Jabberwocky

Philip Legge
A note on pronunciation

In his Preface to the 1896 Edition of *Through the Looking-Glass*, Lewis Carroll wrote:

> The new words, in the poem "Jabberwocky", have given rise to some differences of opinion as to their pronunciation: so it may be as well to give instructions on that point also. Pronounce "slithy" as if it were the two words, "sly, the": make the "g" hard in "gyre" and "gimble": and pronounce "rath" to rhyme with "bath".

As this is not a complete compendium of the unusual words in the poem, the following list is offered as a slightly more beneficial guide.

- **borogoves**: pronounce to rhyme with the two words "borrow groves"
- **brillig**: pronounce "brill" as in "brilliant", "ig" as in "igloo"
- **callooh, callay**: there are two possibilities for the first vowel, rhyming with the "a" in either "sally" or "saloon"
- **frabjous**: pronounced to rhyme with the first and last syllables of "fabulous"; the "j" is soft
- **frumious**: rhymes with "luminous"
- **gimble**: with a hard "g", rhymes with "thimble"
- **gyre**: with a hard "g", rhymes with "wire"
- **Jubjub**: the syllable "jub" rhymes with "pub"
- **mimsey**: rhymes with "whimsy"
- **mome**: rhymes with "dome", not with "some"
- **outgrabe**: the syllable "grabe" should rhyme with "babe"
- **raths**: as noted above, rhymes with "baths": not with "maths"
- **slithy**: as noted above, pronounce the first syllable like the word "sly"
- **toves**: rhymes with "groves"
- **tulgey**: the first syllable rhymes with "bulge"; the entire word would thus rhyme with the neologism "bulge-y"
- **uffish**: like the first two syllables of "sufficient" but with the stress on the first syllable
- **vorpal**: rhymes loosely with "portal"
- **wabe**: rhymes with "babe"
- **whiffling**: rhymes with "piffling"

A note on performance

The first verse is a mirror canon and can be sung the same backwards as well as forwards (in the terms of the avant-garde, it is “non-retrogradable”), so if it is at all possible, the first verse should be recorded in high-quality at a rehearsal. Played in reverse at the correct speed and pitch, this verse can serve as an “intonation” to lead the choir into Verse 1, while the backwards language gives the aural equivalent to the reversed writing that briefly confuses Alice, before she hits upon the idea of using a mirror to read it.

The Bass solo in Verse 2 may be sung by all men, but the marking "quasi misterioso" is to emphasise the tremulous fear of the father, contrasted by his higher-pitched elation in Verse 6 where his speech is translated to the Tenors. (Both these utterances are mirrored, but in Verse 6 the “mirror” is also inverted.)

The speed of the compound metre in Verse 2 and continuing into Verse 3 should be judged with enough flexibility to make the semiquavers in bars 27 and 28 as fast as possible.

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Text for inclusion in programme notes

*Jabberwocky*, written in the space of a few days in May 2010, is something of a mini-cantata version of Lewis Carroll’s famous poem from *Through the Looking-Glass*, in which the eponymous beast is hunted and slain by a young hero. The hero’s father has a singing rôle in verses 2 and 6, given to a solo bass and the entire tenor section respectively, which musically employ palindromic mirror-writing: in verse 2 the nervous, tremulous fear of the father is represented by an inflected, minor-key arabesque which is identical both forwards and backwards and is unsupported by ambiguous floating harmonies, whereas the triumphant hero’s return in verse 6 gives rise to an extroverted major-key scale passage: here the mirror version of the vocal line is inverted. The central verses 3, 4, and 5 vocally depict the dramatic action: long, loping phrases for the searching out of the foe in verse 3, followed by agitated semiquaver oscillations before the appearance of the whiffling and burbling Jabberwock in verse 4, which is duly dispatched by the heroic treble line in the next verse, ably abetted by the rhythmic hacking and galumphing of the underneath parts.

Verses 1 and 7 frame this little drama with Carroll’s best-known lines “T’was brillig, and the slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe: all mimsy were the borogoves, and the mome raths outgrabe.” Verse 1, not surprisingly, consists of musical mirror-writing and is presented as a short, fast, self-contained overture, to be heard once backwards (exactly like the curious backwards poem that Alice finds in Looking-Glass Land) and once forwards. In Verse 7, the same motif initially heard in the soprano part becomes a reversible two-part canon at the distance of half a bar, while the altos and basses sing a slow, non-retrogradable accompaniment to finish the work in subdued and elegaic fashion.

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Jabberwocky

Verse 1 (tutti, Allegro)

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves, and the mome raths outgrabe.

Verse 2 (solo, Andante)

'Beware the Jabber-wock, my son! The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!

Verse 3 (tutti, l'istesso tempo)

He took his vorpal sword in hand: Long time the manx-ome foe he

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sought—So rest-ed he by the Tum-tum tree.

Long time the manx-ome foe he sought—So rest-ed he by the Tum-tum tree.

So rest-ed he by the Tum-tum tree, And stood a while in thought.

And, as in uff - ish thought he stood, the Jab - ber-wock with eyes of flame, Came

Verse 4 (un poco agitato)

And, as in uff - ish thought he stood, the Jab - ber-wock with eyes of flame, Came

And, as in uff - ish thought he stood, the Jab - ber-wock with eyes of flame, Came
Verse 5 (marcato)

One, two! One two! And through and through The vor-pal blade went, snick-er-snick!

One, two! One two! One two! One, two! One, two! One, two! snick-er-snick! snick-er-snick!

One, two! One two! One two! One two! One two! One, two! One, two! snick-er-snick! snick-er-snick!

One, two! One two! One two! One two! One, two! One, two! snick-er-snick! snick-er-snick!

He left it dead, and with its head He went, ga-lumphing, back! ga-lumph!

He left it dead, left it dead, left it dead, Ga-lumph, ga-lumph, ga-lumph, ga-lumph!

He left it dead, left it dead, left it dead, Ga-lumph, ga-lumph, ga-lumph, ga-lumph!
Verse 6 (tutti, meno mosso)

"And hast thou slain the Jabberwock? Come to my arms, my beamish boy! O frab-jous day! Cal-look! Cal-lay!" He

Verse 7 (tutti, Adagio)

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves Did gyre and gimble

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves gimbled

chor-pled in his joy.

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves Did gyre and gimbled

in the wabe: All mim-sy were the borogoves, And the mome raths outgrabe.

in the wabe: mim-sy borogoves, And the mome raths outgrabe.

gimbled in the wabe: All mim-sy were the borogoves, And the mome raths outgrabe.

the wabe: mim-sy, And the mome raths outgrabe.