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Emotion in Song Part II

by **Wolfgang Lockemann**

In Part 1 of this two-part series [see February, 2008], I described why opera and art song do not fit in the same mold. Opera uses a dramatic story, singer-actors, and theatrical effects for expression. Art song is based solely on a few poetic verses. Part 1 showed how every poem establishes a characteristic individual tone for itself, a "personality." This personality (the poem's tone) is the guiding light for true understanding of the text and its emotional expression.

Now let's go into further detail about the poem's character and the resulting artistic challenges for the singer and pianist.

What singers most often do, but need to change

It is rather easy to understand a poem's character. Singers are in the comfortable position of using the same method they use when they study an operatic role. After gaining a general idea who the role/character is, the singer goes into detail, finding out how the character unfolds from one scene to the next, how it develops throughout an aria.

The parallel is perfect. For a Lieder text the central challenge is to figure out how to get from one word, one line, one moment of the poem to the next. Doing this correctly makes the text meaningful and alive.

Singers usually don't take up this challenge at all. Many singers are content with some answer to the question of what the poem is "about." This contrasts harshly with what they do most naturally in opera. In opera it is common knowledge that the various tyrants and power-hungry women are not even close to being identical and singers take the greatest care to give each one of those characters their own individuality.

So why don't we study and treat opera and Lieder on an equal level? Why do the vast majority of singers still reduce a poetic Lieder text such as "Schneeglöckchen" (see sidebar, p. 41) to the little message "spring is in the air"? In performance they circle around this "feeling" like ravens circle an old castle tower, but nothing "moving" goes on.

This limited understanding of the poetic text is very damaging to your hopes for a life-filled performance. A singer's first and foremost pressing allegiance belongs to his or her music, and equally, to its poem. The poet's (and composer's) life and the general aspects of their works and times are valuable background information, but not helpful for performing. They can help singers understand the poetic context and style, but they cannot replace an artistic encounter with each poem's personality, an encounter that has a deep and direct effect on each individual performance.

Opera singers have a stage director who helps unfold and realize the dramatic aspects of their roles. Maybe the Lieder singer and pianist also need someone who helps them develop their song's character, bringing to life the personality of the poem and of their "role." Were there such a job, we might begin to hear a dramatic improvement in performance quality.

Where to start untangling the confusion

A new and different approach can start with a more accurate understanding of the word "action." Action includes anything that develops and unfolds. The change from a bud to a flower, for example, can be a very exciting "action." In our song text, "Schneeglöckchen," the transition from "Flöckchen" in the first line to "Glöckchen" in the second has a very dramatic background that the singer should make audible: winter has unexpectedly (*gestern* – *heute* [yesterday – today]) given way to spring.

In the eight lines that follow we have a question and three imperatives. One imperative is directed at "us" the (fictional) reader, and two at "*Blätter, Blüt und Blume*." We have lots of motion and emotion, lots of excitement, which the charming antiphony of long and short lines supports.

Even after we have gained insight into the constructive elements of the poem we are not yet ready for productive musical practice. We now have to bring all our insights together and hear what we have only talked about: the "music" of the words. Only when we are able to reproduce this "music" can we succeed in transforming it into the music of the composer. His music was driven and governed by the poem he set to music. This act of creation should guide our act of re-creation.

You, as a singer, do not need to bring any personal feelings to your song. You do not need to put yourself "into the mood" by thinking of former experiences. The poem, by way of its constructive elements, gives you everything you need for your performance. Understanding those elements and transferring them into sound brings you closer and closer to the poem's personality, to the "character" you are going to sing. It is not the emotion itself you are after, it is the sound of that emotion as it is inherent in the poem. This sound is stored in you and your memory, by direct and indirect experience. You have the ability to express it without knowing where it comes from. It is life—your life—you are accessing. This life will resound through you as you sing.

You do not need to feel anything in particular. You will feel inspiration and creative power. Do not confuse the original feelings you remember from whenever or wherever with your intimate knowledge of the sound of the emotions that have grown out of these feelings. This is what the poem creates in you, and it is essential to the clarity and freedom of your performance.

In my decades of work with singers, I haven't run across a text yet that could not bring forth the appropriate sound in the singers, when they were open enough to "listen" first to what the text could tell them. The expression has to grow from within, like all growth does, not painted on or added from the outside.

The more involved and experienced singers become with *Lieder*, the more they find that it is not the eternal quest and chase for stronger "emotion" that gives their performances life and expression. This pressure for "emotion" is exactly what leads them astray. Listen to the poem instead. It always leads you in the right direction.

The mutual exchange: the work of art and you, the reproductive artist

Every work of art awaits an encounter with a reproductive artist. In this encounter the poem/song becomes complete. It is a mutual give and take: the music and text touch on the singer's life experiences and these experiences bring life to the song.

This is a spiral of mutual inspiration and understanding. I say it again: Beware of confusing biographical experiences—the poet's, the composer's, or your own—with your art. Yes, your performance needs to be filled with your life, but not with your biography.

A poem is not talking about things, such as a message does. A poem changes the language from signs for meanings to a kind of language experienced by all our senses. The poem is an artistic world that does not imitate or refer to anything else. It provides us with experiences and insights.

In our *Schneeglöckchen* poem we experience, perhaps, what a new beginning is. In everyday life we may not ever have totally understood what a great and powerful moment the change from snowflake to a bell-like flower really is. Because of this song, maybe we will look at both with new eyes in the future.

The emotional values in the poem and the music ring true, not because you as the performing artist share some of your "little" private life, but because you fill the poem and song with the sounds of what you have learned from those "little" experiences. The poem and song bring out, in an artistic way, what you have made of yourself, or rather, what you allowed life to make out of you. You share what was once your personal experience—not in a direct way, but newly found and filtered in poetic tone.

You just need to trust and be true to yourself as you work on the text's personality, on the sound of the poem, your "role."

In German, the word "*aufgehoben*" means three very different things: preserved, lifted up, and done away with. Yet all three are closely related. Just as the poet's and composer's feelings are no longer important when they have finished writing poem and song, the private feelings of the singer become artistically expressed emotions. For the poet and composer those original feelings went into the artwork, were changed and lifted into artistic construction, and thus preserved. As individual feelings they served their purpose and are gone forever, together with the occasion that brought them about.

What the poem and composition are for poet and composer, the performance is for the singer—not dealing with individual feelings and private life, but dealing with the work of art and its "character." This is what "contains" the emotions the singer artistically expresses in and through the song.

Joining artistic forces

How can every single one of us help make Lieder recitals more exciting, more human, more real and significant? Understand the Lied form and do what it asks us to do.

It is curious that the duality of opera and Lied is so controversial. Some try to blur the differences; others try to emphasize those differences. Somehow these discussions mostly serve the status of the individuals involved. In reality, a comparative look at both art forms helps us gain a better understanding of what the singer has to focus on.

The process of producing an opera is divided into clearly distinguishable levels or steps:

- The text
- □ Unfolding the story by means of stage directions
- Characters (as dramatic form)

Physical presence is essential. The characters have to be convincing on stage. Then there is the score. The music has to become a true expression of the dramatic action. All the singers and orchestra players know exactly how they contribute to the whole.

The Lied, on the other hand, folds all these steps into one. The Lied has none of the physical presence that makes opera so fascinating. It is reduced to the personality of the singer and replaced by auditory presence. There is no set, no character, no real story, or narrator. What looks similar in both art forms at first sight is in fact quite different.

How does the Lied show its artistic presence?

The Lied unfolds on the basis of its poem. Singers face the challenge of adopting the poetic text as their character, their "role." I have analyzed what this involves in the preceding pages. Every word of the poem is not just the word as we know it from the dictionary or everyday speech; it gets an individual expressive quality from the overall sound of the particular poem it helps to build. Every part of the poem has to be seen within the context of this "role."

In operatic productions the orchestra and the singers make the dramatic production complete—and into an opera. In Lied the "poetic music" melts into the composition and gives it its purpose, concreteness, and individuality. The singer offers nothing to watch (apart from expressive demeanor) or act, no drama except as tone. It is poetic music and composition as one meaningful whole.

Let's once and for all do away with the amateur and dull concept that poems and songs just express certain feelings that singers have to try to match with their own. Dramatizing a song and its poem's situations, acting them out in some flashy fashion, does not make either more interesting. The result is tasteless and fake because this treatment goes against their innate nature.

Let us be open to a new and highly practical approach. Let us rethink and re-evaluate. A Lieder recital need not be less gripping and moving than an opera performance. It has to have the spark of your individual textual penetration and—built on this sure foundation—musical penetration. It has to breathe and radiate all that makes human life so unbelievably inexhaustible, irreplaceable, and endearing.

Let us try to do even better than we have done before. Let's reject routine, reclaim the vision we all once had, and retrieve our passion.

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