

Music <-> Text

A dilemma

(exemplified in the French *mélodie* of the fin de siècle)

- a short lecture recital for the EPARM congress 2013 in Lyon -

In the traditional genres of vocal art music, words and music seem to effortlessly walk hand in hand. Looking closer, this co-existence is, of course, much less self-evident than it seems to be at first sight.

Speech versus music is just one pair of an infinite number of bipolar antagonisms established in traditional science and arts, finally derivable from a polarity male versus female. Today these antagonisms are being questioned and begin to merge (not least thanks to gender studies), and so it may be interesting to examine their relevance. Traditionally, words were attributed the qualities of intellect, rationality, and consequently of masculinity, while music was instead associated with the „female“ features of emotion, intuition, reverie.

At first, this seems to make sense, given that language is capable of communicating information and facts that are cognitively comprehensible, and can be remembered and retold, while the content of music is less tangible and more ambiguous. On the other hand there must be serious doubts about the simplistic polarity of a predominance of the intellect in the production of speech, and of emotion or intuition in the production of music. Especially the artistic use of speech refuses to obey such attributions. A poem is by definition a work of sound and rhythm, and its content can be quite obscure (and therefore interpretable in different ways). Music, on the other hand, can by its form, phrasing, harmony, and other parameters contribute to a coherent narration, and an overall comprehensible shape of the piece.

We will today have a closer look on some aspects related to text setting in the *mélodie française*, the French Art Song, of the fin de siècle. It was a special moment in music history when the conflict text-music had grown more acute than ever, partly as a reaction to Wagner's *Musikdrama* and his new idea of a coexistence of speech and music with equal rights, so to speak, at every moment. On the other hand, traditional forms of vocal music started to disintegrate, and we are, so to speak, on our way towards Dada and Schönberg's *Pierrot lunaire*.

The art song had always been a special genre with rules of its own, but it didn't gain real importance until the second half of the 18th century.

The French *mélodie* (which started blooming even later) emerged from a particular heritage: already the French baroque opera did not completely admit to the clean division of recitative (<- speech) and aria (<- music), which was almost brutally established elsewhere. Instead, it juxtaposed both types by a style where text and music are more closely interwoven. Rameau, for instance, built entire scenes as a constant flow of recitatives or rather *ariosi*, with constant changes of the metre in order to follow the specific French verse rhythm, and arias that are often short and hardly ever follow the Da-capo model so popular in the rest of Europe. This is even more interesting because Claude Debussy (of whom we will hear more later) explicitly declared this treatment of a text as intrinsically French, and as a prototype for his own work.

Against the background of these ideas the somewhat oversimplified observation of the French philosopher and musical connoisseur Roland Barthes, makes some sense: Barthes argued, that the genealogy of the *mélodie française* isn't so much derivable from a musical form than rather from a certain culture of reciting French poetry¹.

¹ Roland Barthes, *Die Rauheit der Stimme*, S. 275

The singer who interprets a song (always referring to traditional vocal repertoire) is at the same time the reciter of a poem, *and* a musician playing a piece of music. Let us imagine two listeners: listener A is interested in literature, and is looking for an interesting, exciting, and maybe unexpected rendering of a poem he or she may or may not have known before, and listener B who is a music freak, and wants to hear a well thought-out interpretation of a piece of chamber music, with interesting dynamics and phrasing, a beautiful and expressive tone of the voice, etc. In an ideal world both listeners are fully satisfied when they listen to the interpretation of a song.

This takes me back some more of Roland Barthes's ideas. His well-known essay "The grain in the voice" (*Le grain de la voix*) is an often polemic declaration of love for the French language and its use in vocal music, especially in the *mélodie*. What I condensed out of it for my purposes is more or less the following: he emphatically speaks out against a hermeneutic practice – by this he means an interpretation that tries to reveal the implied intentions of the authors, and the results of an analysis of the work -, while he propagates a sensual approach that re-emancipates the eroticism of the sounds of the language from meaning, coherence, and semantics. In other words, pushing his thoughts even further: he seems to truly have hated an interpretation style that uses culturally accepted emotional gestures and codes as a proxy of the real thing, and thereby confirms and perpetuates a bourgeois 'canon; and he saw the only refuge from this in going back to the physical reality of the language, the play of consonants and vowels, the vibrations of the articulation apparatus, the sensuality of the prosody. In other words yet again: speech can turn into music, and both find their freedom from cultural restrictions through a sexually charged enjoyment of their physical materialization.

A Garden of Eden comes to one's mind, where all is one, and all painful separations are yet to come. And that is precisely what I enjoy in a successful rendering of a piece of vocal music: words and music seem to be one thing, participating in one joint gesture coming from exactly the same place, as if they had never been separated.

Let us have a look at some lines from *En sourdine*, a popular poem by Paul Verlaine that has been set to music by many composers – a website specialised in listings of song repertoire counts 51 settings, and, of course, the list doesn't claim to be complete.

Practical demonstrations marked with "●"

Paul Verlaine (1844-1896)
En sourdine, 1st stanza
 (from *Fêtes galantes*)

Calmes dans le demi-jour	A	7syllables	(Calmly, in the half-day / half-shadow
Que les branches autes font,	B		That the high branches cast,
Pénétrons bien notre amour	A		Let us well penetrate / soak our love
De ce silence profond. B			By / in this profound silence.)

Show different ways to read a poem:

- 1) read in verse rhythm,
- 2) read as prose,
- 3) read „expressively“, emphasizing some chosen important words, and
- 4) read as “music”: vowels and consonants form a chain of sound, independent of meaning.

Now let us look at **2 different settings**, and examine what they require from the singer with regard to the articulation and sonority of the words.

The 1891 setting by Claude Debussy (1862-1918), as it is his general habit, follows the natural prosody of the text most closely, and, equally typically, he treats it rather as prose than as poetry.

Does that mean we can start the song by “speaking on pitch” in the style a chansonnier might do?

- Debussy / **attempt 1** – “speaking on pitch”

This might show how well Debussy captured the flow of the speech, but it certainly isn’t satisfactory for our listener B – it is a composition by Debussy, after all, and we need musical phrasing and a homogeneous flow of the sound.

- Debussy / **attempt 2** – the voice as an instrument

This is the way we often hear this repertoire, and it will probably satisfy listener B, but it doesn’t really give us an idea of Verlaine’s universe: the half-shadow, the lazy resting lovers...

The most ambitious task in this style is combining the two requirements. I will try it, and risk a failure here in front of you, but it might give you an idea:

- Debussy / **attempt 3** – doing justice to words and music at the same time

Of course, when interpreting a song, we are not only “beholden” to the poet, but also, and some would say: above all, to the composer. The musicologist Thomas Kabisch calls a setting of a poem merely a reading or a read interpretation of a poem, put down in writing by the composer. It is an interesting question of interpretational ethics (if you will), when singing a song, whether my own version of reading the original poem is relevant at all, whether I should feel responsible towards the work of the poet, or if the responsibility of the composer towards the poet completely absorbs my own. My personal approach is to integrate both, and when I sense discrepancies I try balancing them out by generally obeying the (supposed) intentions of the composer, but at certain points letting my ideas about the ‘content of the poem shine through, as if there were two or more transparent layers put on top of each other, and maybe one can create beautiful effects by shifting them slightly against one another.

A contrasting example is the setting by Gabriel Fauré, a completely different work. Instead of deriving the vocal line and the whole composition from the prosody of the text, he set the content and atmosphere in extended and long vocal lines, far detached from the lengths of spoken syllables. We will hear that Fauré’s setting doesn’t give license to abandon the clarity of the articulation, but requires completely different use of the singer’s means.

- Setting by **Gabriel Fauré** (1845-1924), also from 1891

As you hear, in a setting like this, the singer has to translate his or her ideas of how to pronounce the poem into a vocal style that stretches the speech into long lines, and somehow endangers the co’herence. Lucky are the ones who manage to let the speech flow of the original poem shine through on a certain level, while at the same time opening their instrument enough to effortlessly draw the long musical bows.

Anyway, there are no rules or technique, and a great flexibility is requested.

A choice of quoted and other relevant literature:

In French:

- Francois Le Roux / Romain Raynaldy: *Le chant intime*, Fayard Paris 2004
- Michel Faure / Vincent Vivès: *Histoire et poésie de la mélodie française*, CNRS Paris 2000
- Roland Barthes: *Le grain de la voix, Entretiens 1962-1980*, Points, Paris 1999
- Guide de la mélodie et du lied*, Hrsg. Brigitte Francois-Sappey und Gilles Cantagrel, Fayard Paris 1994
- Claude Debussy: *Monsieur Croche et autres écrits*, Gallimard, Paris 1971
- Charles Koechlin: *Debussy (Les Musiciens célèbres)*, Librairie Renouard, Paris 1927
- Paul Verlaine: Poems, many French and international editions

In English:

- Roger Nichols: *The prosaic Debussy*, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, Cambridge University Press 2003
- Pierre Bernac: *The Interpretation of French Song*, Kahn & Averill, London 1997
- Lois Rosow: *French Baroque recitative as an expression of tragic declamation*, in: *Early Music*, Bd. 11, 1983

In German:

- Hans-Georg Coenen: *Französische Verslehre*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 1998
- Theo Hirsbrunner: *Debussy und seine Zeit*, Laaber 1981
- Hans-Dieter Gelfert: *Einführung in die Verslehre*, Reclam, Stuttgart 1998
- Richard Strauss / Romain Rolland: *Briefwechsel und Tagebuchnotizen*, Hrsg. Maria Hülle-Keeding, Henschel, Berlin 1994

Bartolo Musil



I have been working as a composer and a singer since my childhood.

I always thought of this double activity (even if it was often interpreted as indecisiveness) as a potential gift of wealth in which both professions can enrich and fertilize one another. I even expanded the spectrum further by occupying myself as a teacher, coach, cabaret artist, translator of poetry, and chansonnier.

After having been given the opportunity to do important composition work already in my early 20s (large commission works for Musikverein and Konzerthaus Vienna and others, productions for the radio and on CD), I changed focus, starting a relatively intense activity as a concert and opera singer (Musikverein and Konzerthaus Vienna, the opera houses of Frankfurt and Magdeburg, the Berlin Philharmonie, the Antikenfestspiele Trier, the Chigiana Festival in Siena, and some other leading European venues).

At the moment it seems easier to combine the composition and voice skills in one project. My artistic research doctorate at the University on Graz/Austria is an additional step on the journey to combine practical and theoretical skills.