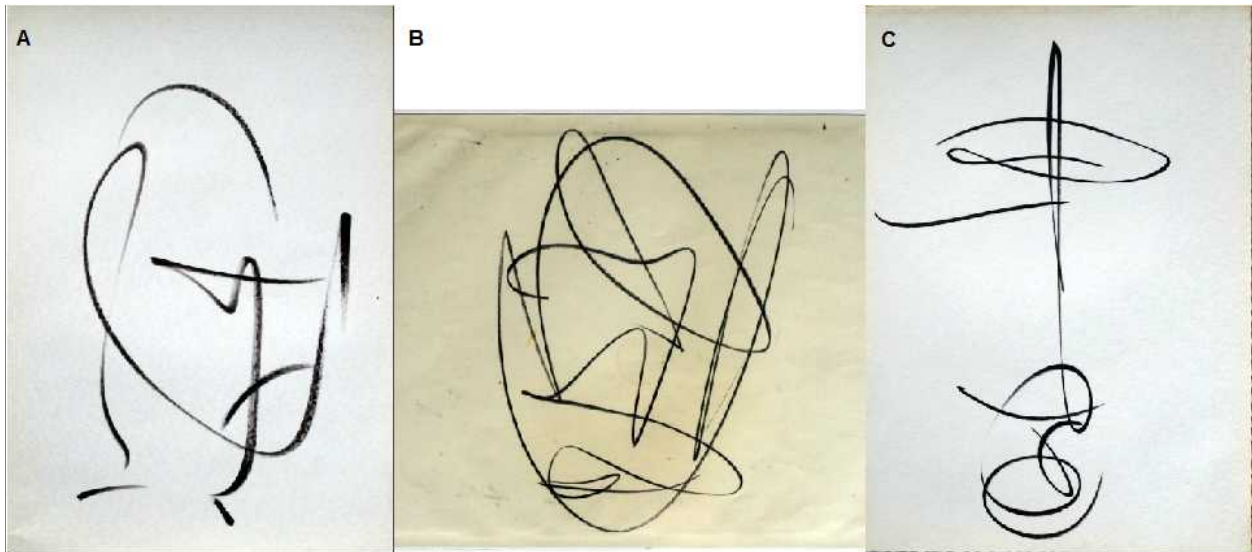


I was initially inspired to think about Szabó Lajos when I watched [a musical performance by my friend Bali János](#). He *performed* some of Szabó Lajos's calligraphies and transformed an originally visually striking piece into a musically striking piece. What grasped me was that he used two different instruments to express different "tones of the rhythm." Each movement he made with the different instruments - a stick-sounding one and a more brush-like sounding one - was made in time, lending the performance a clear rhythm and the combination of different sounding instruments moving along the calligraphic strokes gave the rhythm a direct kind of tone. It is not much to say that it is not common to think of rhythm having much tone - with actual music, we mostly listen to rhythm as the structural basis underpinning melodies from different instruments like the guitar or the voice. But, through this kind of "tonal rhythm" Bali gave the rhythm color, a color comparable only to that of the voice, in essence giving the calligraphy itself a voice.

Observing the drawings themselves then, I understood that Bali's performance was spot on. My own basic experience of these not quite image-like pictures is comprised of just these two: rhythm and tone. So for myself I needed to attempt to make some loose definitions of these, or at least cast their meaning in some sort of form. Tone in these calligraphies always has to do with weight, the lightness or heaviness of the stroke. In comparison, the density of strokes conveys a kind of rhythm; I feel a faster rhythm where lines condense, be they stout or light, and a slow rhythm where there are few lines in an area. Both definitions are immediately in need of amends. The weight of each line may change within the line thus shading and livening up the tone. But there is more than that. An individual line can also be fast or slow. This is partly due to the direction of a stroke, its swift or sluggish turns, but also in part because rhythm and tone entangle as the changes of tone and shades lends dynamism, that is, speed to the lines, which connects them to the notion of movement. In other words, tone can be applied to the concept of rhythm - just as in Bali's musical performance.



What exactly I mean by all that is what the description of the following few drawings will hopefully both elucidate and expand. In the calligraphy, A, I see a self-portrait of Szabó Lajos. The rhythm of the drawing, which despite the low density of strokes is fast, is formed by the sharply arching, heavy ink strokes. Few dynamic lines delineate a face, making both the face and the drawing deliberate and striking. And the lines themselves belie our physical intuition: we usually expect heavy things to go slow - *heavy-footed*. What Szabó does here subverts our physical expectation. The calligraphy suggests the existence of a world where heavy moves fast, indeed it is heavy that is truly fast, and light (overly light) moves slow. In contrast to the portrait, the next calligraphy, B, has a high density of thin lines, with barely any space. I chose this calligraphy as a counterpoint because it is also a portrait, in fact a self-portrait, yet is obviously different from picture A. Fastness is of a very different character here, its tone too is lighter: we see a high density of wildly looping thin strokes like fire spurts. The density of strokes lies low in the plane of the page. Lower to the ground, more gravity in the placement of the bulk of the lines, but no gravity in the strokes. It is not as striking as the face distinctly etched, but it is still full of internal energy and looks to me like a fire glowing inside an egg. Calligraphy A may show an outwardly burning, willful fire while Calligraphy B shows an inwardly glowing burn. That is just why it is exciting to observe them as self-portraits of Szabó.

As an example of the mixtures of such different rhythm and tone extremes, in calligraphy C, I see an oscillation of heavy-light-heavy tone and fast-slow-fast rhythm. The heavy-light-heavy tone is due to the thickness of the individual strokes at the bottom and top compared with the thinness of the stroke connecting them through the middle; and the fast-slow-fast rhythm travels from bottom to the top of the page as from the dense bundle of strokes a single line shoots ahead through the white space.

All these varying rhythms and tones express a unique musical quality for each drawing. Rhythm and tone are of course inherently musical terms. Previously, I wrote rhythm in music provides the skeleton, the foundation on which other more tonal melodies are built. So in the visual, the lines make the skeleton - where we draw a line, we build a structure: we divide space. This is obviously an important point for Szabó. Musicality, however, appears not in the predictable, trivial way in his drawings. Because of the combinations of heavy and light, fast and slow, the lines compact melodies, which are usually built upon a musical skeleton or structure, directly into the skeleton or structure itself. This enriches the skeleton, giving it deeper qualities than just line and not line or black and white. I think this is analagous to a singer. When I am singing, my voice has “color,” so they say, a combination of certain tones, guttural and nasal sounds. But this color is my unique, individual trait. In a Szabó Lajos calligraphy, each line is heavy-or-light and fast-or-slow - and this would be no surprise but placement of these rhythms and tones in space imposes an individual color to each line and group. The visual of his calligraphic pieces is inherently musical but it also acts as his voice which exudes the color quality.

And yet the colors in his drawings are all black and white. Does this somehow apply to the music I know? As there are no gray areas in Szabó Lajos’s calligraphy, there can be no “to some extent” either when it comes to speaking about the musicality of his calligraphy. Is there “to some extent” in music? My own inner experience says there cannot be! If I only go half-way to produce a sound, it is unsupported and cracks. To be soft, I cannot be soft: I must fully expand my lungs and change the shape of my mouth, slightly closing off my throat. To be loud: I must fully expand my lungs and change the shape of my mouth, opening my throat and nasal passages as wide as humanly possible. In Szabó’s visual voice, it is the thin, incision-like line that is in discrete opposition to the loud or heavy line. Nothing is, nothing can be to some extent. It is in

the extremes of black and white, line and not line - yet, also similar to music, while there are discrete musical notes and intervals, there are individual weights (tones) and structures (rhythms) attributed to the lines in space which lead me to perceive color.

So how can I more specifically characterize this color that I see in SzL's visual voice? I think about the ideas of light and fast and the word "airy" comes to mind. This is an airy color, for example, sky blue or off white. In contrast, I think of what heavy and slow mean. I say "rich." People say "rich" colors are e.g. burgundy or royal colors. But food is "rich", so is earth. I certainly do not mean the direct materialistic richness in the money-sense here. But I like "earthly", "bodily", which then transforms "airy" to "heavenly", "out-of-bodily" - so it too gains a kind of weight. So there is bodily/earthly and out-of-bodily/spiritual. What is exciting in all this, is that in these drawings the two do meet. I see abstract lines and spaces immediately and I see the bodily emerge from these. I see faces. People look for faces in natural things, like trees or in man-made things, like paintings, because we look for ourselves in it. And this is where we find it. In many of SzL's calligraphies my eye is drawn to facial features, such as the frown in calligraphy A and the turned down eyes of calligraphy B. This very basic human form - the face - does not appear with the realism of a photograph though and is more of an impression due to the rhythm, tone and resulting color of the combination of lines and space. The movement of a line across white space begets a notion of spirit in the calligraphy. In contrast, in calligraphy B, behind the aspects of the human face - downturned eyes and pursed lips - because the lines are looping and intersecting wildly, I feel this added chaos. Sadness and struggle are condensed with a quiet intensity. And in the intersection of these is what is human. That is why there is a human voice and so much color in this pure black and white.

*Edited by Cziegler István*