The Missing Dimension

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A story that has become part of musical folklore tells of the rehearsal of a Beethoven piano concerto by the pianist Artur Schnabel and the conductor Otto von Klemperer. As Klemperer was conducting the orchestra, he noticed that Schnabel was motioning to the musicians behind his back. He tolerated this as long as he could, but finally he could do so no longer. He turned to Schnabel and said, "Herr Schnabel, the conductor is here. Klemperer is here." "Ah," Schnabel replied, "Klemperer is there and I am here, but where is Beethoven."

Implicit in Schnabel's reply is the belief, common among musicians, that it is possible to go to the score of a musical work, to examine the score from the standpoint of its formal and expressive elements, to learn all that can be learned about the composer — particularly his life experiences up to and including the time that he wrote the work, to take into consideration the social and cultural situation in which the work was written, and, as the result of doing all this, to arrive at an interpretation of the work that represents the composer's original intention.

At first glance, this may seem to be a valid approach. Is it not true that the musical work hardly needs the kind of interpretative effort that is required, for example, in the case of a biblical or legal text. The biblical or legal text requires someone to bridge the gap between the mind of the author and that of his readers — readers who live in many cases years later and under substantially different circumstances. Even someone like the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, who could hardly be said to subscribe to this view, concedes its appeal:

> If we define the task [of interpretation] . . . as the bridging of personal or historical distance between minds, then the experience of art would seem to fall entirely outside its province. For of all the things that confront us in nature and history it is the work of art that speaks to us most directly. . . . an absolute contemporaneousness exists between the work and its present beholder that persists unhampered . . . The reality of the work of art and its expressive power cannot be restricted to its original horizon in which the beholder was actually the contemporary of the creator. It seems instead to belong to the experience of art that the work of art always has its own present (Gadamer, 1977, p. 95).

For music is, above all the arts, the one that speaks most directly to the person experiencing it, and, if this is the case, does it not make sense to interpret the musical work using this objective kind of approach? The directness and

immediateness with which the musical work is transmitted, according to those who are proponents of the objective approach to interpretation, leads to the inevitable conclusion that the meaning that was conveyed by the creator of the work to his or her contemporaries is the same meaning that is conveyed to subsequent listeners.

But is it really true that a musical work's meaning continues to be the same for all subsequent audiences as it was for its original audience? Does it really have nothing different to say to people living at times and in places different from those of its original audience?

One of the papers presented at the 1996 annual meeting of the American Musicological Society dealt with the *Star Spangled Banner* in the written form in which it has been transmitted to us and considered it as the prototype of a number of different versions. These included performances by the Coldstream Guards, a rock group, a gospel singer, and one or two other performers in addition to the performance of Stravinsky's version of the work. All of these versions were identifiable as the *Star Spangled Banner*. The differences between them were attributable to personal differences and differences in the sociocultural situation of each individual or group involved. What happened was that each individual or group took the prototype and modified it to fit their own personal and sociocultural understanding.

We see the same sort of thing happening in the case of Stravinsky's adaptation of Pergolesi's "Pulcinella". Here the simple substitution of quartal for tertial harmony results in the transformation of this work from the classicism of the eighteenth century to the neoclassicism of the twentieth. Gadamer says in this connection,

> In its origins, is not a work of art the bearer of a meaningful life function within a cultic or social context? And is it not within this context alone that it receives its full determination of meaning? Still it seems to me that this question can be reversed: Is it really the case that a work of art, which comes out of a past or alien life-world and is transferred into our historically educated world, becomes a mere object of aesthetic-historical enjoyment and says nothing more of what it originally had to say? (Gadamer, 1977, p. 97).

In reality, then, we cannot go back and attempt to reconstruct the original intention of the composer. In many cases, the composer himself does not know what he intended. Many composers are very poor interpreters of their own works. Richard Strauss, for example, was an outstanding interpreter of Mozart's work but only an indifferent interpreter of his own. As Gadamer puts it "all the meaning of what is handed down to us finds its concretion (i.e., is understood) in its relation to the understanding I [the interpreter] . . . and not in reconstructing the originally intending I [the creator of the work]." (Gadamer, 1988, p. 473).

If it is true that we cannot go back and attempt to reconstruct the original intention of the composer of a piece of absolute or instrumental music which has no extra-musical meaning, how can we do so in the case of a piece of vocal music which has a text and, therefore, does have an extra-musical meaning? Here we have to deal with a poet and the way in which the music and poetry interact. Yet this is usually what we are asked to do. For example, Carol Kimball, the

distinguished singer, teacher, and author, writes,

> Just as song is an integration of music and poetry, interpretation is a resynthesis in performance of the original creative process. Skilled interpreters . . . are willing to lose themselves in dissecting details of music and text in order to plumb the layers of meaning that make up the song's totality, then bringing everything together again in performance. (Kimball, 1997, p.3).

What is wrong with this approach? Nothing, as far as it goes. My argument is that it does not go far enough. What is missing is what I call the experiential dimension. Utilization of this dimension requires singers to integrate the tradition associated with a particular piece of vocal music into their own personal experiences and the sociocultural situations in which they live. Gadamer refers to this as a fusing of horizons. (Gadamer, 1988, p. 306). The original creators of the work were subject to certain personal, social, and cultural limits (their horizons). Subsequent interpreters are subject to different limits (their horizons). New interpreters need to fuse what they have received from those who preceded them with their own contribution. Instead of a re-creation of what is supposedly the original creator's intention, the process of interpretation is something that is continuous and always changing. To use Gadamer's phrase once again, the vocal work " is understood in relation to the understanding I . . . and not in reconstructing the originally intending I." (Gadamer, 1988, p. 473).

What usually happens when this experiential dimension is missing? We come away from a performance with the feeling that we have heard the identical performance many times before. In fact, we have. We have heard the same mechanical display of technique and nothing else, for technique is all that comes across. In the absence of the experiential dimension, vocal interpretation equals vocal technique. Richard Miller, in an article written for the *Journal of Singing*, says,

> If a singer's technical foundation is based on a series of localized controls to be consciously managed during singing, that singer's attention during public performance will be directed to the generation of those controls. Performance then becomes not an act of communication but a public enactment of a learned operation. In such cases, technique has become not the facilitator of communication but an end in itself. (Miller, 1997,p. 31)

The difference between the interpretative skill of singers who include the experiential dimension in their performances and singers who do not is analogous to the difference between the work of the artisan and that of the artist. The dictionary tells us that the artisan is " a worker in a skilled trade [or a] craftsman" (*Webster's New World College Dictionary*, 1996, p. 78). There are three definitions of the word artist, the second of which is most relevant for our purposes. According to this definition, an artist is "a person who does anything very well, with imagination and a feeling for form, effect, etc." (*Webster's New World College Dictionary*, 1996, p. 78). For example, the construction of a building involves the work of the architect who plans and designs the building and that of the workers

from the various building trades (the masons, the carpenters, the plumbers, and the like). Here architects are the artists. They are the ones who have the imagination, the vision, and the breadth of knowledge to visualize the building that they want to create. The workers have developed a high degree of technical skill in their various trades, but they lack those qualities that the architect has so that they can never be more than artisans whereas the architect is and will remain the artist.

The same distinction between artist and artisan holds in the field of vocal performance. Singers who include the experiential dimension in their performances are the artists, singers who do not are the artisans. The difference between the artist and the artisan is the difference between a great performance and a run-of-the-mill performance.

If we as singers wish to include the experiential dimension in our preparation of a work, how do we go about it? There are two tools, in particular, that merit consideration.

The first is a research methodology known as heuristic research. Heuristic research was developed by Clark Moustakas, Michael Polanyi and other social and behavioural scientists. The word heuristic comes from the Greek word *heuriskein* which means to invent or discover. (*Webster's New World College Dictionary,* 1996, p. 634). Invent or discover, in this context, has the meaning that the word eureka has in the often-told story of Archimedes. Archimedes was the fellow who discovered the principle of buoyancy while taking a bath and was so excited by his discovery that he ran naked through the streets of Athens shouting "Eureka!"

Central to the process of heuristic research is the concept of tacit knowledge. Michael Polanyi, who was largely responsible for the development of this concept, says of it: "We can know more than we can tell . . . Take an example. We know a person's face and we can recognize it among a million. Yet we usually cannot tell how we recognize a face we know . . . This knowledge cannot be put into words." (Polanyi, 1983,p. 4). The kind of knowing that comes from tacit knowledge is the first of a series of steps in a process that eventually leads to an ever deeper understanding of an experience, one that enables a person to bridge the gap between the objective fact of the experience and his or her own personal understanding of it.

The application to the singer is obvious. When the singer is confronted by the objective reality of a score written by a composer to a text by a poet both of whom represent an experience that is alien to the singer's own experience, he or she must find some way of coming to grips with this alien experience and then transmitting the expanded understanding that has been achieved to his or her contemporaries. This cannot be done by going back and attempting to uncover the original intention of composer and poet. With this approach what is alien remains alien. Singers must take what they have been given in the score and relate it to their own experience and that of their audiences. Only in this way can the alien become understandable while at the same time retaining its essential nature. The heuristic approach can help in this process. It is a demanding approach both from the standpoint of time and effort, but the results are well worth it. Polanyi describes the kind of reward that awaits the person who is willing to expend this time and effort: "Having made a discovery, I shall never see the world again as before. My eyes have become different. I have made myself into a person seeing and thinking differently. I have crossed a gap, the heuristic gap, which lies

between problem and discovery." (Polanyi, 1962, p. 143).

Another valuable tool that can be used by singers who wish to include the experiential dimension in their performance of vocal music is the process known as hermeneutical analysis. The dictionary definition of the adjective hermeneutic or hermeneutical tells us that it is derived from the Greek verb *hermeneuein* which means to interpret. (*Webster's New World College Dictionary*, 1996, p. 632). This, in turn, has its origin in the name of the Greek god Hermes who served as a herald and messenger of the other gods. He was, in other words, the one who mediated or transmitted what he learned from the other gods to mortals. It is this mediating function of transmitting what has been received by way of tradition and updating it to fit a new historical situation that lies at the heart of hermeneutics. This, of course, is what the singer is also attempting to do.

The dictionary defines the noun hermeneutics as "the art or science of the interpretation of literature," (*Webster's New World College Dictionary*, 1996, p. 632), a definition that has been expanded to include such other fields as biblical and legal interpretation, historical research and, most significantly for us, the arts. We gain a much clearer view of what hermeneutics is if we consider the fact that, in Greek, a *hermeneus* is a translator and then think for a moment about what translators do. They don't translate a text literally. If they did so, they would only confuse the people for whom they were providing the translation. The translation would utilize the thought forms of the language being translated and would be unintelligible to the translator's audience. The translator's task is, rather, this mediating function of expressing what is written in the thought forms of those receiving the translation.

If we singers wish our performances to be more than exercises in vocal technique, we need to consider what the inclusion of the experiential dimension in our performances can do for us and what it has to say to us. The primary message that it has for us is that we cannot begin and endwith the composer and poet, that we cannot reconstruct the original intention of composer and poet. What it can do for us is to provide the means whereby the singer, the understanding I — to use Gadamer's phrase again — truly transmits the meaning of the originally intending I — the composer and poet. This is the means whereby we, as singers, can truly functions as artists rather than artisans.

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