

LIEDER AS MINI-OPERAS?

By Wolfgang Lockemann

Step out of the Shadow of Grand Opera

There are many attempts to make Lieder and other art songs more attractive and accessible for audiences. Professional groups everywhere try to find new ways to strengthen the communicative power of this artistic genre. Most interesting are those groups who want to strengthen the “story telling” aspect of art songs by presenting the “drama” in the poetic text, by developing strategies for impersonation. There is even talk about the theater of art song. All of these attempts have in common that they borrow their ideas for better art song communication from theatrics and opera. I consider this a questionable approach.¹

I subscribe to the concept of art forms and/or genres. This concept means that each of them comes with their own set of choices, challenges and chances. Lieder appear very different from operas, and that suggests that their ways of communication must be genuinely their own, not just adjusted operatic communication, unless -- Lieder are nothing other than mini-operas without the fascinating theatrical stage and its aura.

The Lied was not meant for staging when it appeared in full glory in the time of Franz Schubert (1797-1828) and the German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832). Does the Lied nonetheless have any inherent theatrical characteristics, which allow a nearly identical approach as the one to opera? Is there anything in the Lied that suggests, or at least tolerates, to treat it as a mini opera?

Dramatic characters, brought to life by actors on a theatrical stage, are the pillar on which all theatrical art is built. Do we find them in a Lied? Do the singer and collaborative pianist act when they perform? Do Lieder offer dramatic characters comparable to those found in operas?

I once heard Schubert's "Gretchen am Spinnrade" sung by a young performer who wore a beautiful peasant-style Austrian Holiday-Dirndl dress. This was highly irritating. The impression she gave was that of a disguised singer, not, what she probably intended, that of a singing actress. What was supposed to help her credibility as a singer, destroyed what she was trying to convey through Schubert's music and Goethe's text. The regional Sunday dress did nothing more than detract from the song she sang. Do all singers who perform “Gretchen am Spinnrade” have to look like Gretchen in Goethe's drama “Faust” or in Gounod's opera? Of course not.

Why was the hint at a costume in the concert setting so disturbing? Obviously, it leads us to expect something, which is not delivered. When there is a costume we want to see the character who fits this costume. Schubert, however, makes us see a singer who sings a song, which has as its subject matter the longing Gretchen. Gretchen is not the subject who sings, Gretchen is sung about in a song. This is done in the grammatical form of the first person, “ich,” I.

In opera any indication of costume helps the illusion, while in the world of Lieder, it has exactly the opposite effect, by confusing our focus.

Why do singers believe that they should spice their performance on the concert platform by borrowing from the operatic stage? Do concert singers doubt their success with just a beautiful song, a professional expressive voice, a meaningful textual and musical interpretation, and their own artistic personality? Maybe, their doubts and fears create the trap of expectation. How can the public be fully engaged if the artists themselves are unsure of the power of what they do?

I suspect that many Lieder singers do not have a clear idea of what exactly they want to express and communicate. There seems to be a large grey area, coupled with a lot of confusion. All these questions are hardly ever approached in some depth. This feature tries to bring some clarification.

For the composers, it all starts with poetry. In many instances, it is rather well documented how they dealt with it.

Poetry seems to be an elusive kind of communication. It is limited to the world of artistic expression. There is nothing comparable in the language that makes up daily communication. We do not talk to each other in calculated rhythm, meter and rhyme, or elaborate images. We do not communicate in lines and stanzas.

What do these curious elements, which poetry has always played with, "mean"? Can we just act as if the outcome was the same, whether they are present in a text or not?

It is enlightening to hear how singers deal with their poetic texts. Let us start with what Renee Fleming said in an interview with the Miami Herald about her preparations of Strauss' *Four Last Songs*: "' The phrases are so long, you can't really mess around with it,' Fleming says. 'I work with the text and think of different meanings. The texts are so enigmatic you can apply many different scenarios to them.'"² All this may be true, yet, there is no hint that these texts are poems and not just some cryptic story fragments. Scenario means story line, sequence of events. Poems are not nuts or riddles to be cracked.

Soprano Lotte Lehmann (1888-1976), whose beliefs are still popular, has this to say: "The lied is a small framework of the opera. To make a lied, one has also to forget one's own person and become the person whom one portrays. A different role for each lied."³

Birgit Nilsson (1918-2005) speaks out of her vast experience, when answering the following question: "We know you as an operatic soprano. Do you find the challenge different as a concert singer?"

It is like night and day. You cannot compare these two arts. It's so good for the voice. You keep the voice much, much more under control when you sing lieder, because you have to be careful about every note. Maybe in the opera, if two or three notes are not so correct it's not so important. But in the recitals every note is important, you must have everything under control. And when you are making a

whole program of twenty songs, you have to be twenty persons, just to get the right atmosphere in the song. In an opera you only have to play one person.⁴

The notions that twenty songs require twenty different persons (Nilsson probably meant: characters), that there is a different role for each Lied (Lehmann), sound like a pretty weird assumption to make. Are we as individuals and artists limited to one type of utterance? Do we have to “impersonate” different characters all the time?

It may be a sound and useful idea to get rid of the operatic communication model for Lieder, which causes this strange and unnecessary constriction. The genre Lied is not diminished by admitting that it does not follow the model of opera. On the contrary, it grows in stature when it possesses its own set of artistic choices and challenges. Lieder are songs, not character/role pieces. This feature will show how Lieder establish their own pattern of communication.

Let us have a look at Schubert's "Der Schiffer" (D 536) to a poem by Johann Mayrhofer. In this context, the first and last stanzas will suffice.

Im Winde, im Sturme befahr' ich den Fluss,
Die Kleider durchweicht der Regen im Guss;
Ich peitsche die Wellen mit mächtigem Schlag,
Erhoffend mir heiteren Tag.

...

Drum tose des Wassers ohnmächtiger Zorn,
Dem Herzen entquillet ein mächtiger Born,
Die Nerven erfrischend, o himmlische Lust
Dem Sturme zu trotzen mit männlicher Brust!

In wind and storm I ride upon the river,
my clothes soaked through from the downpour;
I lash the waves with powerful strokes,
hoping for a bright day.

...

May the water's impotent rage roar forth,
from my heart rushes a blissful spring,
refreshing my nerves - what heavenly bliss
to defy the storm with a manly heart!

It is a very masculine text. From the title "The boatman" to the last words "with a manly chest/heart," the poem is a passionate fight with the elements. As the third stanza tells us, it is a self chosen fate: "It had to come this way, I willed it so." This guy is a real macho man.

I once heard mezzo soprano Brigitte Fassbaender open her recital with this "manly" song, which Schubert wrote, as could be expected, for bass voice. Fassbaender's performance was wonderfully vigorous, driving, dynamic and full of conviction. Not for a moment did the thought occur to me: is it appropriate that a woman sings such a manly boatman? The gender connection between text and singer, which is manifest for opera as the correlation of role and singer actor, is in Lieder no longer valid.

In a poem, the focus has completely changed. It has moved from the speaker of the utterance to the utterance itself. As long as artists are able to deliver the song in a way, which is commensurate with its 'character,' it does not matter whether the performer is male or female, young or old. The speaker/singer just has to find the right tone.

It is highly interesting and significant that these observations are fully supported by a look into the history of Lied performance. Everyone who thinks and performs Lieder with the concept of role and impersonation, should perhaps consider first what Martha Elliott in her book "Singing in Style" has to say about gender in song:

A word about gender-specific songs: plenty of accounts exist from the nineteenth century of famous sopranos singing *An die ferne Geliebte*, *Winterreise*, or the *Müllerlieder*, in which the protagonist or speaker in the poems is obviously male. By the same token, [Julius] Stockhausen sang *Frauenliebe und Leben*, in which the voice in the poetry is decidedly female. Thus the boundaries of gender were not considered to limit a singer's choice of songs in the days of Schubert, Schumann, or Brahms.⁵

Even though gender became an issue, the tradition was somewhat upheld through the twentieth century by Elena Gerhardt, Lotte Lehmann, Christa Ludwig, Brigitte Fassbaender, Mitsuko Shirai among others. Especially "Winterreise" has lured female singers to jump the gender barrier. Maybe this is due to the fact that the protagonist becomes much less visible in this cycle than in the others, and is not constantly connected to his lost love as, for example, the young miller is in "Die Schöne Müllerin." In the last hundred years, the gender liberty was no longer mainstream. It seemingly was never taken with Schumann's "Frauenliebe und Leben." It could very well be that in the twentieth century no male singer of fame has ever sung this cycle in a memorable concert.

The above mentioned baritone Julius Stockhausen (1826 - 1906) was the most important and acclaimed Lieder singer of his time. In 1862 in Cologne, he performed several songs from "Frauenliebe und Leben," with Clara Schumann at the piano. In 1865 they performed the complete cycle in Hamburg. We can safely assume that Clara Schumann would not have been a part of these performances if the gender issue had existed for her.

In 2007 in Salzburg, baritone Matthias Goerne performed "Frauenliebe und Leben," and it seems, he found wide approval. The Austrian newspaper "Der Standard," for example, wrote:

“Frauenliebe und Leben“ . . . wurde mit der überwältigenden Gestaltungsfähigkeit von Matthias Goerne zum Bild überzeitlichen und quasi ‘übergeschlechtlichen’ Sehnsens.⁶

“Frauenliebe und Leben“ . . . became the image of timeless human longing, which goes beyond sex differentiation, thanks to the overwhelming expressive powers of Matthias Goerne.

The loose gender link between the lyric speaking subject in the poem and the performer of the song has consequences. The speaking subject loses, together with his/her gender characteristics, also his/her individual identity, which would make him/her into an actable character. The protagonist of a poem and song becomes a “typical voice.” The boatman of Mayrhofer’s poem is any person with a similar attitude and comparable circumstances. He stands for any such person. The poem is a human experience. The same holds true for all other lyrical subjects, whatever their name or profession. To name but a few: *Gretchen, Mignon, Agnes, Das verlassene Mägdlein, Die Liebende, Der Harfner, Der Wanderer, Der Schiffer, Der Fischer, Der Jäger, Der Schäfer, Der Gärtner, Die Spröde* or *Der Hirt auf dem Felsen*.

Elisabeth Schwarzkopf (1915-2006), acclaimed master singer in both realms, opera and Lied, speaks about the particular challenges of Lieder singing with great candor and conviction:

Lieder is an entirely different medium [than opera and operetta]. In the concert you cannot use anything else but your voice and your face. You paint with a very much finer brush than you ever have to do in opera. In a lied, you can go down to the very finest threads of pianissimo, which you cannot do on an operatic stage. You have to find so many colors which you never could employ when you have to cut through an orchestra. Poetry comes into it, style. You have to have a feeling for poetry. It happens very often that even in a lied which you sing ten years, twenty years, you suddenly come across a dot, and that dot will alter surely something in the way you express that word. Even though you’ve sung this one lied time and again, there is always the discovery of some nuance. You are alone with your pianist, who is the true partner, who I always regard as really my other half there.⁷

Lieder, according to Schwarzkopf, are highly sensitive artistic creations. She talks about the “very much finer brush,” which, compared to opera, has to be used, about “the very finest threads of pianissimo” to be applied, and about finding “so many colors.” There is an ever ongoing “discovery of nuance.” All these performance characteristics are due to the texts of Lieder, the poems: “Poetry comes into it, style. You have to have a feeling for poetry.”

This brings to mind the famous dictum of Robert Frost (1874-1963), "Poetry is what gets lost in translation," a phrase, which says masterfully that poetry does not and cannot exist in any other way than it was written in. The poem is lost as soon as it is paraphrased. Whatever it is that makes words, text into poetry, it is something so fragile and elusive, that it cannot be put into different words or another form. Schwarzkopf's "feeling for poetry" actually means exactly the same thing, poetry has to be approached with the utmost care, in order not to be abolished.

The "formula," which I have offered in my article "Words make Music too," becomes useful here once again. It points at the underlying core of Lied: Lied = Art². Lied is the only art form based on finished works of art, which have perfectly well stood for themselves. They usually are not (or very little) altered to fit the music, when they become part of a Lied. On the contrary, the music tries to live up to these finished art works. Lied creates, on a new level, an artistic "Together," a poetic-musical symbiotic entity. Useless to ask, which one is more important, which one has the say – they function together, they support each other in every imaginable aspect. Their connection is a constant give and take.

In approaching a Lied, it has to be remembered that the poem was there first. It is the poem, which gives foundation, direction and drive to the music, and by doing so, melts into it. It is the poem, which is responsible for the particular ways – Schwarzkopf mentions a few – in which the music has to be dealt with. It is the poem, which changes the ways in which regular speech functions, into a unique communication of its own.

My own attempt of showing how inappropriate the theatrical/operatic model is for Lied, is fully supported by the performance practice in the time of Schubert, and by statements of his friends. Especially Leopold von Sonnleithner (1797 - 1873) has important insights to offer. He wrote his reports thirty years after Schubert's death (in 1857 and 1860), when he considered most of the performances of Schubert's Lied opposite to what, in his opinion, the composer had wanted:

The lieder singer, as a rule, only relates experiences and feelings of others; he does not himself impersonate the characters whose feelings he describes. Poet, composer and singer must conceive the song *lyrically*, not *dramatically*. With Schubert especially, the true expression, the deepest feeling is already inherent in the melody as such, and is admirably enhanced by the accompaniment.

The center of the ingenuity of Schubert's Lied lay for Sonnleithner in their melodies. Anything that disturbs or distorts these "flowing, yet deeply felt creations" is "too arbitrary, too 'dramatic'"⁹, "their musical beauty is in no way dependent on a declamatory style of performance."¹⁰

The composers and critics of Schubert's time were very much aware of general aesthetic laws and demands of particular genres. In fact, this clear understanding of structures and forms is probably the main characteristic of artistic principles of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The nineteenth century brings the increasing dissolution of these principles, any number of "mixed genres" create new ways of expression. This development found its pinnacle in modern times. The

reception of the songs of Schubert were in many instances hampered by the fact that most of them did not conform to the genre of “Lied” of the time.

Marjorie Wing Hirsch in her study “Schubert’s Dramatic Lieder”¹¹ draws attention to what the word “dramatic” encompasses in Schubert’s time: “Used in reference to Lieder, the term ‘dramatic’ does not merely signify a striking or forceful manner . . . Rather, it implies an attempt to mimic the acts of impersonation and portrayal of action that takes place on the theatrical or operatic stage.”¹²

Schubert himself, and many of his circle, clearly understood that the dramatic elements in his Lieder¹³, did not alter the underlying structure and manner of presentation of a Lied. This explains why Sonnleithner writes in the above quotation: “Poet, composer and singer must conceive the song *lyrically*, not *dramatically*.” This recognition and insight cannot be overemphasized, even for today’s Lied performance. Lieder require a different approach than anything theatrical or operatic.

The refusal of the Schubertians to accept theatrical effects are based on the conviction that the melody, the accompaniment and the poems contain everything needed for a convincing and moving performance. This is what Sonnleithner tries to say in the above quoted statement: “true expression, the deepest feeling is already inherent.” The less the performers try to “do,” the better and more appropriate they are. This has nothing to do with “Schöngesang,” expressionless singing, which is focused solely on beautiful tones and legato lines.

An accurate, purely *musical* performance in no way excludes feeling and sensitivity; but the singer . . . should not try to be more poetic and inventive than the composer, who has clearly indicated, by means of notes and signs, just exactly what he wants . . .

In the case of a composer like Schubert, the simplest but, at the same time, the most unaffected singing (. . .) is greatly to be preferred to the most sophisticated, declamatory performance; the latter we will leave to those who always look for another poetic or philosophical idea behind the musical one (which, as such, they do not understand and, therefore, despise).¹⁴

This remark is noteworthy for today’s performers, teachers and coaches as well. The eternal search for meaning and, as Sonnleithner calls it, for “ideas” “behind” the phenomenon, whether poetic or musical, is something performers should leave to literary scholars and musicologists. For performing, the phenomenon itself is the “idea,” there is nothing else. The notion that this “behind,” whatever it may be, is “performable,” is easily the most widespread misconception in Lied performance. Take it from the American poet Archibald MacLeish (1892-1982): “A poem should not mean but be.”

What made Johann Michael Vogl’s singing feel so true and special? Josef von Spaun writes: “The much applauded Stockhausen . . . did not attain by a long way to Vogl’s deeply sensitive

[“seelenvoll”] manner of performance.”¹⁵ Walther Duerr considers this judgment not to mainly mean an emotional interpretation but “the accurate expression of musical and poetic structures.”¹⁶

We have heard it before: whatever is inherent in poem and music has to be brought out “accurately” by the performer. Interpretation of Lieder is a task, which requires restraint, modesty, care and intelligence from the performers. Vogl is prepared to take on these challenges because “his classical education made for a more spiritual [“geistigere”] conception of the poems set to music. By his performance Vogl “created an interest not only in the music but in the poems as well.” Another well liked Schubert singer, Baron von Schönstein, is also lauded for his “many-sided culture.”¹⁷

It is striking how much weight and importance is given to the poems of the Lieder. Even though Sonnleithner puts Schubert’s melody into the center of his reports, he also tries to describe the connection of these melodies to their words. It is a prime example for their dialectic connection:

The beauty of his melodies (. . .) is . . . an independent, purely musical one, i.e. it is entirely independent of the words, even though it follows these closely in every respect and always interprets the poet’s feeling profoundly and, indeed, often ennobles it.¹⁸

This statement describes Schubert’s Lieder in a most remarkable fashion. Music and words keep their own beauty and characteristics. This is accomplished despite the fact that the music “follows” the words “closely in every respect,” i.e. the words define and drive the music. On the other hand, the music as the “follower” does turn this direction around by “interpreting” and “ennobling” these words. The composer does not add music to words and swallows them up in the process. On the contrary, Schubert creates “Art².” This transforms both media to equal advantage into a new third medium.

Opposed to the widespread opinion that the words don’t mean very much in a Schubert song, the reality is quite different. Schubert and his friends must have felt astoundingly close to the ideals, which are heard about three generations later from Hugo Wolf. The Schubertians were very much aware of the fact that they needed different listeners than the general public.

The listener must . . . have a feeling for the poems and enjoy the lovely song together with it; in a word, the public must be quite a different one from that which fills the theaters and concert halls.¹⁹

Johann Michael Vogl emphasizes “the necessity for the clear enunciation of the words” for a well defined reason. His motto was: “If you have nothing to say to me, you have nothing to sing to me either.”²⁰

The word “say” encompasses true understanding, backed by sensitivity, education and culture. Let that be the guiding light for the approach to lyric diction!

The Musical Transformation of Language (MTL)

The question remains, what is so special about the poems? Why all the emphasis on the need for “feeling” for the poems? What lets the gender differentiation be of very little consequence? How does poetry communicate? Is this communication really different from regular language? How does all this affect the singer’s performance?

I want to make an experiment. The purpose is to experience what happens when we take the step from a regular prose statement to poetry. I borrow the sentence from the German naturalist poet Arno Holz (1863-1929) who used it for a related purpose.²¹

Der Mond steigt hinter blühenden Apfelbaumzweigen auf.
The moon rises behind blossoming apple tree branches.

We can let our imagination roam to put us into a romantic mood. A similar experience, which we have had, might come up, letting us bathe in pleasant feelings.

When we encounter this sentence in an everyday context it clearly refers to a beautiful natural spectacle.

Now we change the sentence slightly:

Hinter blühenden Apfelbaumzweigen
Steigt der Mond auf.
Behind blossoming apple tree branches
rises the moon.

We could also print it like this:

Hinter blühenden Apfelbaumzweigen
Steigt der Mond auf.
Behind blossoming apple tree branches
rises the moon.

By the waste of space on the page, we see at first sight that this sentence is not intended to be part of real life communication. Its special appearance is like a secret code, whose significance has to be learned. If we do not decode it, there is simply no difference to the regular sentence.

Only after this decoding process can we possibly know what the meaning of this new sentence is. It could sound exaggerated to call the sentence new, because the words have not changed. But their order has. This order is now part of the meaning, the words alone no longer represent everything that's there. It is imperative to understand the implications of this new dimension. How does it work together with the words?

When we change this new order back into a regular prose sentence, by writing it in one line:

Hinter blühenden Apfelbaumzweigen steigt der Mond auf

the difference to the original version is negligible. The second version just flows a bit more evenly. The core of the code is not the word order itself. The reason for the re-organization must be something that lies beyond the words and their order, and still serves a meaningful purpose. In our example it must be the fact that the sentence is now broken into two lines, by the so-called enjambment or line-break.

The two lines are of different length. The cut between them falls after the expression of place, the action is reserved for the shorter second line. Musicians should ask for the "musical" implication of this line break. Since it is not a change on the semantic level – what does it affect? The answer is simple, it affects the way the poem sounds. Poems need to sound, they want to be listened to, just like music does. Every poem, by its particular poetic style, begs us to do what musicians do best, changing notation into sound.

There is a common fundamental misconception as to what a poem's speaking/elocution/recitation/dramatic reading involves. This task is not accomplished by just somehow putting the poem's "emotional content" into sound. If we empathize, and "feel" the atmosphere and emotion of the so-called speaker or protagonist, if we manage to put the accents on the "right" words, imitate the melody and pronunciation of a native speaker, -- we are still very far away from what needs to happen.

Yes, a poem has its own poetic style. Just as it is expected from singers to be "Singing in Style" (Martha Elliott), they also have to learn how to speak and communicate the poetic text in style. How to begin this task?

It begins with the foundation of a poem, its words. Whatever is said and depicted through these words can be called the skeleton of the poem. Obviously, a skeleton is far from being a live organism. This holds true for the poem as well. The preparation for what has to be accomplished is just in its first step.

We have to fully realize how the poem is set up. This should be called its basic situation. We find it by asking the key questions for unlocking a situation: Who, what, where, when, why, how? One more question has to be added, which is significant for many poems: to whom or to what is it addressed? In a poetic text these questions usually cannot all be answered. In this case, we leave them open, and refrain from guessing or inventing. A ground rule for dealing with a poem is: only what is directly or indirectly in the words, is important and part of it. Information, which is missing, was left out by the poet for a reason. It does not contribute to the whole. Next we have to realize that a poem does not strive to have or be a message. Instead, a poem has this basic situation, which, most of the time, evolves, develops, and progresses. In this way, the poem creates a semblance of action. We have to make sure to understand this path of progression in every detail before going further. This is also the appropriate time to look over all the findings and ask the central question: what do the different aspects tell about the principal tone of the poem?

Whenever performers deal with poems they should always keep sight of their ultimate goal: to establish the tone-personality of each individual text. I dealt with this important aspect of textual work already in my feature "Emotion in Song." Once the basic situation and progression are determined, the "tonic keynote" of the poem, its main personality traits, if it were, have become clear. With growing experience, the focus on the poetic sound, down to the small details, should become second nature for the performers. With this focus they hold the master key to the poem and to the music in their hand.

Thus far, the task of approaching a poetic text has not been uniquely "poetry specific." We deal and proceed in a comparable fashion with an operatic text too. But once we are clear about a text's progression, opera and Lied go different, and in many respects, opposite ways. An opera uses all the theatrical means to bring its story to life; life meaning the three dimensional illusion of the theatrical stage. The singer actors transform their music into "language," which expresses their character and their situation.

Poetry creates its life not by stagecraft and characters, but within the language itself. It uses a system of poetic notation. Performing artists must learn to understand and read "the notes" of a poem. These "notes" are created by poetic devices, like sentence, sentence structure, punctuation, stanza, line, line break, meter, rhythm, rhyme, images, symbols, comparisons, metaphors and many others. These devices change regular language into a "musical" score. The score will tell the performers what choices and options they have when they put the poem into sound. Some solid basic knowledge, good ears, courage to experiment, experience and artistic intuition will teach singers and pianists all they need.

Maybe, this "musical" concept of poetry feels unfamiliar and awkward, and is therefore a bit unsettling. In daily communication everyone is so totally focused on meaning and message that words have become just abstract concepts and signs, and can easily be replaced by others, which signal the same message. But in poetry, as we have learned, this replacement is unthinkable. Instead, poetry "composes" or builds its "music" out of the existing language, using this language differently. The language transformation is accomplished by poetic devices, which create a "musical" score, the poem.

An example from the treasure chest of poetic devices, which contributes to this transformation from daily speech into poetry, is the line break. It does not help much to just acknowledge its existence, unless we can determine its function. How does the fact that a sentence in a poem goes beyond a single line affect this poem? In what respect is it meaningful poetic notation?

Let us first establish what a line break does to a text, and then ask for its meaning in concrete examples.

Imagine, you approach an intersection and see a yield sign. What do you do? You advance with caution, slowing down some. There is no rule to generally say how much. It depends on many factors: the type of streets which meet, the street you are on, the amount of traffic, the time of day or night, the weather, the car you drive, your driving experience and style, the mood you are in. All this and more decides about the way you drive onto the intersection, behave when you are on it, and the way you leave it.

Think of this analogy when, in speaking, you approach the line-break. There are as many possibilities here as there are on the intersection.

Driving may not be the most pleasant analogy for many people. But nearly everyone probably liked to play in a brook as a child. It is a favorite and fascinating endeavor to try to overcome the water current by building a little dam. Of course, it never quite works, but there usually is a result nevertheless. For a tiny moment, the current seems to slow down to only speed up afterwards. I saw this spectacle repeated on a grand scale in the river Mur in the city of Graz, Austria. The city fathers and mothers decided to build a river walk, and wanted to make the river look even wilder than it already does. They lodged large boulders into the river, which affect the current in a most picturesque way. Slow and fast movement become so intermingled that it is impossible to say what is taking place at any given moment. This is very similar to what happens at almost any line-break. It is by no means a simple stop in the flow of the sentence, it is a dynamic balance of two principles: the sentence, which is broken up, wants to go on, the line puts up resistance, and wants to be acknowledged in its organizing function too.

The communicating artist has to mediate between these two contradicting principles, and do so in accurate style. What would that mean for our example?

Hinter blühenden Apfelbaumzweigen
Steigt der Mond auf.

There is no simple right and wrong here. I personally hear the “effect” of this line-break in this way: the rather fast and irregular movement of the first line comes to a fairly abrupt stop and is transformed into a regular slower and heavier progression. The sentence finds its completion on “Mond,” this final weighty accent seems to create the moon for our senses: we see this big lucid round, and sensually feel its glorious appearance. The way in which this line-break governs the sentence leaves for me no room for doubt: I experience a rising full moon! My interpretation will, of course, be reflected in the way I speak this sentence. If it were a song, I am reasonably sure that

the music would point in some way into the same direction. If it didn't, my challenge is to find out what it wants to express.

Underlying the two lines, which embrace one single sentence, is the characteristic rising and falling, up and down arching movement, which characterizes every German sentence.²² There is no German spoken without this movement. The American speech builds much less of an arch, its rhythmic- melodic character could be described as short waved and broken up.

The German sentence has the peak or climax of its arch at the place where the movement turns from upwards to downwards. So the climax is simultaneously the turning point of the sentence, where the rhythmic-melodic movement changes from ascent to descent. At or near the end, the sentence has its low point, which always carries the most weight and the main emphasis of the whole sentence.

For our example this means: The peak and turning point of the sentence is on "Apfelbaumzweigen," the main emphasis lies on "Mond." The break between these two parts articulates their functions in the sentence: the first, ascending, branch awakens our curiosity, the second, descending one, gains the character of an answer. Since it is also shorter than the first line, it is consequently slower and weightier, because our innate need for harmony will always try to balance the difference in length. This difference in line length is extensively used in newer poetry.

The rising and falling of the sentence and its connection with the lines and stanzas of a poem are not the only rhythmic-melodic movements, which need to be watched and realized in sound. There are small movements within the lines too. We mostly think of them in metric terms. As for example the iambic meter, xX (unstressed, stressed), and its opposite, the trochaic meter, Xx (stressed, unstressed), or the meter, which spans three syllables, the dactylic meter, Xxx (stressed, unstressed, unstressed). The dactyl with its three syllables, oftentimes appears together in one line with a two syllable meter, iambic or trochaic, as it does in the first line of our text:

Hinter blühenden Apfelbaumzweigen

Xx / Xxx / Xxx / Xx /

This "mixture" takes away from the strict regularity of the inner-line movement. In our line it creates, very appropriately, an uneven, zigzagged motion. The "unregulated," real appearance of apple tree branches could not be transformed into sound any better.

The second line

steigt der Mond auf

Xx/ Xx/

has a very different rhythmic appearance: it has a consonant motion. The fact that the two metrically unstressed syllables fall on two words of considerable weight, "der" and "auf", furthers

the calm and dignified rhythmic character even more by minimizing the difference between stressed and unstressed syllables.

These contrasting rhythmic qualities of the two lines transform the description of the event into the event itself. By the “simple” merging of several layers of rhythmic movement the words, literally, sing a different tune! They materialize and are what they say. The rhythmic movement is the poetic breath of life, all other poetic devices contribute to it in some direct or indirect fashion and are subservient to it.

We experience how the mighty moon rises. In speaking and hearing these two lines, we are involved in this spectacle with all our senses. From the crisscrossing, delicate movement of the blossoming apple tree branches we are led to focus on the celestial wonder of the moon.

The memory of our own experience of something similar pales. It just provides the fuel for understanding the poetic phenomenon. Had we never seen a rising full moon or read a description of it, had we never seen blossoming apple tree branches, we could not experience the poetic two-liner.

In speaking or hearing the two-liner we feel and experience something brand-new and unique, we experience it now. It is fully appropriate to call this lyric experience the poetic "Power of Now!"²³

Let us have a look at “Du bist wie eine Blume”, and experience how Heinrich Heine masterfully uses the line break:

Du bist wie eine Blume,
So hold und schön und rein;
Ich schau dich an, und Wehmut
Schleicht mir ins Herz hinein.

Mir ist, als ob ich die Hände
Aufs Haupt dir legen sollt,
Betend, dass Gott dich erhalte
So rein und schön und hold.

You are like a flower,
so sweet and fair and pure;
I look at you, and melancholy
steals into my heart.

I feel as if I should lay
my hands upon your head,
praying that God may keep you
so pure and fair and sweet.

First we look at line three and four of the first stanza. They are formed by one, easily to grasp sentence: Ich schau dich an, und Wehmut schleicht mir ins Herz hinein. The sentence comes in two parts, which are clearly separated by “und:” two actions, first the look, and then the reaction of the person who looks. These two different acts offer themselves for two different lines. Yet Heine, agreeably one of the most splendid lyricists of all time, disappoints and surprises us:

Ich schau dich an, und Wehmut
Schleicht mir ins Herz hinein.

I look at you, and melancholy
steals into my heart.

What is the reason for such a drastic cutting action in a sentence, which speaks of care and melancholy? In the prose sentence the building, ascending branch and the resolving, descending one conform fully with the two parts of the sentence. Rhythmically everything is totally “normal,” no striking in any way. This changes in the poetic version. Here the climax is reached only in “Wehmut.” The “caesura,” the little break after “an,” indicates that the gaze has been raised to meet the other person’s eyes. This does not stop the upward move of the sentence. At the line break, it is forced to increased energy flow and consequent accentuation. This makes “Wehmut,” melancholy, stand out. We feel it flooding us. In an almost physical way melancholy steals into the last corners of our heart, as the descending sentence finds its main weight and accent in “Herz” in the last line. Masterful and meaningful music, indeed.

The continuation of the poem in the second stanza establishes a similar rhythmic movement, to express a very distinct human gesture:

Mir ist, als ob ich die Hände
Aufs Haupt dir legen sollt...

I feel as if I should lay
my hands upon your head....

The sentence raises to “Hände”, giving us the physical sense of this lifting gesture. The build-up is much weaker than in the first example however, it is more a carefully accelerated flow into the next line: the hands are gently placed on the other person’s head. The fact that the sentence does not come to rest in this second line, but goes on to further building in the following third line, shows clearly that the gesture was not the final purpose, but only preparation, outward sign for the ensuing prayer. The sentence finds its climax in the word “betend,” and starts to resolve from there.

...

Betend, dass Gott dich erhalte,
So rein und schön und hold.

...

praying that God may keep you
so pure, and fair and sweet.

In “betend” we encounter another fascinating rhythmical phenomenon. The metrically accented syllable falls on “-tend”, which does not make sense. Yet, the word-accent has to be on “be-“. However, the “laws” of poetic writing require that each rhythmic layer has to be given its own right, and not be eradicated for another one. Each type of accent must be respected. To do otherwise would destroy the delicate weave of the poetic sound. The poetic fabric could not exist without this “equality” principle. So - what is to do? “Betend” must get two finely weighted, balanced accents. Even though they are of different origin, they work perfectly together. They create a besieging prayer.

To the untrained ear this may sound surprisingly complex and very close to the musical fabric. Well, it is. What interpreters usually ascribe to the piano part of the song, the ability to express the exact qualities of a natural phenomenon or action, turns out to be one of the key qualities of the poetic text itself. A poem individualizes everything it presents, and thus, makes it absolutely unique. This is, in fact, what makes a text into a poem. A poem has so much more and so much deeper things to say than its words alone could ever indicate!

It is a fascinating and spellbinding experience, for the speaker/singer as well as for the listener, how the poetic devices change the words as they are spoken and heard. The words lose their usual daily-speech character; they become energetically charged, taking on a quasi “bodily” existence. They are heard in new ways; they can be felt, seen, and smelled, and tasted.

It is highly remarkable that it all happens without the conscious effort of the speaker. It happens when the poetic devices are understood and treated as notation, so they fulfill their function. This “Musical Transformation of Language”, or MTL for short, lets the words sing and the music speak.

Twice this was noticed. We heard from the Schubertian Leopold Sonnleithner and the singer Elisabeth Schwarzkopf the exact same words, once addressed to the listener, once to the performer:

The listener must have a feeling for the poems...
You have to have a feeling for poetry...

Hardly anyone would want to say something like this about listener and performer of opera. Rather we may say: you need a keen sense for dramatic character and situation. Opera deals with a lot of very strong passions and desires, much more extreme than poetry. And yet, the word “feeling”

would not easily show up in our demands on performer and listener of opera. What is needed from them is not determined by the emotional content of the performed works, but by their mode of presentation, dramatic versus lyrical.

Clearly, poetry is not just a message to be conveyed, that is a task for rhetoric and other prose statements of various kinds; it is not a mini-piece for theatrical performance, there are small and large scale forms for that; it is not a story to be told, that is more efficiently done in narrative prose and ballads. Poetry is a unique genre all its own. I am convinced that the Lied composers and early performers understood this. For Schubert especially, but also for the other Lied composers, it was so much easier to recognize and realize the true nature and potential of this poetry than for all of us today: it was contemporary, new and exciting, different from anything that had existed before. It was full of music, full of sensuality, it was full of individual personality and glow, it was an overwhelming experience. I hardly dare to ask, how is it seen today? It is esoteric and elite writing of the highest order, it stems from a distant time, with ideas, views and problems, which do not seem to connect with ours. It lacks the attraction of story and theatrical spectacle.

This is to say that singers and Lied pianists have it harder than ever before, to find the appropriate approach for the art form Lied, and not get stuck with poor substitutions.

It is curious that particularly Schubert and Brahms are often criticized for their choice of texts. They knew much better, what made a “good,” i.e. useable poem for them because their texts were mostly by contemporaries and friends. They were fascinated by the newly discovered power of poetic language, which could make any inner and outer situation come to life. This was akin to music, yet could be even expanded, deepened and heightened by composition. While poetic language had the advantage of being concrete, intense and individual, music had the advantage of being even more immediate and sensual: the perfect match of two arts, creating a third, new one, the Lied.

Does this create a one-of-a-kind communication? This question can be answered with a resounding yes! The Classical-Romantic lyric poetry, as a rule, does not want to present a character, does not want to tell a story, it creates a life-like sensual experience.

In a poem and Lied, the words assume the power of reality itself. They seem to materialize, to become three-dimensional, they become concrete and real. This is the kind of communication poem and Lied have to offer. They are the sole place, where words are more than words, where words become breathing life and gain unparalleled power and magic. If these words are reduced to a pseudo-dramatic monologue, or a story, the artistic fascination, intensity, and magic of a poem and a Lied will be lost. All attempts to infuse Lied with elements borrowed from the theater and opera, or from storytelling, rob poem and Lied of their own kind of communication.

Poetry lets the listener become part of a human experience in a very direct fashion, within language itself. It does not create a dramatic situation, which is unfolding between dramatic characters. It does not create a storyline, which develops in a sequence of events. Comparing the expressive power of poetic language to these other modes of presentation, one could call their ways of communication a complicated detour.

The prominent German literary historian and writer Max Kommerell (1902-1944) has defined a poem as “a kind of primal speech within the existing language.”²⁴ His concept is in many ways related to what I have called MTL, the Musical Transformation of Language. Primal speech is the individual “voice” of a poem, which is found in the way it is written, its particular style. Expressed in terms of a musical composition, it should be said that every poem has its own score, just like every piece of music does.

This voice of a poem is not the (divined) voice of its author. The same holds true, of course, for the music. The author’s and the composer’s “voices” are replaced and artistically preserved in the poem and the composition. These voices become real and “personal” when they sound through the mouth or fingers of the performing artists. This is exactly the meaning of the Latin word “per-sonare,” to sound through an individual person. The poem’s and the composition’s voices gain a “personality” in the process. The performing artists do not just express themselves, but give their voice and individuality to the poem and its composition. The performance is always the convincing encounter and symbiosis of these voices: poem, composition and performers.

Consequently, it is a bit naive, and less than professional in my opinion, to approach a poem with the notion that the way it sounds could be anything that makes it “effective.” Hard to imagine, anybody went about their music in a comparable manner!

In the beginning of this feature I stated that poetic communication is confined to the world of artistic expression, and that there is no link to the language that makes up daily communication. This is true as long as one tries to go the way from regular language to poetry. It is false for the opposite direction, “poetry” did invade daily life. One sector of it, curiously, the most aggressively materialistic aspect of society, Advertisement, takes over a hefty dose of poetic communication.²⁵ Advertisement wants to “transform” everyone into ever ready consumers. I leave it to my readers, to listen around in advertising to hear all the assonances, the rhymes, the pleasantly flowing repetitious rhythms, which want to flatter our ears and pry open our purses by means of our innate quest for balance, harmony and beauty. There is no doubt, which business sector wins the prize for “poetic transformation” of reality. The winner is the world of beauty and hair. It is a treasure chest of fantastic inventiveness. No wonder: transformation is their business!

If the Lied community has problems to fully appreciate how poetry functions and communicates, they can learn from the business community: these professionals can change the public’s spending habits by the power of “poetry”. They certainly know their craft and use their insights into the mechanisms of this special kind of communication to their best advantage! They make their wares “speak,” consequently, we listen, see, smell, taste and feel – and buy.

It is not accidental that the compelling, almost irresistible effects of poetic speech have ancient roots of magic incantation in the literatures of Old High German, Old French and Old English. These old magic spells or incantations used forms, which we know from poetry: metrics, repetition, formulaic composition, assonances and metaphors.

Let me add one more facet of this “magic” connection. The well known word “Abracadabra,” which is used by magicians as an incantation, is not just “magical” sounding, but also has a most appropriate meaning. It expresses exactly what happens, when a poem is accurately recited or

sung. According to the renowned linguist Ephraim Goodman the word “Abracadabra” comes from the Aramaic and means: ”I will create as I speak.” This connects with Genesis 1.3: “And God said, let there be light, and there was light.” Reality materializes from words.

These short references must suffice in this connection. They may give an idea of the dimension, which reverberates, when dealing with poetic communication. Abracadabra: I will create as I speak. For the poet it means, I will create a reality for the senses as I write my poem. For the performing artist it means, I give this potential sensual reality my individual voice and create life.

I want to close with a stunning documentation about Hugo Wolf’s way of reciting, composing, and singing. Here is said much of what has been discussed, in a nutshell. The first two documents were written by Hermann Bahr, a man of the theater and author of plays and insightful essays on art and friend of Hugo Wolf in the 1880s:

Never in my life have I heard again such recitation. It cannot be described. I can only say this: when Hugo Wolf spoke, the words took on an incredible truth; they materialized. Indeed, we had the impression as if Wolf’s own body was suddenly transformed into the flesh of the words; as if the hands ... were disembodied from the human being and now were part of the words we were hearing. He had transformed his whole being into the words of the poet. The words had taken his place.

For Bahr this transformation is evident in Wolf’s songs:

I had heard nothing of Wolf for years until his Goethe Lieder were published. These struck me to my deepest core. Then I suddenly remembered. Yes, it was the same phenomenon! ... The music he had written could not have been added to the texts. It was the natural music of the verses. We must have simply possessed bad ears, otherwise we would have heard it before: for it was the natural music of these poetic verses. The music Wolf composed must have been in and with them, but Wolf’s songs made it truly audible.²⁶

These contemporary accounts may explain a third account, showing why Hugo Wolf’s singing of his own songs was, despite his “poor” voice, so incomparably impressive:

With his poor, almost toneless voice, he was able to hold his hearers spellbound. None that heard him ever forgot the experience, or even heard any performance comparable in intensity from any trained singer.²⁷

All of us certainly are not Hugo Wolfs, but what we can do, is go in his direction and take his intensity and communicative prowess as a model for our own work and artistic communication. Then we might also earn the same kind of applause he received for his performances at the Wagner Verein in Vienna. He writes to Josef Strasser on March 23, 1888: "On an evening when I performed my latest songs, I made the Wagner Verein completely crazy from enthusiasm. . . I am celebrated there like a king."²⁸

Who would not enjoy a reception like this?

Footnotes:

1. In this feature I deal with "Lied" specifically, not with "Melodie" or "Art Song." It is left to the readers to decide whether they consider what is appropriate for Lieder to also be applicable to Art Song in general.
2. "Miami Herald" May 4, 2007
3. Studs Terkel, "And they all sang" New York, 2005, p. 278
4. Terkel, p. 34
5. Martha Elliott, "Singing in Style" Yale UP 2006, p. 166
6. "Der Standard" August 7, 2007
7. Terkel, p. 46
8. Otto Erich Deutsch, "Schubert: Memoirs by his friends" New York, 1958, pp. 116/117
9. Deutsch, p. 117
10. Deutsch, p. 337
11. Marjorie Wing Hirsch, "Schubert's Dramatic Lieder" Paperback, 2009

12. Hirsch, p. 2

13. It cannot be warned strictly enough of the confusion between so called “dramatic elements,” like a dialogue or presentation in the grammatical form of the first person, and “dramatic structure,” which is always geared for impersonation and theatrical presentation. The much used expression “dramatic reading” of poems is very questionable, to say the least. It puts the theatrical mold on texts, which require a completely different approach and treatment. The widespread use of the word “dramatic” implies that there is only this one way to give life to texts.

14. Deutsch, p. 338

15. Deutsch, p. 140

16. Walther Dürr, “Virtuosität und Interpretation. Schubert-Lieder ausgeziert?” in: APCS Bulletin, September 2000, Nr. 48, p. 3

17. Deutsch, p. 364

18. Deutsch, p. 337

19. J. von Spaun, in: Deutsch, p. 140

20. Quoted by Johann Vesque von Püttlingen, in: Deutsch, p. 216

21. Arno Holz, “Revolution der Lyrik” Berlin, 1899, p. 45

22. My understanding of rhythmic-melodic phenomena is broadly based on the research of Fritz Lockemann. See his books “Der Rhythmus des deutschen Verses” München, 1960 and “Das Gedicht und seine Klanggestalt” Emsdetten, 1952

23. Eckhart Tolle, “The Power of Now” Paperback, 2004

24. Max Kommerell, “Gedanken über Gedichte” Frankfurt, 1943, p. 38

25. See the famous essay of Leo Spitzer, “American Advertising explained as Popular Art” in: “Essays on English and American Literature” ed. Anna Hatcher, Princeton, 1962

26. Hermann Bahr, “Gesammelte Aufsätze über Hugo Wolf” Berlin, 1898

27. Frank Walker, “Hugo Wolf” Princeton Paperback, 1992, p. 208

28. Walker, p. 208