

# *A Brief History of the Master of Execution Stenography*

DANIEL HOJNACKI

---

“Анннннннннннннннн” read the first line of Soghomon’s work projected on the whiteboard of the classroom. A jagged red line trailed under the entirety of the text as if the spell-check function were designed for the express purpose of undermining the young student’s artistic form. But, if we may imagine ourselves in room 309 of the Execution Stenography Department of the Sugrue University Press five years ago, we would note that Professor Kurtzmann was doing that already.

“A noble venture,” began Kurtzmann, addressing the hundreds of pupils in the stuffy, windowless lecture hall, “breaking with traditional form entirely. But if we give Soghomon’s latest failure, *Bernadette Tehlirian, age 56*, a bit of an autopsy, we can see a clear demonstration of why those forms and traditions exist in the first place.”

Such was the shock from the old guard of critics when Soghomon Hagopian, the progenitor of the texts collected in this volume, first showed the world his New Approach to Execution Stenography. The class included many of the most recognizable figures in the industry today. Soghomon Hagopian was seated next to the eloquent, sallow-faced Gavriilo Jovanovic, as the two had been friends ever since meeting at age six at the State Orphanage for the Sons and Daughters of the Occupation’s Heroes, where they were informed of their parents’ transgressions against the state and were first taught the cultural significance of execution stenography. It was from here that they ascended the ranks of academia to gain scholarships to Sugrue University and secure their places in the literary canon.

Before Soghomon’s work united the field, execution stenographers had more propensity for civil war than any other artists practicing within the borders of Our Glorious and Most Exalted Nation-State.

The pursuit of execution stenography has invited controversy from within and without since its inception. Accusations against practitioners of this noble art form range from the petty (“they’re not a *real* branch of academia, like, say, philosophy or poetry) to the absurd (“they’re not *artists*, they’re just flunky closed-captioning copywriters whose subjects won’t be alive to correct their mistakes”) (italics added). But if one has read a masterwork death-rattle transcript, like, say, *Sawyer Glotfelty, age 47* by Lyudmila Ouspenskaya, then one certainly sees the inherent beauty in this exciting mode of artistic expression.

Wait wait please wait what are you no you can’t (wails gutturally). . . (continues screaming). . . (groans of anguish grow in frequency). . . (groans grow less frequent, lower in volume, cease completely).

Some scholars claim that this early work of genius has yet to be surpassed. Its subject’s words and noises are rendered with such clarity and sensory detail that the readers can imagine themselves right next to Mr. Glotfelty within the stainless-steel cylindrical walls of the Elimination Center. One can almost feel the state-regulated drilling instrument enter into the subject’s skull and see the whites of the executioner’s eyes beneath his mask. After reading such a piece that inspired Soghomon and so many others, it should come as no surprise that our Holy Realm offers such generous subsidies to research and disseminate our work and its related criticism.

However, the profession’s inclination for infighting is unparalleled among artistic pursuits. Despite the above extract’s singular beauty, every word of scholarly criticism written about it draws a battle line between factions that Soghomon still hopes to unite. There are Linearists, who believe that a series of sounds the subject makes that are more or less the same should be included in the same brackets and treated like a progression of sounds. They are, naturally, opposed by the Splitists, who contend that each sound should be split into its own bracket, e.g., “(high-pitched yelp). . . (high-pitched yelp). . . (high-pitched yelp).” Then there are Punctuationalists, who believe that commas and periods should be used between the subject’s words, and

they are at perpetual war with the Polysyndetonists, who feel that a lack of punctuation more accurately represents the sound of the subject's parting words.

So when Professor Kurtzmann spoke of "traditional forms," he of course carried the prejudices of his own particular school of Holmian Polysyndetonist Linearism with him. But in every school of thought, descriptive words in parentheses have been used to convey the subject's shouts. The young and brilliant Soghomon, at the age of twenty-four and with no prior publications, changed the face of Execution Stenography Studies forever that day, introducing a new unifying style: Onomatopoeics.<sup>1</sup> The rest of the audience, including Gavriilo Jovanovic and the eminent Lyudmila Ouspenskaya herself on a visiting lecture tour, did not realize they were witnessing the birth of a movement; they did know that the way they saw stenography could never be the same. All of them, except for that frail, brittle septuagenarian vanguard of the Old Approach, Hume Kurtzman.

"The most glaring issue," said the professor, gesturing his arm at the screen dismissively, "is that onomatopoeia invites troublesome interpretations. If you had the words 'screams in mortal terror' in brackets, there could be no mistaking your authorial intent. But an A with a trail of *h*'s doesn't look to me like a scream. It's an exhale. As if the man being drilled to death in the execution room had just gulped down a particularly refreshing can of Coca-Cola." He mimicked a refreshed exhale as loudly as his wheezing lungs would allow. "How do you intend to resolve this problem?"

He pointed to the second line on the screen, hoping his class's gasps were not of admiration.

---

1. We should note here that the old guard of Execution Stenography critics have been putting out some nasty propaganda about Soghomon's former occupations. There is a pernicious rumor that he was a closed-captioning writer for television and was fired after transcribing the archaic German phrase *Arbeit macht frei* as the English "Our bite-marked fry." Let us dispel that rumor here.

Hhhgggzuuhrrennarrrrhorlamallakkukkkfrejajugjug

“I intend to let our readership interpret the texts for themselves,” said Soghomon, rising to his feet in defiance. “After the piece is published in this month’s issue of the *Sugrue Review*.”

What followed was nothing short of masterful. The young and artistically undiscovered<sup>2</sup> Soghomon delivered his famous treatise on execution stenography that is this author’s unadulterated joy to reprint.

“Friends, we are here today because we love this unique practice. One need only quote a line like ‘No god oh god please god don’t let (dismayed writhing)’ to remind ourselves why we toil away on our stenotypes in the execution chamber for hours on end. But those old quotations have their limits. There is a problem with our profession that we can no longer ignore. The number of convicts the state puts to death is increasing every year. Every apartment tenant has a neighbor who was whisked away to the Elimination Center. Even some of our most trusted friends at this publication, J. J. and Dearbhaile Tehlirian, are on the run after being accused of unimaginable crimes against our Mighty Maternal Realm. The Tehlirian siblings were two of the most promising students in our ranks, and they would never harm a soul. But last night, two of our Strong and Holy Soldiers were found shot to death in their home when they came to question them about their dissident mother. Though we may much rather turn our heads, none

---

2. Soghomon had at one point published poetry. His autobiographical narrative poem “Broken Window” is a hackneyed and formulaic account of the death of his father, a Strong and Holy Soldier. Fatally wounded in a car bombing, he tried to call his then six-year-old son to bid his last farewell, but young Soghomon was unable to answer on the other end of the line, and could not hear his father’s last words over nearby air-raid sirens. The poem failed to move beyond the tropes of the irredentist hero-orphaning narrative. The poem was rightly panned in critical and academic circles. Its lone admirer was the ever-loyal Gavrilo, who was brought to tears by the piece and said, “This was just like what happened to me. When the final chance to speak to them came, I said nothing.”

of us can deny the dark truth that this increase in political dissidents signifies.”

The professor and his entire class must have shuddered, for they knew exactly what that unspoken truth was.

“We will soon run out of adjectives and verbs to describe their deaths. And then each one will come off not as a unique representation of death, but as one of a handful of tropes. The only solution is to render the subjects’ noises as onomatopoeia. No longer will each subject be relegated to the tropes that the limits of the current system confine them to. It is not the severity of the subject’s pain that draws the reader in, but the specificity. Every subject has a unique sound, and we must copy them accordingly. Kurtzmann represents the Old Approach that writes that a man cries nobly and a woman shrieks shrilly when their voices are the same pitch. The Old Approach that says a commoner “gasps confusedly,” but an aristocrat “sighs resignedly.” Onomatopoeia is the great leveler. There are no prejudices hidden in the text before you. My new form offers endless combinations of letters to depict our subject’s suffering with authenticity and endless interpretations to draw from them.”

It was at this point that Gavriilo began to stand in support of his friend, and Lyudmila Ouspenskaya, who at age seventy-five was still infinitely more progressive than Kurtzmann, snapped her fingers several times in rapid succession to show her approval. “Why does our professor stand for the social injustices of the Old Approach in his critical writings? Not to advance the field, not to advance this school, and not even in keeping with the doctrine of stenography for stenography’s sake. It is because he hopes a theoretical school will emerge bearing his surname. He hopes his name will become an adjective one sounds smart saying.<sup>3</sup> I do not share that interest. I am interested only in the future of our art form.”

---

3. We can assure the reader that Soghomon himself has never shared this shallow ambition, since his last name already bears the “-ian” suffix. The notion that he would want his theoretical work referred to as “Hagopian-ian” tries the limits of absurdity.

And so were the rest of the class, which voted unanimously to publish his piece despite the professor's protests. A great session of verbal saber rattling ensued, after which Professor Ouspenskaya agreed to publish the piece herself, staking her position within the university on the strength of Soghomon's vision.

What happened over the next few months is well known to any educated reader who picked up a copy of this collection. The piece dissected in class, *Bernadette Tehlirian*, age 56, became the most lauded and best-selling specimen of stenography ever committed to steno paper. A new wave of Onomatopoeticists followed in his wake, including Gavriilo Jovanovic, whose talents nearly equaled that of Soghomon himself. As they were bonded in their youth by their artistic ambitions, they became ever closer as the preeminent practitioners of the New Approach. The quantum leap forward in the art form has been noted in the critical essays "Blaawagkrauu: Freudian Influence in Soghomon" by Liza Sartorius and "Zatarblundaminaa: Foucault's Discourse in Gavriilo" by Elliot Caron-Vera. An immortal line like the following from *Hume Kurtzmann*, age 64<sup>4</sup> should demonstrate the success of Soghomon's advances in the field.

Mine gotten him ill zurrrhhennnnnarrhhhh

If Soghomon is the medium's greatest innovator, he is also its savior. The masterworks in this collection first came at a time when the very existence of an audience for our work was endangered.

It may seem strange to have to address the ethical concerns regarding the state-mandated executions. One is hard-pressed to question the ethics of this necessary institution, when the methods are humane and the subject's immediate family is admitted to the

---

4. There are some voices on the fringe of our society that objected to Kurtzmann's recent arrest and execution, even going so far as to suggest that Lyudmila Ouspenskaya gave false information to the Nation-State against him to take over his position in the university. That, however, is irrelevant here, and we leave that for the Confession Analysts to pore over for their own critical discourse.

showing free of charge, a service that only Our Glorious Nation-State can boast. Yet, there are those in this world who would seek to pervert the execution process into an opportunity to cash in on the voices of the dead.

I am writing, of course, of the minimalist composer Jerzy Wajda, who found success by remixing the noises of execution subjects and overlaying the vocal track of Kyu Sakamoto's mid-twentieth-century pop hit "Sukiyaki." The first objection any moral person should have is that Sakamoto has long been dead and could not have consented to the exploitation of his distinctive croon. Everyone knows that pre-Nation-State music catalogues can be bought on the cheap, leaving them vulnerable to appropriations by those of questionable class allegiances like Wajda. But what should really flood any educated reader's throat with bile is the fact that this carpetbagging death profiteer was in contention for the Zucco Prize in Execution Stenography, which carries with it the state grants that allow our artists to attend the executions and publish their transcripts. Wajda was nominated on the grounds that his music was a kind of "aural stenography that changes the landscape of the profession." This high praise was heaped on a vulgarian who crafts the soundtracks to debauchery and overdoses rampant in universities throughout the Nation-State.

The awards ceremony was a watershed moment in Soghomon's creative development. The two finalists for the Zucco Prize were Soghomon for the groundbreaking *Bernadette Tehlirian and Other Selected Transcripts* and Jerzy Wajda for his musical artistic anathema. To the dismay of the thousands gathered in the Great Theater of Our Realm, Jerzy Wajda took the Zucco Prize and the funds that go with it. Rather than make a victory speech, he simply played a sample of another song, this one mixing Kurtzmann's sounds with Kyu Sakamoto's "Congratulations." His continued sampling of Sakamoto is surely because his was the only musical catalogue he could afford. The substances that inspire his work no doubt burn a hole in his pocketbook. His trademark oversized eyewear and one-sleeved T-shirt almost certainly covers red eyes, track marks, and other classic indicators of his deviant lifestyle.

For Soghomon, Gavrilo, and any other self-respecting stenographer or critic, the tape loops of dying prisoners in Wajda's abominable pop-bubblegum confection sounded as if he were remixing the death cries of our beloved medium. Wajda and those who wrote critical essays on his work began to receive half the share of government grants once set aside for our industry. Soghomon and Gavrilo knew they needed to act quickly to reverse this trend. One of them had to craft work of such singularity, such undeniable humanity, that it could reclaim scholarly attention and expose Jerzy Wajda's work for the transient pop-cultural afterbirth that it was. Indeed, when Wajda descended from the stage after receiving his prize, Soghomon confronted him, telling him, "though you seek to destroy our profession, I swear my work will revive it." Though it was reported that Wajda simply looked at him confusedly and continued to sway to his own music, I'm sure the reader can infer that this was because Wajda did not want the public to see how rattled he was in the presence of one who possesses the greatness his work so crudely imitates. If you are reading this introduction, selections of the work of which Soghomon spoke rest in your hands. However, he could not have known then what tragedy would inspire them.

It seems necessary here to explain the tragedy that accounts for the sorrow evident in Soghomon's latest work, which some have already labeled his blue period. That tragedy was the murder of Gavrilo Jovanovic after he took an ill-fated shortcut through an abandoned building in Our Kingly Paradise Block C. We now know that he was killed by his former colleagues, Dearbhaile Tehlirian, age twenty-seven, and J. J. Tehlirian, age twenty-five, who fled as fugitives after their mother's justified incarceration. Both are tall and skinny to the point of emaciation, have ungainly long dark hair that makes them hard to distinguish one from the other, and have facial and ear piercings befitting a common addict or minimalist composer. The evidence against them rests on a piece of paper from Gavrilo's own stenotype which they left at the scene and a security recording which was listened to once and destroyed for the safety of Our Realm. We are loath to reprint an excerpt of the steno record of events, but feel it



is necessary to explain the nature of Soghomon's current melancholy. We apologize in advance to the squeamish among our readership, as the stenography is unforgivably slipshod and inspires paroxysms of disgust in the trained reader.

DEARBHAILE. Are you taking down dictation? Make sure you only get our words.

J. J. I'm click-clacking away like they taught us.

DEARBHAILE. We know it was you that pointed the soldiers to me and J. J. We went to university together for three years, Gavriilo. And if I'd have got the drill, you'd have bitched and moaned about the dialect they gave me in my last words. You'd write an essay about whether or not my screams had parentheses or brackets around them. It's like you're too busy typing to look up and see the blood in the execution room.

J. J. He's not looking up at all, sis. He's too busy yelling help me at himself. Doesn't seem to be taking his own advice, though.

DEARBHAILE. They sent two Strong and Holy Soldiers after kids like us who've never done any harm except to question why we lost our mother to the drill.

J. J. You know, I wonder how many times yelling o god please make it stop ever actually made anything stop. Pretty low percentage of the time, I'd wager.

DEARBHAILE. They weren't so strong and holy when we were through with them. Mother always left some weapons in the house. Wary of home invaders, you know. Seems she asked some questions, too, which is why they sell a book with her name on it in all the stores.

J. J. If any deity was thinking of saving you before, I'm sure you've shouted him deaf by now.

DEARBHAILE. You shouted the soldiers deaf about me, didn't you? You knew everything there was to know about my suspicious tendencies. You had answers for every symbol I was hiding in my work. Where's your power of deduction now? J. J.,

do you think he's taken the hint by now that he's never going to leave this building alive?

J. J. No, I don't think he has. See, sis, they don't teach hint taking at Sugrue, do they? That wasn't his concentration.

DEARBHAILE. No, Gavriilo, your concentration was learning how to make little poems out of our mother's dying sounds. Wasn't it?

J. J. (whistles "Sukiyaki")

DEARBHAILE. You're going to give us a recitation of your work. Maybe even improvise some extra verses, like . . .

#### HE SOUNDED LIKE THE REST WILL

News of Gavriilo's death left Soghomon in a state of ruin. Anyone who witnessed his reading at the newly renamed Ouspenskaya University can attest to the anguish he expressed when he first heard that his orphanage-brother's life had been terminated. At the head of the lecture hall, he was reading a particularly masterful section of *Bernadette Tehlirian* when Lyudmila entered the room, made the long walk to the lectern that Soghomon was speaking from, and whispered in his ear that Gavriilo had been murdered by antistate dissidents. Soghomon dropped to his knees and let out a wail of unparalleled anguish. One reviewer noted that the audience couldn't tell where the reading stopped and the sounds of genuine grief began, a true testament to the raw emotion that Soghomon brings to his live performances.

Soghomon could not escape the lingering species of grief that befell him. On one level, Soghomon knew, as all our countrymen do, that the dead body of a former loved one is nothing to grieve, as it supplies further work for the funeral parlors, cemeteries, and florists that our Nation-State relies on for its economy. But narratively, Soghomon's closest friend's death would fall into the overwrought and melodramatic Silent Dissident Murder Victim trope with no recorded last words or noises to distinguish him. Just as the unspecific, trite nature of his parents' deaths rendered them an unsuitable artistic

topic, so too was Gavriło's silenced demise such a common literary trope that an accurate recounting would read like hackwork. This was a misfortune that Soghomon could not accept.

From this lack of artistic closure, Soghomon suffered vivid nightmares for weeks. Every night he dreamed he was in Our Kingly Paradise Block C where Gavriło lay near death, screaming but inaudible as though in a muted video, with blank black closed-captioning boxes swirling in the air around him. Jerzy Wajda would always stand nearby with his audio equipment, recording Gavriło's imperceptible shrieks and howls. Soghomon would have to watch in horror as wires would sprout from Gavriło's arms and link up to Jerzy Wajda's equipment as the composer spliced Gavriło's silent untranscribable cries with Kyu Sakamoto's "Sayonara, Sayonara." The closed-captioning boxes would swirl ever closer to Soghomon as he stood bewildered at his stenotype, unable to fill the circling voids with letters. After one particularly violent nightmare, Soghomon awoke with such fright and consternation that he manually broke every key off his stenotype in uncontrollable spasms. The critics who took this to mean his career was over were mistaken. As anyone who has purchased this sensation-ally innovative selection must already be aware, he was only shifting his style to give voice to his grief.

From that day onward, his instrument of choice was no longer the stenotype, but the pen. While he had always imbued his work with his own emotion, now every curve of every letter betrays subtle gradations of human expression unlike that of any other artist in the industry. Who else could pack such labyrinthine puzzles of meaning in such simple lines as this one from *Akaky Golyadkin*, age 33?

Ahh V. knock torn see grotto Mowgli bee euurrhaerrrwasllthhhhh

This new style arrested the attention of this year's Zucco Prize committee, toppling Jerzy Wajda's latest abomination and leading our profession to its most bright and fruitful epoch.

As much as we would love to end on this triumphant note, this introduction would be remiss if it did not address the lingering mystery

that troubles Soghomon to this day and accounts for the sadness evident in every pen stroke of this collection. Unable to endure Gavriło's untranscribed death, Soghomon sought out the one man who could quell his worries. One security official had heard the security tape of the murder before Our Most Valorous State Officials destroyed it, and Soghomon sought him out for closure. Their conversation went as follows, as recorded in Soghomon's interview with the Foundation for Artistic Advancement.

Soghomon visited the site of the atrocity and sought out answers from the security staff.

"Can you tell me what he sounded like when he died?" Soghomon asked the security camera monitor. Both eyes fixed on the uneventful security screen in front of him, the monitor's jaw went slack as he made his answer.

"I don't know. I mean, he sounded like he was dying."

"But what did it *sound* like, specifically?" asked Soghomon, frantically clutching his pen and notebook as tears of desperation flooded his vision. "Could you . . . try and imitate it, please?"

"I mean, I'm no artistic type," replied the slack-jawed man. "I'm not sure I could imitate it if I wanted to. And I'm not sure I want to."

"Can you at least tell me if he had any last words?"

"I don't know really." The untutored monitor shrugged lazily, still not turning to look at Soghomon. "Well, wait now, come to think of it."

Soghomon nearly leapt with the last reserves of his sanguinity.

"Does a gulp count as a word?" asked the monitor. "I think he might have gulped first."

This tragic tale of unfulfilled artistry explains the melancholic tone of the following collection and reveals the symbolism of its title: *Gavriło Jovanovic, age 27*.

ALSO BY THIS AUTHOR

*Crime and Free Will: On the Death Penalty and Bergson's  
Theory of Duration*

*A Wretched Anthropology: On the Use of Kantian Principles in  
Execution Stenography*

*Truth or Derrida? A Deconstructive Reading of Dissident  
Confessions*

*Ecce Homo Supplicium: Soghomon's Nietzschean Ethics*