

Emotion In Song

Cutting Through The Confusion

by Wolfgang Lockemann

It's been a long afternoon in a masterclass on German Lieder. The singer has worked hard and done well. The master teacher acknowledges that fact, but says she could not hear enough "involvement," enough "emotion."

Singer and pianist try again, doing their best, changing some tempos, some dynamics, some colors. It still isn't good enough. The problem is something much less tangible. The master teacher says something like: "Imagine you were in that situation" (and the texts of German Lieder do include some weird situations). "Just put yourself in the place of that young girl (that moonlit night, that brook, that little elf or dwarf, or whatever it may be) and just 'act' what the poet says. Stress the important words. Can you please tell me what they are?" the teacher asks. The student tries, naming three nouns, two adjectives, and one verb. Everybody can see and hear her stress and strain. Her singing only becomes worse.

The teacher pushes harder. "Just put yourself into the mood. You must know how it feels, from your own experience. Have you never stood on a bridge in the middle of a cold night and kissed? You are too distant, my dear. I want you to identify more!" The student is embarrassed—she has kissed in the middle of a cold night on a bridge (in almost the same way the poem described it, as she later, again in good spirits, told everybody). The more she thinks about her own adventure, however, the less she can express it in the song. Finally, tears well up—but the right feelings don't—even though it was a heart-rending song.

When the student regains her calm, she pleads, "Please explain to me why I can do what you ask in my arias but not in the songs. I just never know where to look for the emotions or what my role is. I just don't get it." The class ends. The singer leaves frustrated, feeling unsupported and unaided in her confusion.

Does this sound familiar? Have you ever experienced something like this? This or something similar happens day in, day out, all over. This is something we have to change—and we will, with your help.

Basic differences between the worlds of opera and song

You cannot force out the feelings in songs. Expression in song does not result from just identifying enough with the situation or the character of the song.

Poems can be first-person, third-person, or no person at all (very often the case in Lieder). What a different world this is from opera, where apart from stage directions, all text is essentially in first person—the words of the character who is singing. That character, "the role," determines how the singer delivers the text in emotion and expression. In performance the opera singer is clearly someone other than he or she is in real life. The singer's task is well defined: to be as "real" and convincing as possible in the role while singing well—nothing more, nothing less. We in the audience want to be caught up in the performance. We want to see and hear nuances of individuality, of voice, and of human behavior, that we have not experienced in any other performance before.

"Expression" for the opera singer means to represent the intellectual, mental, and psychological state of the character at any given moment in the opera. If only the situation were this obvious for the Lieder singer.

Common beliefs and opinions

The character is the center in opera, but where is this center in song? Is there anything comparable in which a singer should center all artistic efforts? The usual answer is expression of emotion. I have already indicated that this answer is nothing but a big problem in itself, not a solution. Whose

feelings? What emotion? Expressing what? Do we express the emotional state the poet was in when he wrote the piece? Do we somehow reconstruct his feelings?

This can't be done, of course. This is precisely the reason anecdotal biographical material about the creative process of a work of art is so extremely popular. Singers try to find something to hold on to as a guiding light for their emotional path through the work they perform. This approach means creating a confusion of different spheres. You cannot explain a work of art by the subjective experience of the individual artist. We do not express what he felt. Instead, we want to express what he wrote or composed. You cannot explain the one using the other.

A large group of Lieder experts believes in what I like to call "the expressive deity of words and sounds." They believe that emphasizing "important" words or double consonants and certain vowels enough and using them like a paintbrush (highlighting diction) will "emotionalize" the text and create expression. This doesn't work—the "emotionality" runs empty and is detached. If a singer creates the emotionality out of his or her personal feelings, it is not anchored in the poem, and it creates counterproductive stress, as in the anecdote at the beginning of this article.

The need to give the poem some space within the interpretation of Lieder is widely recognized. Some people look for the solution in the singer's "effective elocution" or recitation of the text. This sounds like a good idea, but where is this effectiveness to come from? Your gut or your feelings? That would mean you express only yourself rather than the poem and song you want to perform.

Effectiveness has never been a good guide for any interpretive work. Your elocution or recitation should be "effective" only in one way: to help you understand what the music wants to express. You must first understand the poem. It is the driving force behind the music. Effective elocution does not replace this understanding.

I repeat: Poetry is not just an outpouring of personal feelings. Let's find out what it is.

The central question remains: How does the poetic text of the Lied provide the singer with the space to unfold the necessary feelings and emotional expressiveness? Where is the singer supposed to look for these feelings?

The poem as "tone" and "character"

Let's start with a random example, "Schneeglöckchen" by Friedrich Rückert, composed by Robert Schumann, op. 79, no. 27, 1849. (See text on p. 52.)

A seemingly harmless poem that is very easy to understand, it could be classified as a spring poem, or to be more specific, a very early spring poem. Why would that be important? It gives us our first clue about character, color, tempo, and the like. Let's find a word (not necessarily in the poem) that can characterize the basic tone of this poetic text. We probably have many choices. I opt for "expectation" or "enthusiasm," maybe even slight "impatience." The title "Schneeglöckchen" sounds rather delightful and delicate, and that inspires the word "slight."

Do you catch on to what I am doing?

On a first, very basic level I try to establish a core for the poem. Since I don't have an operatic role and character whose personality I can start to analyze and understand, I take the whole poem and its tone instead. I should never forget that it is a poem I approach, not a human. An opera character reveals itself through words and deeds—the singer's task is to understand the motives and feelings that stand behind them. The "character" of the poem is "motivated" differently.

Poems tell us who they are by their appearance, meaning their artistic construction. A poem's "appearance" encompasses various elements: stanzas, lines, syntax, rhyme, imagery, meter, rhythm on the different levels, melody, and all other aspects of sound. From all of that we build a tone—the poem's "personality." Once accomplished, we have the equivalent of the operatic role. As you work on Lieder, you have to think of the tone of the poem as your character, your "role." This is the anchor we sought, the guiding light for emotional expression.

When you try to “translate” the poem into sound, you should not think of yourself as an actor who needs to recite a poem in an impressive and effective way. Your intent should be much more modest. Your goal is different. It is to discover as much about the poem’s “personality” as you possibly can.

In Part 2 of this article, I will discuss in greater detail how to clearly establish the tone and personality of a poem, cutting through the confusion even more and helping you to be the most expressive singer possible in both opera and art song.

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