SONG
THE CONSUMMATE SYNTHESIS OF POETRY, MUSIC,
AND THE HUMAN VOICE

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By

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ABSTRACT

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Aside from being synonymous with Art Song and its various permutations (i.e. Lied, Chanson, Canzona, Canción), poetry, music and the human voice can all be thought of as agents of communication or as vestibules that lead emotions, thoughts, and expression from the mind to the heart and soul. For instance, music is often thought of as a medium that expresses or communicates that which words cannot. Inversely, poetry can be seen as a medium that is so dense with raw emotion that only a language that has been distilled to its purest extract can realize a thought or emotion and its harmoniously clad beauty. The human voice can be narrowed down to its basest function, which is a pattern of inflectional sounds used to communicate mundane and minutil quotidian occurrences. However, the human voice is expressed by more than just sound; it is expressed by one’s experiences, one’s body interacting with inanimate objects such as musical instruments, a
block of clay, or a pen. In other words, the human voice and everything it entails is any raw expression that emanates from the human body, soul, and mind. Therefore, Art Song can be thought of as sheer expression for it marries three elements that exude expression, in myriad ways.
Introduction

Art songs are more than just songs; they are more than music and lyrics and more than what is written on the page. On a rudimentary level, a good art song should possess high quality poetry that is then set to high quality music that consequently employs a singer with a high quality voice and an accompaniment (played either by a pianist or orchestra) of equal quality. Therefore, when an art song or group of art songs are performed the singer must not only hold true the poet’s and composer’s original interpretation and experience, he or she must also internalize it and make them both his or hers. The performer must allow his or her voice to permeate through the music; both in terms of sound production and intellectual and emotional understanding. By doing so, the singer and accompanist are falling in line with the example first set by the poet and then by the composer of allowing their individual voices to infiltrate the work.

This phenomenon can be observed in all of the songs that form part of this thesis. As a whole, these songs allow the poet’s voice to shine through the layers of music. As the poets were inspired by life, similarly the composers were inspired by the poets’ words. These composers distinguished these poems after they had thoroughly read and understood them and were thoroughly moved by them. Once this indivisible synergy was created, the singer and accompanist became indentured to not only sing and play these works of art with the upmost artistry, but to bring forth the history and passion, the emotion and expression in the language, and their individual voices along with those of the poets and the composers as well. For a song is sculpted by an aggregate of voices, articulated by the agency of varying manifestations, that en masse form a creation that so easily allows one to appreciate and be moved by it.
Georg Friedrich Händel: Songs of Imprisonment, Parental Burden, and Fate’s Unrelenting Unpredictability

Although Georg Friedrich Händel technically never wrote art songs, his arias from both opera and oratorio have become so well-known that these often stand alone as individual works of art due to the amount of emotion and expression encompassed therein. Like art songs, Händel’s arias describe specific emotions that take place in specific moments usually involving the inner struggles of the character. In the case of *Si tra i ceppi* (Yes even in chains), which is an aria from the opera *Berenice*, an imprisoned man declares that neither the bonds of chains nor death will extinguish his burning passion for life and freedom. The form of the aria is ABA\(^1\) or *Da capo* and it features a long orchestral introduction which allows the character to hear the central melodic theme that also forms part of his melodic line.

*How willing my paternal love* is originally from the oratorio *Samson* and features Samson’s father bemoaning the fact that his son is blind to his unconditional love and feels the burden of pain that comes with losing a child. This aria foreshadows Samson’s eminent fate at the hands of Delilah. Once again, this aria also contains a long orchestral introduction that provides a berceuse atmosphere as the emotive text suggest that when it comes to filial care, a parent is always blind to his or her child’s age or condition.

Similar to the aforementioned arias, *Cangìò d’aspetto* (Changed Aspect), which originates from the opera *Admeto*, features another type of prisoner as well; however, instead of being burdened by chains or filial care, this character is captive to fate’s cruel unpredictability and unrelenting inconstancy. Similar to *Si tra i ceppi*, this aria possesses a large orchestral introduction and is also a *Da capo* aria which allows the singer to embellish the second statement of the A section.
Hugo Wolf: Unrequited, Innocent, Unbeknownst, Filial, and Erotic Love

In the pantheon of art song, no other language can match the vast array of songs produced by German speaking composers. Much of that credit is due to the prolificacy of Franz Schubert, who wrote over 600 art songs in his lifetime.¹ Even though Schubert did not invent German art songs or Lieder, he revolutionized the way they were composed and changed the way many composers would view them and incorporate them into their compositional cannons. Some of Schubert’s most revolutionary developments in Lieder were his canorous melodies, thorough development of them, and his onomatopoeic and picturesque piano accompaniments. The latter set a standard for every subsequent Lieder composer to create an accompaniment that not only performed the task its name denoted, but that also created an atmospheric environment in which it and the singer could harmoniously interplay, serve as a foreground for the singer’s sung narrative, and rapturously envelope the listener.

Besides Schubert, I believe that only a composer named Hugo Wolf has been able to not only uphold the true essence of the Lied (sing. of Lieder), but embellish it and take it to new heights. Wolf accomplishes this by making the poetry the most important specimen in the trinity of art song and by creating independence in the previously interdependent relationship between the piano and voice.² Building on Schubert’s varicolored accompaniments, Wolf’s accompaniments contain a larger fraction of the song’s overall narrative. These accompaniments fulfill the basic functions a rudimentary Lied accompaniment must achieve, while at the same time conjuring imagery that the singer’s melody alone cannot. The piano accompaniment and vocal melody will at times

share a dualistic relationship in which they each have their own rhythmic movement and occasionally fragmented harmonic unity. This is best observed when the piano accompaniment does not share common notes with the singer’s melodic line.

In the song Die Nacht (The Night), Wolf uses Joseph Eichendorff’s poetry to create a nocturnal atmosphere reminiscent of a Chopin Nocturne. The lengthy piano introduction weaves and flows creating the imagery of a still gentle pool of water kissed by the warm night air and touched only by the reflection of the stars. The singer’s melody is as delicate as the piano’s and is sung softly as to not wake up those that sleep or disturb the peaceful silence that solely listens to the sobbing of a jilted and tortured soul.

In Der Knabe und das Immlein (The Boy and the Bee) by poet Eduard Mörike, the composer commences the piece by creating a slow, dull, and desolate landscape that he later counters when the young protagonist realizes that the bee gathering nectar lives in a beehive located at a house where his love abides. This saccharine Lied is a perfect example of Wolf’s mastery of the genre for whenever the boy is speaking; he is given dramatic and expressive legato lines. However, when the bee is speaking, it is given short phrases with wide leaps and an accompaniment that abounds in trills meant to emulate the bee’s buzzing wings.

Employing the poetry of Eichendorff once again, Wolf clads Verschwiegene Liebe (Secret Love) with a gown of night draped with a heart-breaking delicate piano accompaniment decadently cloaked with a chiaroscuro vocal melody. Conjointly, these two reveal a secret hidden only by the night. Once again, Wolf provides the pianist with an exquisite introduction and the singer with the rare opportunity to truly execute the ethereal and fabled quadruple piano (pppp) dynamic marking.
Mörike’s *Auf ein altes Bild* (Gazing Upon an Old Painting) is a fragile delicacy that is as brief as it is beautiful. This *Lied* paints the painful and bleak tale of Mary and child playing unbeknownst of the imminent danger represented by a sapling growing in the woods behind them. Like the two Eichendorff settings, this piece shares many qualities of a Nocturne even though it is described in the poetry as diurnal. The piano’s four measure introduction also serves as the piece’s accompaniment hauntingly repeating, time and time again.

The last piece, *Der Rattenfänger* (The Rat-catcher), comes from the poetry of the most beloved and renowned German writer; a man by the name of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. This piece can only be described as a rambunctious bravado-driven anthem of a man who claims to have the power to allure not only rats, weasels, and unruly children, but also young maidens and any type of woman. The piano accompaniment opens the piece by releasing a furious flurry of arpeggios that are as relentless as the honey-drizzled patter that exudes from the silver-tongued Rat-catcher. Although this song is strophic, the poetry allows the singer to emote the action contained therein. The Rat-catcher’s irresistible and magnetizing swagger is matched by the ever so memorable vocal lines and the richly lyrical harp-like piano accompaniment that emulates the harp wielded by the protagonist to lure and enchant his victims.
Maurice Ravel: Chivalric Love for a Woman, Devotion to Holiness, and Joy’s Intoxicating Rapture

*Don Quichotte à Dulcinée* (Don Quixote to Dulcinea) is a song cycle written by French composer Maurice Ravel set to the poetry of Paul Morand based on the novel by the Spanish writer Miguel de Cervantes. The cycle is comprised of three songs, each very different from the next, but simultaneously contribute to the effort of fleshing out the character of the retired and ingenious gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha by adding dimension and depth. These songs were originally written by Ravel to be used in the film “Adventures of Don Quixote” (1933), which relates the adventures of the beloved quixotic character and his sagacious companion Sancho Pança, of whom a laconic allusion is made in the first song of the cycle. Unbeknownst to Ravel, the producers of the film decided to cast their solicitude to a number of composers, who like Ravel, had no idea of the scheme. To Ravel’s misfortune and the art world’s fortune, the film’s producers decided to opt for Jacques Ibert’s Quichotte songs, thus making Ravel’s song cycle part of the art music cannon and not that of film music.

The cycle as a whole centers on the character of Don Quichotte and the text is sung in the first person from his perspective and was written for Baritone to be accompanied by orchestra. The first song, entitled *Chanson Romanesque* (Romantic Song) focuses on the amorous sentiments felt by the protagonist and his profession of endless love and unrelenting desire to please and woo the object of his affection, the fair and quintessentially virtuous Dulcinée. Don Quichotte, himself being chivalry incarnate, believes that in order to manifest his enthrallment for this immaculate woman, it is of paramount importance for him to make disparate claims such as clearing the night’s sky.

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of stars and immediately after repopulating it once again with them. This piece’s accompaniment possesses a strong Spanish flare meant to characterize Don Quichotte’s Iberian heritage.

The medial piece of the cycle, entitled *Chanson Épique* (Epic Song), is a prayer made by the brave knight to Saint Michael, also known as the Archangel Michael, and Saint George the patron saints of chivalry and knighthood. In his prayer, Don Quichotte supplicates to both of these saints to don his sword with their blessing and to watch over him and all of his endeavors. The somber accompaniment tolls a bell-like pattern that soothingly drones under the chant-like baritone melody. This ecclesiastical sereneness blossoms into a lush lyrical apex which embodies Don Quichotte’s rapturous trance which slowly wanes back to the gentle droning of the bells.

*Chanson à boire* (Drinking Song) revolves around an episode of intoxication in which Don Quichotte’s adamancy regarding how one should enjoy wine can only be quelled by the sheer enjoyment of inebriation. The man of La Mancha curses he who thinks that his intoxication will lead his soul to sorrow. Similar to *Chanson Romanesque*, this song employs music that alludes to the arduous *joie de vivre* synonymous with Spanish culture appreciated also in the “Toreador Song” from Georges Bizet’s *Carmen*. The singer is provided with bravado infused melismatic passages piqued by the piano’s mischievously rhythmic and boisterous displays of guitar-like strumming.
Gerald Finzi: To Weep or Garlands Bring, All Lovers Young, Youth’s a Stuff Will Not Endure

Written as a gift and dedicated to his teacher Ralph Vaughan Williams on his 70th birthday on October 12, 1942, Gerald Finzi musicalized an eclectic selection of airs, extracted from William Shakespeare’s plays, and entitled the collection “Let Us Garlands Bring”. Each individual air featured in Shakespeare’s various plays is not provided with any musical notation or indication. As a result, people from generation to generation have used various melodies and harmonies to color these airs and bring them to life. Interestingly enough, as opposed to the poems used by German Lieder composers, these Shakespearean airs were written with singing in mind.

*Come Away, Come Away, Death*, the opening piece in the cycle, comes from the play “The Twelfth Night; or, What You Will” written circa 1601 as entertainment for the Twelfth Night festival which marks the end of the Twelve Days of Christmas. The song takes place in the home of Orsino, the Duke of Illyria. The Duke calls for the Feste court jester and requests a song that speaks the truth in simple terms. Feste then begins this pastoral carol that serves a two-fold motive. On the one hand, the jester sings a song to alleviate Orsino’s pangs of love towards his mistress the Countess Olivia. On the other hand, the jester is also parodying his master’s bemoaned condition by singing that his master will surely die of his heartache.\(^5\) The piano accompaniment, lush and sensuous, alludes to a funeral march as an agonizingly beautiful vocal melody is sung as if gasping for air or love.

The second song, *Who is Silvia?*, whose last phrase provides the song cycle’s title, derives from the comedic play “The Two Gentlemen of Verona” produced circa 1590.

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This story features two friends Valentine and Proteus who eventually move to Milan from Verona. Having arrived to Milan first, Valentine meets and falls in love with the beautiful Silvia. Similarly, Proteus arrives to Milan, falls in love with the fair Sylvia, and betrays not only his best friend by having him captured and banished, but his girlfriend Julia from Verona. Unbeknownst of Julia’s presence outside of Silvia’s chamber, Proteus assembles a small ensemble of musicians and serenades the Duke’s daughter, thus breaking Julia’s heart. Although the poetry in the song is beautiful and uplifting, Proteus’ betrayal tinges this song with a shade of betrayal and heartache. In Finzi’s interpretation of the song, it seems as though he sets it from Proteus’s perspective as it is a cheerful fanfare that deals not with the betrayal of Valentine and Julia, but instead with his admiration and enthrallment for Silvia.

The median song in the cycle, *Fear No More the Heat o’ the Sun*, is a gentle requiem whose words not only lay to rest the dearly departed, but those that he or she left has behind. This song comes from the play “Cymbeline” and it is sung to the brave heroine Imogen, who is thought to be dead after having taken a low dose of poison, by her long lost brothers Guiderus and Arviragus. Both the piano accompaniment and the vocal melody are soft and comforting, cradling and lulling throughout. The ecclesiastical atmosphere created by this piece is felt to a greater degree near the end of it, when a chant-like melody is sung, which places the song in a suspended state of trance.

The penultimate song, *O Mistress Mine*, was also extracted from “The Twelfth Night” and the interesting part is that it is also about Countess Olivia and her dominion over the heart of those whose eye she catches. The song is again sung by Feste the court

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jester, but on this occasion it is sung to a pair of rowdy drunks by the names of Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek; the former is Olivia’s cousin and the latter a potential suitor. Feste’s song describes the nature of not only the relationship between Olivia and Sir Andrew, but that of Olivia and the men that try to court her, including Duke Orsino. Like in “Come Away, Come Away, Death”, Feste is once again parodying the situation. The jester ends the song with the disclaimer “Youth’s a stuff will not endure”, in other words, his mistress may be able to run away from all of her suitors, but she can’t from time and old age.  

This song features a frolicking piano accompaniment that is paired with a charming and light-hearted vocal melody. This playful tone is interrupted only when the singer forewarns his “mistress” and exposes her to the realities of love.

The concluding song in the cycle, entitled *It Was a Lover and His Lass*, is a light-hearted and gay carol that illustrates a pastoral life of simplicity and tranquility, peace and love, man’s ephemeral youth and nature’s eternal seasonal cycle. This song was extracted from the comedic play “As You Like It” and it is sung to a court jest named Touchstone and his fiancée, a country girl named Audrey. Much like Finzi’s setting, the song serves a light-hearted role in the play, for it is sung by two of the King’s pages to mock the pedantic and verbose Touchstone for being engaged to a simple country girl. The piece therefore possesses many folk-like qualities embodied in the piano accompaniment and vocal melody. This song, like the previous four, not only demonstrates Finzi’s compositional mastery, but his affluent knowledge of Shakespeare’s plays and the characters therein as well.

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Bibliography


