ISAAC PITMAN—Britain’s teetotal, vegetarian, Swedenborgian spelling reformer and the self-described Inventor of Phonography—was also almost the inventor of the modern day postage stamp. In 1839, the British Government offered a £200 prize for the best suggestion for verifying payment under a new system of pre-paid postage. Pitman proposed stamps, printed in sheets of 240 from engraved plates. The stamp, Pitman suggested, would have dual purpose in both indicating receipt of payment and sealing the envelope shut, a suggestion his brother later described as an “unlucky stroke of economy.” Like Pitman, the eventual prize winner also proposed stamps, however the victor’s idea was to affix the stamp to the front of the envelope, all the more convenient for its cancellation. This loss, however, was a very minor setback in Isaac Pitman’s reforming agenda. The advent of the Penny Post was crucial to the successful dissemination of Pitman’s life-long undertaking—to reform English spelling and to teach a phonetic shorthand that would allow writers to render speech verbatim and in doing so, relieve the tedium of writing longhand. “To save time is to prolong life,” wrote Pitman in 1841.

To be clear, Pitman did not invent shorthand. Various methods had been employed throughout history, extending back to the Greeks and Romans. Pitman himself was self-taught using Harding’s edition of Taylor’s system. Pitman’s innovation was to develop a system based on phonetics, in which “not only every sound has a sign, but as, also, every sign represents a sound, all ambiguous ends.” This was the utopia promised by Pitman’s shorthand, that in freeing writing from the arbitrary strictures of spelling, writing would thus be infused with the living trace of speech. The speed offered by shorthand promised mimetic accuracy previously unattainable, and as such, allowed a transparency to the workings of government and the law previously unimaginable. And all this—political, religious, and social reform—was possible with the purchase of an inexpensive instruction book, well within the means and capabilities of working and lower middle-class men and women.

Pitman’s first manual (Stenographic Sound-hand) was issued in 1837. A 12-page letterpressed booklet (3.5 x 5”) with two lithographed plates, it was “enclosed in a dark cover of thin cardboard.” Pitman apologized for the sewing of the first 200: “Since this first essay we have had a lesson on the subject from a stationer.” Pitman continually revised his system, and after devoting himself full-time to phonography, he toured Great Britain promoting the system and selling his instructional pamphlets. Grasping the commercial implications of the Penny Post, Isaac Pitman walked the eleven miles back and forth between his home in Bath and the engraving establishment of S.J. Lander in High Street, Bristol, in order to supervise the engraving of his Penny Plate, a remarkable conspectus of his system miniaturised onto a 6.5” x 8” plate. The rules of the system are outlined in 35 points (the last, no. 35: Reader, Practice, Persevere). Tables illustrate the symbols and outlines; the Lord’s Prayer and various psalms are rendered in full. Examples are given in French and German, with the note that “any language may be written in phonography with trifling difference in the sound of some letters.” Pitman announces “Any Person may receive lessons from the Author by post gratuitously. Each lesson must be enclosed in a paid letter. The pupil can write about a dozen verses from the Bible, leaving spaces between the lines for the corrections.” As can be imagined, the success of the winged art

Let us all labour in the eye of the motto: The Future is greater than the Past.

— ISAAC PITMAN, 1873

by Carolyn Fraser
Pitman’s Penny Plate, issued on January 10, 1840—the first day of the new Penny Post—resulted in a tremendous workload. The first shorthand magazine—the Family Messenger—was circulated between the nine Pitman shilling residents in England. Other magazines followed, and became known as Evercirculation.

In Manchester, on March 15, 1843, the first phonographic festival was held, attracting “100 friends of Phonography, who partook of ‘tea and indulged in speedmarking.’” Other festivals followed, and tea parties and “phonographic soirées” were held throughout Britain. During the early years of phonography’s popularity, shorthand was practiced as often in the seance room as the courtroom (shorthand allowed accurate recording of both the voices of the living and the dead.) Pitman’s publishing company supplied popular and religious literature both in phonetic type and typewriter. But ponder them a moment longer, they are supremely simple, pleasing graphic counterparts. A t first glance, these diagrams possess a singular charm that is a mixture of paradox and wonder. The Technics of the Baton was a failed and failed pamphlet, with its title, sub-title, description, author’s biography, and publisher’s information centered across the cover, like the radiating bones of a fish skeleton. I picked it up, and while absentmindedly flipping through it, happened upon these marvelous little diagrams.

I was browsing a densely packed bookstore, one where the shelves are surrounded by ever-accumulating mounds of unsorted, precariously stacked books. These shelves often contain treasures, drawing your eye in a flash of detail—a fragment of type, the shard of a phrase, a sketch of illustration. So it was with The Technics of the Baton. It was a fascinating and fascinating book, with its title, subtitle, description, author’s biography, and publisher’s information centered across the cover, like the radiating bones of a fish skeleton. I picked it up, and while absentmindedly flipping through it, happened upon these marvelous little diagrams.

Gorgeous, right? What struck me immediately is their depth, which makes them read almost spatially. Their proportions are nearly that of the human figure, which gives them an uncanny physical presence. Diagram no. 1 is a particularly captivating example. The arrows dance, joined at the ends of dotted arms, bending elegantly across their lengths—arcing and tracking together as they inscribe measures of time. One of the joys of this little book is the melodramatic grandeur of its descriptions of conducting. “The performers should feel that the conductor feels, comprehends, and is moved; then his emotion communicates itself to those he directs; his inward fire warms them, his electric glow animates them, his force of impulse excites them; he throws around him the vital irradiations of musical art.”

The aesthetic stakes in play here imbue these simple gestures with considerable raw power. These slivers of motion bind a roiling mass into a single organism, teases from it emphasis and colour, and simultaneously transmit and evoke interpretations both subtle and profound.

All this, I think, accounts for the particular character these diagrams possess. At first glance, they are supremely simple, pleasing graphic constructions. But ponder them a moment longer, and they come alive, like arrows engaged in elegant ballet.