable. I also give the students an alternate text with the rhythm of the poem in musical notation.

In musical notation, one foot of a dactylic hexameter verse becomes one measure or bar with a 4/4 time signature. A half note represents a long syllable, and a quarter note represents a short syllable. See figure 1 for a representation of a dactyl and a spondee in musical notation. Thus, a basic line of dactylic hexameter is six measures long.

Figure 1 - Dactyl and Spondee

![Figure 1 - Dactyl and Spondee](image)

Figure 2 shows the rhythm of the first line of the *Aeneid* with the words transcribed underneath. Representing each metrical foot as a measure requires playing the music at a fast tempo, but it makes the students’ musical compositions correspond more closely to the way I teach them to analyze hexameter.4

---

Figure 2 - *Aeneid* I.1

![Figure 2 - *Aeneid* I.1](image)

4 Note that Mahoney explains long and short syllables differently, as quarter and eighth notes. She also argues that one should not attempt to give Classical meters a time signature in musical notation. It is true that Latin meters besides dactylic hexameter cannot be divided into equal units of time, and a Roman probably would not take exactly the same amount of time to recite different lines of even those two meters. The aim of this project, however, is not to produce a perfectly authentic recitation but rather to make learning about
Presenting Latin poetry in this way also helps students follow the natural word stress. By identifying the downbeats and encouraging students to experiment with syncopation, or accenting the ‘off’ beat, I am able to show more effectively that some of the artistry of Latin poetry emerges from the interplay between metrical stress and natural word stress. In the first line of the Aeneid, for instance, the downbeats are ca- in the second foot and Tro- in the third. Thus, the students’ knowledge of modern musical techniques helps them understand accentuation as well as syllable quantity in Latin poetry. Furthermore, telling students that they themselves must resolve the tension between metrical and natural stress gives them ownership of the performance process and helps them move beyond singsong or chant-like recitations. To help my students understand the importance of reciting with the natural word stress this year, I invited them to try the scanning aloud technique with Frederick Ahl’s hexameter translation of the Aeneid. Early Latin learners do not always appreciate how strange Latin verse sounds with heavy stress on the first syllable of every foot, but the problem with this placement of the stress accent in a line of English hexameter is easy even for beginning students to hear.

After learning about dactylic hexameter in the first class period devoted to the project, the students begin using Apple’s GarageBand to make a beat in the second class. I demonstrate how to make the beat for a single foot, and then the students experiment with creating their own music. Students have one or two classes to work on their compositions before performing the poem over their own beat. For this initial performance, students are allowed to read from a text of the poem. We stage a ‘Roman Rap Battle,’ and students vote for a winning beat and ‘rapper.’ In the first year, I observed and the students confirmed that even reading the poem aloud helped them memorize it, so I now give them multiple opportunities to practice the whole poem in front of the class with a text. Later, students are responsible for reciting the poem over their beats from memory. Finally, students submit an audio recording of themselves reciting the poem over their beat, and I use some of these recordings as examples for the next group of students.

I measured the effectiveness of the first iteration of the project by checking the accuracy of students’ recall of Aeneid I.1-11 and by having students do an anonymous quantitative meter accessible and enjoyable for beginning Latin students. Trying to apply a musical time signature to Latin poetry would not be appropriate for more advanced students, who are studying meters other than dactylic hexameter, but it has worked well as an introduction to epic meter (2001, p. 397).  

evaluation after they submitted their final pieces. Of the fifteen students who participated in the project, fourteen completed the evaluation form. All of these students had previously studied Latin meter and memorized a piece of Latin poetry twice, once with me and once with another teacher. Every student successfully recited the poem, and the evaluation results showed evidence that most students were meeting the learning goals. Responses indicated that 71% of respondents believed they understood hexameter better after the project, and 71% were able to explain the meter of a hexameter line clearly and succinctly. Additionally, 64% said this approach made studying Latin poetry more enjoyable or much more enjoyable, and 57% said that memorizing the poetry was easier or much easier.

The recordings made by the first group of students were not suitable for use as teaching tools because they were made with headset microphones. Two summers ago, I won an ING Unsung Heroes Award for the project, and I used the proceeds to purchase high quality recording equipment. Recordings made by 9th graders last year and this year became an important part of my lessons on dactylic hexameter for the 8th graders, who were also very enthusiastic about the process. I have never seen teenagers so excited to recite poetry in front of their peers. Some even searched YouTube for instrumental versions of their favorite songs and asked for more chances to recite poetry in class. This project helps Latin poetry come alive for students, and they understand the difference between quantitative meter and accentual meter better with this method than with others that I have tried. Although the final pieces are undoubtedly different from an ancient Roman’s recitation of the same poetry, the benefits of approaching Latin hexameter in this way are significant for modern students.
