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## Words Make Music Too: The German Lied

**by Wolfgang Lockemann**

Whether you're in a studio or master class, whether you're a beginning or accomplished singer, when it comes to Lieder, the questions—more often than not—are the same: What is the Lied about? Who is singing?

The answers, in my opinion, should be: I am singing—and as far as the poem is concerned, the poem is not “about,” the poem just is.

What are poems, most of the time, about? It's somewhat embarrassing to admit: they are about something that everybody knows anyway. Poems are about love's joys and pains, other general aspects of the human experience, and nature from every imaginable angle.

Do singers feel a need to tell “the poem” in their own words, garnished with details they feel might be fitting? Does it feel good and productive to help the poem's meaning along that way?

Singers like to change the poem into a story. When they succeed to create so much semblance of character and action as to change the Lied into a mini operatic aria, well, that means the poem is finally expressive enough to be quite singable.

The modest lines of the poet many times seem to be just the skeleton for which singers provide the flesh.

Perhaps we are allowed to ask: Doesn't this method involve a little too much “productivity” for a “reproductive” artist? After all, you are neither the poet nor the composer—you are the singer.

The singer has the all-important task of bringing the song to life. The searching artist should not be tempted to destroy the very roots of the song. The song grew out of the poem, out of a few poetic lines, not out of a thought, not out of an invented story, not out of a character, as in opera.

How did we ever get the idea that composers such as Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Wolf, Mahler, Strauss, and scores of others would create and develop an art form out of word material that somehow we singers have to complete and finish? A little more consideration and modesty toward the poet and his creation would, at least according to my own artistic belief system, be valuable and appropriate.

We, as individuals, want to be taken for what we are. Why not extend this same, wonderful courtesy to the individual poem? I think we have forgotten how to take these poems for what they are. We have to relearn this fitting approach.

It might be a good idea to listen to the composers themselves, and look at what they did when choosing the texts for their songs. The report of Schubert's friend, Joseph von Spaun, about the creation of “*Erlkönig*” is well known: “We found Schubert all aglow, reading ‘Erlkönig’ aloud from a book,” wrote Spaun about the day of Nov. 16, 1815. “Several times he went back and forth with the book. Suddenly, he sat down, and in the shortest possible time the wonderful ballad was written on paper.”

Interestingly enough, we hear the same story about the creative process of Hugo Wolf, who would recite a poem repeatedly until the composition just started coming to him. This tells us that this approach is not a purely individual phenomenon, but the result of a unique historical situation. This new artistic process became prevalent at a time when the musical and emotional power of Classical-Romantic poetry from the end of the 18th century through the 19th century found a strong creative

echo in many composers. The main creative principle for the Lied from Schubert onward was not the development of customary musical structures, but the new poetry that, with its individual poetic power, inspired new relationships of word and music.

When Hugo Wolf, half a century after Schubert, was possessed the "poetic music," he was not the first composer who used this approach. Already, during the time of the origin of the Lied and shortly before Schubert, Goethe's friend and favorite composer, Carl Friedrich Zelter (1758-1832), wrote: "Whenever I want to compose a poem, the first thing I do is try to understand the literal meaning of the words and make the situation alive for myself. Then I read it aloud until I know it by heart, and in this way, while reciting it repeatedly, the melody comes by itself."

The musical quality of poetry, which Goethe created with his personally felt poems, helped bring the art form of the Lied into existence. This "poetic music" nourished the music of the art song.

Clearly, it is not the intention of a Lied composer to combine two art forms and thus establish an ideal of "fusion," nor to substitute one for the other. We should speak instead of artistic balance, or of dialogue, of encounter. This means freedom for historical development: Every composer has a different connection between word and music.

Not everyone wants the close mirroring of poem and composition that Hugo Wolf, for example, strives for. To speak of the union of words and music as the ideal accomplishment for a Lieder singer is unfair to the singing artist, to the poem, and to its composition. Instead, we should realize that for every composer, every composition, every singer, there is an ever-new and never-ending attempt to create a balance, harmonious or otherwise, of words and music.

To cast this into a pseudo-mathematical formula: Lied=Art<sup>2</sup>. Or to put it as an image: Lied is a tree that grows from a seed, develops roots, then grows a trunk, and branches that hold leaves or needles.

Think of what happens when you separate leaves from branches, branches from the trunk, the trunk from its roots. Yes, we can admire and enjoy every single part, and can be content with that—but we don't have the tree, the living organism anymore. Only if we bear in mind that every part equally contributes to the whole, only if we understand its function and interdependence, can we deal with a tree in an appropriate fashion.

What does all this mean for the singer's practical approach?

Most of all, it means singers must know and use the poem as a poem, not merely as the text of the song. It should be self-evident that the poem should be used in its original poetic form, the way the composer read it.

Unfortunately, most books with translations of the art songs print them in prose. You cannot even find the lesser-known Lieder, in their poetic form, in any of the many translation books. Yet this form is the source of direct inspiration for the composers' music. Singers usually deal only with texts, not with poems! For Lieder, particularly those from Schubert to Strauss, this is a severe shortcoming.

A Lied is a partnership of poet and composer. Its performance is a partnership of singer and pianist. It is just as essential that pianists hear the "poetic music" as it is for singers.

When it comes to the recognition of the poetic text as the root and driving force of the music, there is a remarkable gap between the approaches of composers and interpreters. The words could and should be the guiding posts that give the direction to the singer. When we use them this way, we can, slowly but surely, recognize what it is that became the song's foundation. We can discover the composer as the first interpreter of the poem, and reach a new level of understanding that bears directly on our performance.

Through practice, by reading and reciting aloud, the poetic sound becomes anchored within us. It will, without force, in a most spontaneous and natural way, grow together with and into the music, and give it the concrete substance that the Lied needs for a life-filled performance.

It is all too obvious that singers cannot realize this approach by hearing about it, or by following descriptions. To grasp the power of the method, to sense the joy of true insight, in the beginning learning stages you should experience the excitement of communication, of exchanging what is being observed, of experimenting with the poetic sound, of expressing loudly whatever has been recognized. So, for what follows, just imagine one of those happy, lively class situations, as we look at Eichendorff/Schumann's "Mondnacht," from *Liederkreis Op. 39, No. 5*.

The principal rule for any discussion of a poem is this: Hold on to the simple, commonsense possibilities. The poetry of the period in question is safely connected to concepts of real-life experience. The poems always "make sense"; they are not weird. Verify any interpretive idea through the loudly spoken poetic word. If it sounds forced and lacks simplicity, throw your idea out, fast. If you can't express the idea in sound, it's either off track, or not for you at this time. Let it go.

Don't forget: Limitations to your own interpretive possibilities mean freedom of expression for what is left. The "speaking test" is astoundingly revealing and reliable. Check everything you come up with this way. Every idea has to blend in naturally, and complete the other musical aspects of the poem.

If you follow this path faithfully, the textual work leads directly into the heart of the composition. It can become a treasure chest for singers and pianists.

Background information about the poem supports your understanding, but does not replace it. Obviously, it is easier to bring information to the poem from the outside than to let the poem speak for itself. The poem seems truly to be a "foreign" language!

The "poetic music" is not dictated by impressive effects, but by a variety of structural elements out of which a poem is made. To say it again: you must use the poetic text in its original form, not as it appears in the music, or in a written-out prose version. It is the only way to recognize the structure. Stanzas, lines, sentences, and other elements build the framework for the "poetic music," and they play a big role for the composition and performance of the song. Only guided practice and experience can bring the finely tuned ears necessary.

*Es war, als hätt' der Himmel  
Die Erde still geküsst,  
Dass sie im Blütenschimmer  
Von ihm nun träumen muesst'.*

It was as though the sky  
had softly kissed the earth  
so that she, in gleaming blossoms  
had now to dream of him.

The opening: *Es war, als hätt' der Himmel*, "It was as though," tells us a lot about the world we are going to enter. It sets the tone. There is something that cannot be named, that can only be indirectly grasped: "It was as though ..." Thus prepared, the grand image of the kiss between heaven and earth follows, the result being the "*Blütenschimmer*," the gleaming blossoms. That radiance is earth's longing dream for heaven. The connection of the two spheres, initiated by heaven, has been made.

The second stanza seems to sink back into one of those tiring, commonplace, "romantic" descriptions:

*Die Luft ging durch die Felder,  
Die Ähren wogten sacht,  
Es rauschten leis die Wälder,  
So sternklar war die Nacht.*

The breeze ran through the fields,  
The grains gently swayed,  
The woods rustled softly,  
The night was so bright with stars.

What a letdown from Stanza 1 this seems to be! What does the second stanza have to do with the grandiose image of the kiss? It is crucial that singers recognize and understand transitions, and follow the ways of how a poem gets from one thing to the other. These transitions make performing a rewarding adventure.

A poem is never "all the same." Yes, most of the time, it has no action, but—and this "but" is decisive—it has a semblance of action. Something unfolds, something develops, something connects, something is "happening." How exciting this can be! Our artistic liberty is always guided by the poem and its "music." We shouldn't just improvise on the theme of the poem and follow the whims of our free-running imagination. We would not dream of performing the composition that way, and we should not treat its root, the poem, with any less respect and care.

What then is the bridge from Stanza 1 to Stanza 2? For sure, the transition seems to be a letdown, because the new stanza starts far away from sky and heaven, on the fields! While the first stanza takes the direction from heaven to earth, the second stanza goes the opposite way. Slowly but surely, it raises us from breezy fields to swaying grains, to rustling woods, into the starlit sky.

And here, as the third stanza continues, our soul unfolds her wings. The poem ends as it started, with an "as though," but this time, the words do not open the curtain for the marvel of the union of heaven and earth. On the contrary, they close it, by making the new dimension truly ours. It is "home":

*Und meine Seele spannte  
Weit ihre Flügel aus,  
Flog durch die stillen Lande,  
Als flöge sie nach Haus.*

And my soul spread  
wide her wings,  
Flew through the silent lands  
as though she was flying home.

As we have gained a basic idea of how this poem unfolds, we have to learn how to coordinate the three stanzas. How do we have to start out to reach each step of our journey convincingly? How do we build? How do we expand? How do we move and find rest in the new dimension of our soul's home?

Let's think back on the second stanza. Can you hear how it starts at the bottom, how each line is building on the one before, lifting you and me a step further upwards? It lifts upwards so the third stanza can continue with: *Und meine Seele spannte / Weit ihre Flügel aus*, "And my soul spread / wide her wings." All this has to fit together well, calling for artistic economy.

I believe you can imagine how it sounds. You can probably hear it—but can you do it? Can we, as listeners, experience it together with you? There is a lot of big and small movement, lots of dynamics. When you have learned to do this in the poetic language, it will open up Schumann's music for you—and it will carry it, because he heard it too, and wrote the song based on what he heard.

The most essential realization for enjoying and singing Lieder is approaching them in a way that relates to what the composers did: taking the poems as the root and driving force for the compositions. We, as singers and Lied pianists, should work earnestly from words to music, rather than from music to words. This difference is a major one, as anyone who has experienced it will testify.

"Yes, of course," everyone says, "my work starts with the words." But most of the time, this avowal doesn't really hold. The textual approach is far more than translation, far more than just the meaning of the words, far more than just proper pronunciation and accentuation of what some naively call "important" words. And this textual work is just as essential for the native speaker as it is for the singer who is still struggling with the German language.

The true approach from words to music is, understandably enough, not the way most musicians proceed. When singers follow this path, however, it brings a whole new dimension to their singing. It brings depth and reality to the song—and life, fascination, and inspiration to the singer.

How could we, as artists, on any level, work more productively, than by truly enjoying what we are doing, and loving every step of the way, as we prepare, practice, and perform!

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