

Art Song in the Studio

Excerpted from a talk given as part of the Pedagogy Retreat
at the Vancouver International Song Institute, June 14, 2010.

This topic was inspired by a similar “coming together” of teachers and performers this past spring...a panel discussion with several performers, composers, and teachers, that was intended to focus on the vital collaborations between composers and performers that continue to shape the development of American song, as well as the innovations and challenges in today’s song recitals. However, the subject was almost immediately diverted into the issues of music education and performance curricula...it seemed that the challenges of reaching concert audiences in song recitals was not nearly as much of a concern as reaching our students with the repertoire! There were several points that stuck out; the conviction that it is essential to give young students the opportunity to sing in their native language as they also embark on foreign-language repertoire (which I agree with), and a passing but reactionary comment from one mentor who said “I don’t know why we always start with Schubert in college—it’s some of the hardest material in the literature.” Of course, even more than just “reaching” our students, it is vital that song repertoire serves many purposes in the training of young artists, everything from the beginnings of mastering their technique to stirring the depths of their expressive potential. That’s a heavy load for a genre, as well as for teaching. (By the way, I am considering both pianists’ and singers’ education here, even though song is not typically core repertoire in piano studios for undergraduates...that’s a whole other issue that I hope to address some other day!)

What I’m interested in is exploring the specific ways that art song repertoire can be a unique core of teaching beginning university students, and also the ways in which that repertoire presents larger challenges to the typical approaches of curriculum and studio

teaching. In other words, “ask not what you can do for art song, but what art song can do for your teaching.”

I am coming from a particular perspective on this...I joined the faculty at University at Buffalo in 2006, to take up a new position as teacher and coach that was created to directly complement the studio teaching in the voice department. In addition to a weekly studio class in which the voice teachers and I collaboratively work with the performing students, I see each student every week for a lesson on their repertoire. I teach what you might expect: deeper examination of song texts, deepening their experience with the languages at hand, and helping the students work collaboratively to understand the interactions of the voice and piano parts. At Buffalo, we have such a small department that there is the freedom and closeness to teach in this collaborative way, and it has been a rewarding and eye-opening position for me...I began working with some of the instrumental studios as well, because they see the benefits of this kind of collaborative teaching.

I don't want to get off the track of song, but it was illuminating to hear that, in Saturday's forum on “Teaching With Empathy,” one theme that came up was the intensely dependent and sometimes litigious environment that grows out of a teacher's studio. This is intense work we are all doing, and the intimacy of a studio is prone to extremes of feeling one cannot access in a group class situation. I was thinking about my position at Buffalo differently after that forum: in addition to providing another weekly lesson in which students can assimilate musical information, I wonder how much my colleagues take for granted the dispersal of responsibility our collaborative approach has set up. I know that I feel secure in knowing that I am always part of a whole process of the student's learning, and I depend on the life experiences that each student brings into the

studio to act as a filter and distillate for the poetic and musical experiences we encounter in repertoire.

And how do we encounter those poetic and music experiences? To each song, each student brings their own background of education, emotional makeup, and aesthetic predilections (however latent they may be at age 17). These individual qualities are at work not only in the studio, but in the core classes of an undergraduate music curriculum, and it is in the first semesters of an undergraduate degree that students are introduced to new levels of working and, hopefully, commitment to their art. It is at this stage of the game that I think song can be incredibly valuable. Not only is song inherently interdisciplinary in its origins (poetry plus music), it is also a tool for singers and pianists to set off on an artistic journey in which they mingle their instruments with a vast variety of languages, textures and timbres of sounds, and communication across generations and cultures—engendering a two-way current of connection between musical partners, their teachers, and composers in just a few pages.

It isn't that easy, of course, and the final points I'd like to make center on the challenges and possibilities we have in initiating that current of connection with our students.

First of all, we have the basic fact that standard song repertoire is a combination of poetry and music. In most undergraduate music curricula, music theory is a basic pre-requisite for any performance degree, in order to learn the functions of harmony and compositional language that informs music. Given the infinite possibilities that are “music” today, that in itself is an impossible task, and suffers from outdated approaches. But, at least students are oriented towards some key elements of musical language. How can we provide the same orientation to poetry and sung words? I'm not talking about diction classes. I am talking about the idea that poetry is its own language, governed by unique rules and

properties of sound that are separate from the language dialects from which it is made. In his book called *Making Your Own Days*, the poet Kenneth Koch discusses this idea in depth, which originally comes from the poet Paul Valery, who talked about poetry as a “language within a language.” In this case, there would be the ordinary language, such as French or English, and, existing inside its boundaries, another: “the language of poetry.” Koch’s perspective is that knowing how poems are made is a help in knowing how to read them; a reader who knows how poetry is made has a better chance of responding to what’s there.

If we take the idea of a poetic language seriously, one of its central properties is that *the sound of the words is raised to an importance equal to that of its meaning*. This is a departure from standard spoken language, as well as from the direct translation students must do when dealing with songs in a foreign language. Koch is barely into his first chapter before he is introducing the fact that the sounds of poetry create a music, and it is through this music that the poem transmits meaning. The sensuousness of music in poetic language arouses feelings, memories, sensations, and its order and formality promise a way to probably make sense of them. According to Koch, “poetry lasts because it gives the ambiguous and ever-changing pleasure of being both a statement and a song.”

Approaching poetry with this aural sense can absolutely complement anything students are opening their ears to in other classes. There is a direct link between the textures of a spoken language and the compositional music that has grown up around it, and there are also connections to be made between literary, musical, and cultural conventions, as we have so enjoyed exploring these weeks at VISI. Much of the teaching here has begun with understanding of the text informing and infusing instrumental color in performance, but it goes even further: by engaging with the details of craft in both text and music,

students begin to interact with the aesthetics of the art from which the piece comes, as well as the very human sources for those aesthetics.

Of course, the biggest requirement to effectively utilize all this interdisciplinary richness is **time**. Song is certainly a tool for growth in the studio, but it is also a tool by which to expand technical ability at one's instrument. And, I don't know many students who come to college with the intent of enjoying quiet moments of assimilating aural and technical information...I remember the first time I encountered Debussy's "C'est l'Extase" as a pianist. My freshman year. Not only was that level of sensuousness unknown to me, I could barely sit still long enough to imagine it, much less imbue the opening low fifth in the piano with any sense of transcendency. Many of my students come off like they have barely kissed anyone, much less transcended the mortal coil through sexual union.

There is also the issue of the smart students taking on too much information at once and not knowing what to do with it. One of my colleagues at Buffalo assigned Schubert's Heidenröslein to a lovely young soprano. When she came in for a lesson with me, she had the notes and rhythm well learned, but she wasn't bringing the verses alive with inflections that told the story. So, I asked her simply, "so, what happens in this song? What is this song about?" She said: "Rape." Of course, there is plenty of scholarship about symbols in German lied repertoire and subtext about man vs. woman in this poem, but that wasn't really how I wanted to begin!

Among all the many things we must impart to our students in their university years, song is a platform for turning our students on to the wonders of the universe, often because many of the cornerstones of song rep deals with deep levels of love, pain, and sexuality... Isn't that what university training at its best can do for artists—bring them into the vast world of human experience? [The] challenge of taking responsibility for a song's

performance is only met through the generous work with teachers and collaborators that song inspires. It is met when students can engage with text and music in a larger context than their own experience at that moment, by entering into a conversation with everyone from their teacher, to their collaborative partners, to the authors of the songs themselves, and, ultimately, with an audience...it is a rare opportunity to be steeped in one's subject, or one's training, with many different people, working towards common goals always with individual distinction.

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