

The Singing Actor—The Act of Song

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Classical art song is a well-loved genre that became popular in the early to mid 1800s and consists of poetry set to music. The most famous composers of art song, Franz Schubert and Robert Schumann, set a high standard that was followed closely by many other composers, up to and including today's composers. The traditional way of performing art song is a singer and pianist onstage. Usually the singer stands in the crook of the piano and remains there for the duration of the recital. A typical program consists of songs by Schubert and Schumann, French songs by Debussy, Fauré or Chausson, maybe some Russian songs or Spanish songs, and an impressive aria or frivolous showpiece to finish.

In recent years, the changes that have taken place in the format of the song recital have been mainly those of programming and stage etiquette. These days it is not uncommon to hear a cabaret song in a recital setting, or songs that walk a thin line between pop songs and contemporary art songs. Also, singers have started to show more of their individual personality through fresh interpretations of well-known songs. It is not unusual for a singer to address the audience from the stage, an act that was formerly frowned upon by most conservative audience members. These changes, while offending some who hold tightly to tradition, draw many audience members closer to the material being performed and dispel elitist stereotypes that some may hold regarding classical music. Audiences of today are constantly being renewed, thus should the performance of art song be renewed. I suggest that this can happen with the addition of acting to the performance of the art song.

When one performs a search of the existing literature regarding art song and its performance, it is apparent that not much has been written about what the singer does non-vocally. There have been volumes written about text-music relationships and, increasingly, about how the piano music portrays as much or more about the emotions and meaning of the poetry than does the vocal line. A survey of literature about vocal performance will produce information on how the singer can express different moods and characters through changing the quality of the voice. Such information covers the topics of timbre, dynamics, and pitch. Only recently have there been some writings about non-vocal physical performance. In their book, *The Art of the Song Recital*, Emmons and Sonntag (1979) comment upon the lack of acting skills of most singers. In a chapter entitled "the Singing Actor" they claim that "Many contemporary singers

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accept the dictum that an operatic singer must obviously be an actor but that 'acting' is a dirty word where songs are concerned (p. 112)." However, I believe that acting has a place in those songs that have a story to be told.

Though Emmons and Sonntag (1979) speak of acting as an essential skill, they feel it must remain an exercise for the practice room. In their words, "It matters not a bit whether all this [acting] will *show* to the audience (p. 116)." I would like to challenge this remark. It *does* matter whether or not the audience sees the acting that goes on in interpreting art song. The lack of written research about non-vocal physical performance of art song led me to examine my experiences over the last few years as a collaborative pianist. I have been involved in many performances in recitals, master classes, vocal workshops, and vocal repertoire classes in which the singer utilized much of the stage and included many physical actions to tell a story to great effect, whether in English or another language. In order to demonstrate this for an audience, in the past I have performed Hugo Wolf's "Abschied" in two different ways: One way is a traditional performance as one would see in a song recital; the second way is a fully staged version of the song, as if it were on the opera stage. First, I will elaborate on the conventions of the song recital performance.

The tradition of performing art song demands the singer hold all emotion inside. The emotions that exist in the poetry of the song must be conveyed but the singer must do so through minimal physical movement. The eyes can show a range of emotions—the appropriate expression must be displayed. Diction is important—the strength or softness of a word can convey underlying feelings. Timbre is another technique—an emotion that is conveyed by a soft, rounded tone is quite different than one conveyed by a strident tone. As far as gestures are concerned, sometimes a small hand gesture is acceptable in moments of heightened emotion. One must be careful to use only natural, unforced movements so that it seems as though the movement was unplanned.

Here is an English translation of the poem "Abschied" by the German poet Mörike. Wolf set the poem to music in March of 1888.

Abschied (Farewell)

Without knocking, a gentleman comes into my room in the evening:
"I have the honour to be your critic!"
Immediately he picks up the candle,
Studies my shadow on the wall for some time,
Steps up close to me and backs away again:

"Now, my dear young man,
Kindly take a look at your nose from the side like this!
You must admit that it's abnormal!"
"It is? Well, damn it, of course it is! Hell!
I never thought, never in all my life,
That I was walking around with such an enormous nose!"
The man continued talking about this and that;
I swear I don't remember what.
Maybe he thought I should make a confession to him.
Finally he stood up; I lit the way for him.
When we got to the top of the stairs, I felt in a very merry mood,
And gave him just a little kick from behind on his
seat to send him on his way.
My goodness, was that a commotion, a tumbling and a stumbling!
I never seen the like;
Never in my life have I seen a person go down the stairs so fast!

The singer must make certain that the words come through clearly in order for the audience to understand the song. The pianist has an important part in portraying meaning and images, but the audience reacts mostly to the singer. Many teachers and pedagogical manuals advocate the addition of acting to art songs in rehearsal. It is an important exercise in coming to understand both emotionally and physically what a poem is trying to express. It certainly helps a singer move beyond thinking only about technique and voice production. A performance without comprehension of the emotions that have to be conveyed is certainly an uninspired performance.

Once a singer understands the emotions of a poem, he or she can express those emotions to the audience. The only advice I have found in articles and books on the topic of drama in the song advise the singer to hold this emotional energy inside the body, to completely contain it so it is expressed only through the eyes and through barely perceptible movements of the body. It is not appropriate to consider acting in all songs—certainly it would be difficult to imagine the form and purpose of acting out Symbolist poetry favoured by French impressionist composers like Debussy. Truly emotionally and spiritually moving performances are those in which the singer draws the audience close by creating stillness. The perception that the singer is quivering with emotion yet controlling herself or himself heightens the dramatic tension and intent. Audience members are forced to concentrate on the emotions being portrayed.

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It is appropriate to consider the songs of Hugo Wolf when addressing the topic of acting in the performance of art song. An important development in Lied composition was the new philosophy used by Hugo Wolf. He viewed the poetry and the music as inseparable elements of song. Greatly influenced by Wagner's music dramas, Wolf developed songs with tightly compressed dramatic elements. In the words of Newman (1966), "the secret of Wolf's peculiar power is that he pierced to the very heart of the poem as few musicians have done (p. 156)." His songs were complete dramas—Wolf is praised for his ability to distill images, moods, and characters into capsules of song. In his book *The Songs of Hugo Wolf* Sams (1983) tells us "...Wolf condensed the dramatic intensity of modern music-drama into voice and keyboard, lending fresh life and force to the Lied form and enhancing its expressive vocabulary (p. 2)." Wolf's obsession with drama and opera showed itself through his concentration on characterization and atmosphere through musical techniques. The drama of opera was brought to the concert stage through his songs and they can be considered opera in miniature form.

Let us consider what function an acted art song may have. I invite you to picture a performance of a song with utter stillness—perhaps "Verschwiegene Liebe" by Wolf, or "die Nacht" by Strauss. After performing one of these meditations on love, how does a singer move from the intense atmosphere he or she has just created to a new scene or atmosphere? The acted art song could be considered a way of easily disseminating the residual emotion, a clearing of the air before starting another set of songs with strong emotional content. Another function could be the acted art song as finale. It would leave audience members and critics alike talking about either the audacity or cleverness of such an act. It has been said that any publicity is good publicity!

The soprano, Lotte Lehmann (1945), in her book *More than Singing—the Interpretation of Song* encourages young singers to form their own interpretation of songs, to decide for themselves what is an expressive, yet natural way to perform songs even though it may conflict with tradition. According to Lehmann, the young are different than the rest of the population and she feels that the nature of youth brings with it a desire to try anything new. She realizes that some may be offended by such liberal instruction. She says, "I know I am committing a frightful sin against the holy tradition when I say: Excellent! Seek your own way! (p. 11)." Tradition should be considered something to build upon, not simply followed without question. Lehmann grew up in Germany and relates that she learned to sing Lieder within the strictest confines of tradition. However she was also involved heavily in theatre and says she would have become an actress if she had not become a singer. Her inclination to act even while singing remained strong,

but she limited her acting to facial expression and minimal gesture given that it was the early years of the twentieth century.

As artists today, it is our duty to respect the composer and proper performance practice encourages research into what the composer's intent was in setting particular poems to music. At the same time we live in a postmodern world—questioning tradition is a valuable learning tool. Once songs have left the composer's hand, they can be considered the performer's domain. We have the freedom to decide what to do; maybe there is a new facet of a song that we would like to explore. It is a way of turning the art song inside out to discover something new.

In the university setting there is room for experimentation as well as learning the traditions of our craft. Both ways of training must exist side by side. The facilities are available as are the experienced teachers, themselves performers of art song. Experimentation has only just started to be commented upon in writing in recent years. Schneider (1994), in *Concert Song as Seen: Kinesthetic Aspects of Musical Interpretation*, comments,

It is no wonder, since singers are given so little training within the recital's own conventions of style, that so many of them waver between standing motionlessly and moving self-consciously, or that they depend on stock gestures without knowing their meaning...Singers are hardly free to express themselves in the style of the naturalistic drama (p. 71).

This situation, however, is changing, and many universities offer classes in vocal repertoire that involve experimenting with acting in the art song.

John Hess, a collaborative pianist and professor at the University of Western Ontario, encourages his students to question convention and to experiment within the classroom setting. In his vocal repertoire classes there are several occasions on which the students are asked to act out what is happening in the song they are performing. One such song is "Gretchen im Spinnrade" by Schubert. The action of the spinning wheel is clearly conveyed in the piano but the singer can sit on a chair and move her foot as if operating the spinning wheel. When asked if it affected voice quality on one occasion, the singer replied that it did not and it helped her experience in her body the emotions that Gretchen may have felt. While some actions may go too far, it is a valuable activity, for we do not know a physical limit or a boundary pushed too far unless we experiment.

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Emmons and Sonntag (1979) claim that the public is weary of conventional programming. Young people have grown up in a world of spectacular rock concerts and multimedia performances, all accessible through the television and easy travel to big cities. This conditioning leaves them desiring stimulation in the concert setting. The lone concert singer can seem, in their words, "boring and anachronistic." The song recital is a "miniature medium, [and] must triple its capacity to entertain (p. 282)."

It can be said the acting in art song seems just a gimmick. It might not be viable given the way it can affect vocal production and also given the way we experience emotion from the stage in a concert setting. One reason to try this seemingly irreverent method of performing the art song is for experimentation's sake, or as is frequently said, *art for art's sake*. We as artists will experiment because we can. It is true that all singers must be actors, communicating words with the most effective expression to move an audience, bring them to tears or to laughter or to reflection. Tradition dictates that singers must convey all emotion to the audience as eloquently as possible without crossing the boundary between stage and concert platform. They must be very expressive, but not theatrical.

What is that boundary between stage and concert platform? Why shouldn't singers be theatrical? What does a theatrical performance look like? I am not advocating the staging of every single song in every single recital, nor am I suggesting any acting which will sacrifice the quality of vocal production. Audiences today are not the audiences of the late 1800s and I believe that there is room for innovation and creativity in the song recital. This is an area that is ready for exploration and the song recital's evolution will be exciting for us to witness and take part in.

References

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