

# Singing in German: Moving beyond the diction class

Brian A. Roberts

Memorial University of Newfoundland

Within a much broader investigation of my studying university music students, a question arose during the interviews with voice majors ( $n = 36$ ) from 4 Canadian universities as to their orientation to singing in foreign languages which complemented my other studies specifically about singing in German. In an attempt to understand how Canadian voice majors approach a German Lied, I asked quite simply for the interviewees to explain in some detail how they went about learning a song in German and how long they typically studied a piece before they considered it ready for performance in public.

The brief answer condensed from many responses follows this simplistic pattern with few, if any, exceptions.

- (1) get a translation of the piece
- (2) learn the melody
- (3) work with my teacher to pronounce the text properly
- (4) work on the musical things in the piece – which is to be construed as music driven rather than text driven and only occasionally mentioning work with the accompanist.

Interestingly, rank order of inclusion of these 4 items above leaves all students focussing on items 2 and 3 with several leaving out 1 and 4 in about equal proportions. Some students responded that they had “studied” without access to a translation. With students I questioned, most confirmed that their teachers were unable to offer a fluent translation of the text for them in the absence of a published version. Very few even mentioned the work required for the ensemble between singer and accompaniment as part of the preparation process.

Most students indicated that their music program at the university included either a required course in German and/or a required course in foreign language diction (usually taught within the music school itself). Students reported that they then generally relied on their own new “knowledge” as a result of the German language course or diction class to prepare the pieces for their lessons. Few suggested that they sought out a recording of the piece to use during the preparation, usually indicating that their teachers preferred that they not try and “copy” a recorded performance.

The average study time reported was between 3 and 4 weeks. A few reported being able to get a German Lied ready within a week and a few said that they took the entire

semester or longer to prepare a whole program so that it would be impossible to report on a single song.

My next question was to ask how these students thought a German voice major would approach learning a similar piece. I asked this to see how the Canadian students might reflect on the fact that for the German students, the piece is in their mother tongue and concerns about basic translation and basic diction or the pronunciation of the text were therefore unnecessary. The answers revealed an alarming naivety about the process of learning to sing German Lieder. In fact, most students had never thought about this point even as it might otherwise relate to their own learning a selection in their mother tongue, French or English.

In fact, the students' almost total preoccupation with issues relating to "how to say the words" to even admitting how difficult it was to memorize "nonsense" syllables gives some serious pause for reflection on how German Lieder is taught and what some of the many pitfalls might be.

Another interesting but troublesome response was that since neither the singing teacher nor the audience at the music school spoke German fluently it didn't matter anyway.

I would therefore like to journey through a few examples of the pitfalls of singing in German to highlight some difficulties that ought to be avoided and to also make a case that serious teachers of singing need to get as thorough a mastery of the German language as possible since the concert literature for singers is still predominantly based on the German Lied.

What follows are simply examples of a few of the difficulties in singing German. I make no claim that the examples represent recommended literature nor even appropriate literature for students. I offer these as representative difficulties and try to explain what sorts of problems arise from each. The list is not exhaustive but only tries to point out collectively why a thorough knowledge of the language and concomitant cultural realities are so vital to serious voice education.



After a student recital I approached one of my interviewees and asked her why she gave an incomplete title for the Brahms Lied she had just performed. I was met with an indignant response that she had given the title exactly as it appeared in her book. The piece in question was Brahms' beautiful song "O wüßt' ich doch den Weg zurück" (Op. 63, Nr. 8 with the text by Klaus Groth). When the student announced the title as above but leaving out the last word "zurück" I was struck by the obvious absurdity of the event. Since the meaning of the title and the song itself is tied directly to the notion of wishing to know one's way **back**, it seemed to me to be provocatively irrational to stand and presume to sing a song which was obvious the performer did not understand. Better teaching would have solved this but even more troublesome was the indignant assuredness of the incorrect title presented to me.

I searched out the problematic edition by *International* which provided this student with so much confidence and was surprised to learn that the title really was printed without the last word. So neither the teacher nor the student had any knowledge of what this piece

was called or probably about. It may also indicate that neither the student nor the teacher had ever heard a recording of the piece where the correct title may have become apparent.

A small point you may suggest. Well personally I think not but there is much more. Compare the titles as printed firstly correctly and secondly as seen in the International edition.

O wüßt' ich doch den Weg zurück (correct)

O wüsst' ich doch den Weg (International edition)

There is an even more glaring difficulty that arises in this International edition. Notice the replacement of the German **ß** with **ss** in the title. This English equivalent is often seen in editions of German text set in English speaking publishing houses. For all intents and purposes it is fully comprehensible and every German understands this "international" version of the **ß**. Given that, why would I make a case that this is a serious problem.

In German language pronunciation (and in English as well) one of the significant rules is that the length of the vowel is determined by the number of consonants which follow. This gives rise to the often mispronounced difference between the German words "den" and "denn". Students, however well schooled in their university diction classes, will have been taught at least this and, as it appears in front of them on the music and the rule applies, it is more or less possible to get reasonably close to the difference between the long and short vowel.

In the case of the example above, "ss" is two consonants and therefore requires the short vowel while the **ß** is but a single consonant and requires the long vowel. Since this is the same word it can hardly be spoken two different ways. This plays havoc with all sorts of words that are common enough in the language. Since the double "ss" is also seen frequently in such words as the verb "müssen" which is declined as "miß", it is obvious that actually knowing what the correct configuration is supposed to be can become quickly a very important requirement for singing teachers and students alike. How is the student to know which of the "ss" configurations is really "ss" and which is a replacement for the "ß"? Selecting a good edition is a first step to avoiding these problems. In the end, knowing the language thoroughly is the only defence against this error.

I'll come back to this piece for a bit more discussion a little later. In the meantime I would like to take the next step in showing what can happen when unknowing teachers and students offer close but incorrect pronunciations. In most cases the problem arises because the teacher and/or student is unaware of the competing words which arise with the errors.

Take, for example, the innocent but lovely line at the opening of Rudolfo's aria in Puccini's La Boheme. The German sung translation of this famous piece reads "Wie eiskalt is dies Händchen" (in English – how ice cold is this little hand). Unfortunately the word "Händchen" is somewhat difficult for English native language speakers. It is the "d" sounded in German as a "t" which is often left out in an attempt to get the "~chen" spoken properly. The resulting spoken word without this "t" is "Hähnchen" which is unfortunately not a little hand but a little **chicken**. The occasional tittering in the German

opera house is witness to the problem.

Sometimes the smallest shift in vowel can be more than a little embarrassing. Staying in the opera house for a minute, Belmonte's opening line in Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* reads "*Hier soll ich dich denn sehen*" (in English — Here I ought to see you). The word "*sehen*" requires a very closed "e" sound uncommon in English and somewhat difficult to centre without considerable practice. If a slightly more open vowel (still in the English closed "e" phoneme) is substituted the resulting German word becomes "*säen*" which means to sow seed and I will let your imagination run wild with how that changes the meaning of Belmonte's opening words, notwithstanding that the libretto is still a boy gets girl story. The difficulty rests for native English speakers in the fact that there is this intermediate vowel, the "ä" somewhere between the open "e" in "*denn*" and the closed "e" in "*den*" or "*sehen*". Here the problem rests less with recognizing what the vowel should be and more with the ear training necessary in the language to actually produce the correct sound.

Another confusing pair of words comes from Schubert's "*Heidenröslein*" and from Wolf's beautiful song "*Der Gärtner*" where the similar but distinctly different word is "*das Rößlein*". This once again shows us the difficulties with the ß, the single s and the double ss. "*Röslein*" is a little rose, the diminutive form of the German word "*die Rose*". "*Rößlein*" is the diminutive of "*das Roß*" a little horse. You can imagine the difficulties one might have riding on a little rose (not to mention those nasty thorns). Notice the change in vowel which is not apparent from the number of consonants following the vowel but from the stem word upon which the diminutive is based. For a definitive authority for German pronunciation I turn regularly to Duden's *Das Aussprachewörterbuch*, (vol. 6).

We will return to Schubert's song again later in another context.

Double consonants cause many difficulties for native English speakers. In Wolf's song "*Gebet*" for example the text reads "*Doch, in der Mitten*". Few singers intuitively want to **sing** either the "~och" or the double t's in "*Mitten*". Both, however, are what provides the tension and colour in the singing, for example in Strauss' "*Cäcilie*" where the weight and pause on the double **nn**'s in the line "*was träumen hiesst von brennenden Küssen*" (International score) or "*was träumen heißt von brennenden Küssen*" (Universal edition). Common performance practice is such that in many places, the double consonant actually distorts the printed rhythm. Take for example the line "*verachte sie nicht zu sehr*" from Strauss' "*Heimliche Aufforderung*". Here the equal eighth notes become a dotted rhythm solely to accommodate the language requirements. Earlier in the same song in the line "*so winke mir heimlich zu*" the double consonant pressure in "*winke*" provides not only a dotted rhythm but also provides the very "wink" that the text indicates. The other exceptionally common error to watch for is the difference between *Sohne* (son) and *Sonne* (sun). The double consonant shortens the vowel but also has a larger space of its own. Then there are the difficulties surrounding where the accent falls on certain words. If we put the em**PH**Asis on the wrong sy**LL**Able, we get rather strange sounding language. In German, compound verbs are separated in some places and not in others. The stressed part of the verb even determines whether it is separable or not. Take this example:

Die Lehrkräfte müssen feststellen, daß die Anforderungen größer geworden sind.

Die Lehrkräfte stellen fest, daß die Anforderungen größer geworden sind.

Here the accent remains on the "fest" but in other similar situations it does not. Take for example the stress shift between "überreichen" and "überreich". Just when you figured you had it knocked, you don't. We also teach students that words which begin with vowels with prefix prepositions which are also separable such as "aufatmen" must have the preposition separated from a glottal attack on the main word's opening vowel. But there are exceptions such as *herauf, hinab, heraus, usw.*

While these diction difficulties are profound enough, there is yet another level to which I would like to move the discussion. Idiomatic German can be profoundly different than English. When we were living in Germany, one of our perverse hobbies used to be translating idioms back and forth – word for word – between languages. More than often you ended up with complete jibberish in the other language. The everyday common German expression, "wenn schon, denn schon" is a good case in point. In English this translates to "when already then already" or maybe "when then, then then" – not your most immediately understandable expression. So don't be surprised if a German says something like "when your hair goes to the mountain" and he seems to understand it. When a German says "blau machen" which we would translate literally as "make blue", he is not taking about painting his house but of "skipping work", what we might convey as "pipping off". It is very problematic to grasp the true intent of the language with idiomatic writing and by extension, the true meaning which is to be conveyed by singing the song. Poetry, even contemporary poetry, is fraught with difficulties in translation because we can have either what it says or what it means but seldom both. Coupled with that is the fact that most of the poetry set to music in the German Lieder repertoire is quite old. Even most English speakers need time to consider Shakespeare's English. Imagine the difficulties expressing the meaning of old German poetry. Hence a knowledgeable teacher must convince students of a higher level of understanding than is often apparent.

We return now to Schubert's famous song, "Heidenröslein". This is an excellent example of a song not being about what it says but really is about what it means. While the text talks about the little boy going and finding the little rose on the field and plucking it off the stem and getting jabbed for his trouble, the text actually is about the deflowering of a woman with every nuance of metaphor that the language can offer. How odd it is to hear little kids singing this delightful song in the music festival having absolutely no clue what they are actually singing about. Just as important in the understanding of German Lieder text and the literary conventions which saturate this medium, the social conventions surrounding songs can be equally powerful. An often poorly interpreted song is Wolf's "Fußreise". The musical directions read "ziemlich bewegt" (in English – moderately moving). But how fast is this? I have heard this song often sung at me in music festivals. During the post-performance discussions with the students it is often apparent that they

have no idea what this cultural tradition refers to and therefore have no understanding of the tempo associated with the event. On any Sunday morning, very very early morning in fact, you may go the centre of every German village and join the morning wander groups. However, be prepare to move it – this is no North American sauntering through the woods. The Germans have paths (in most places now even paved) through the woods and they march right along, breathing deeply and taking in the fresh morning mist – but at a full clip. How fast does this piece go? Get behind the Sunday morning wanderers and really find out.

Just as we can place the stress on various words in a sentence to alter the meaning of the text such as the difference between:

Please **DRIVE** down to Pizza Hut and get a pizza.

Please drive down to **PIZZA HUT** and get a pizza.

The same can be applied to German language sentences. While it is often a similar construct in English and you might wish to stress the same words, when the language begins to have unique idiomatic text such as was discussed above, there is really no equivalent English on which to base a stress decision. The music can be a great help if we assume that the composer has set the most important words on the strong beats of the music. When learning the dialogue preceding an opera aria, however, there is no music to help and only a knowledgeable teacher can solve these problems. Furthermore, German Lieder is considerably more complex than just having the important words on the strong beats of the bar.

Lets go back to our opening selection, Brahm's wonderful song "*O wüßt' ich doch den Weg zurück*". One of the typical style elements of Brahms' settings is that he regularly repeats sections of text and expects that the singer will take the opportunity to place the emphasis in various places to fully exploit the complete opportunity of meaning bound in the poetry. Here are a few lines of this Brahms' song.

zum | **zweiten** Mal ein | Kind,

zum | zweiten Mal ein | **Kind!**

Even more challenging is the text at the end of Brahm's song "*Wie Melodien zieht es*" where the text reads:

den | mild aus stillem | Keime ein | **feuchtes** Auge | ruft,

den | mild aus stillem | Keime ein | feuchtes, ein | feuchtes | **Auge** ruft.

There are endless possibilities here to emphasize various words in the repeated text. How does a student know the effect on a German ear of what these variety of stresses might evoke?

More than anything else, the interviews have shown that students are largely unaware that there are several layers of sophistication available which they are not typically able to comprehend. For many, their best effort and their perception of their best effort is little more than the first reading for a native German singer. Of all the literature sung, the German literature is bound more to the minutiae of the text than in any other language or culture. The fusion of piano and voice parts went largely unmentioned despite the overwhelming importance of the ensemble in the German Lied. Issues of text painting along with variations of the weight and thickness of various consonants for specific effect go unnoticed and unused for lack of an awareness of their existence. While it may be futile to hope that all our voice majors and their teachers may one day reach this level of finesse, the most important first step is to make both groups aware that these higher levels exist and that it will take considerable effort to reach them.

---