

THE THEATRE OF ART SONG AND ART SONG AS THEATRE

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Numerous sources are available bemoaning the decline in audience numbers at art song recitals. This is not a new or a localised phenomenon, but against the background that I will sketch here and for the purpose of this project, I will look at it particularly from a South African context.

1. South African background

Camilleri (2016) believes the song recital is the least popular classic format of all. She goes on to say that at prestigious concert halls with a loyal audience and a tradition of presenting song recitals, it is business as usual, but that the intellectual, seemingly old-fashioned atmosphere of this genre keeps audiences away at most other venues. Additionally, in the ever-decreasing print media, opera and choral concerts are the events that are more likely to be advertised or reviewed (Camilleri 2016). In South Africa I noticed how recital audiences have shrunk. Since the country became a democracy twenty-five years ago, the government's support for Western Classical Music all but disappeared. Orchestras couldn't stay afloat, and opera companies closed. Hundreds of thousands of South Africans have emigrated during this time¹, many of whom are classical music concertgoers. There is a very strong culture of choral singing in the country, as well as a fascination with and love for opera, but among the majority of South Africans the art song genre is a little-known entity.

2. The art song recital

The baritone Julius Stockhausen's public performance in 1856 of Schubert's song cycle *Die schöne Müllerin* marked the beginning of the art song recital as we know it. There used to be very little cross-pollination between opera and art song, as the specialist performers in each of the genres focussed on their preferred format. Crossover performance between art songs and opera was very rare until the 1930s, when singers such as Lotte Lehmann and Elisabeth Schumann, and later Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Elizabeth Schwarzkopf during the 1950s, had successful careers both as lieder and opera singers. Opera stars pulled audiences to art song recitals which, at the time, led to growing audiences (Neher 326–327). Similarly, famous singers with a substantial following still fill concert halls when they perform recitals. I feel strongly though, that this exquisite art form, which is the musical epitome of an intimate conversation between singer and pianist who “communicate to the audience the most subtle and evanescent emotions” (Predota 2016), should be enjoyed by many more people.

The long-running debate that has raged since the time of Schubert about the correct or best way to perform art songs is alive and well and shows no signs of abating anytime soon. Singers, audience members, musicologists and even literature scholars voice opinions on this matter. Even in Schubert's lifetime there was not consensus about performance practices of his Lieder (Deutsch 1958, 338) and there will always be those who insist that theirs is the only way. I wish to make my own position clear: for many decades have I performed song recitals in its traditional format with great joy and commitment and I will continue doing so.

¹ In the search that I have conducted, it seemed nigh impossible to find reliable numbers, but it is estimated that at the very least, 800,000 white citizens have left the country. According to the Induku Consulting Group the tempo of emigration is accelerating, and a recent development is that the number of moneyed black South Africans leaving the country is now exceeding that of whites.

Stand and sing while communicating mainly through the voice and the eyes, certainly did not come easy to me as a young singer, but as my opera career unfolded, my confidence grew, and I increasingly felt at home in my own body when on stage. Gaining experience in expressing emotions through movement and interaction with others, I gradually also learnt how to use word rhythm, the inherent characteristics of phonemes, vocal colour, musical phrasing and my eyes to capture the audience. Whenever I succeed, even a large concert hall becomes an intimate space, filled with trust and shared confidentiality.

3. Why change?

The reality is that we live in a complex, interconnected and fast-paced world in which we are exposed to ever-changing visual stimuli (Palmer 2009). Young people grow up in an environment of rock and pop concerts, theatre, dance, multimedia performances, televised reality shows and fast and furious video games (Kjølberg 2007: 100). Classical music must compete for audiences with these visually animated genres. Where does this leave the song recital? A lone singer standing in one spot in front of a piano for an hour or longer, however beautiful the music and polished the performance, can potentially be very uninspiring, particularly to the uninitiated and the youth (Gardner 2005: 84).

But is it really our responsibility to adapt our discipline to keep up with the times? Traditionally art songs are performed by a singer and pianist on stage in concert attire, with lighting that stays unaltered throughout the performance. The songs are often in a language neither spoken nor understood by the audience and emotions are mainly portrayed through the eyes, facial expressions, minimal gestures at times of heightened emotion and effective use of diction. More animated body language, gestures and movements started to creep into recitals in recent times, but these practices are often frowned upon by traditionalists. I have personally witnessed complaints from mainly older generation audience members about such ‘travesties’ that ‘have no place within the art song genre’. Lockemann (2010) calls this “a questionable approach” and implies that singers do not trust their own artistic ability if they incorporate elements usually associated with an opera performance, thereby “destroy[ing] the very roots of the song” (Lockemann 2006). A few of the previous generation singers, such as Lotte Lehmann, were of the opinion that tradition is something to be built upon, but not followed slavishly. Lehmann encouraged young singers to find their own way as they searched for meaning and expression in art songs. Neher (2011: 330) muses on the need for singers “to get out of the formal high-art temples in order to break the bonds of convention and bring the vocal recital into the twenty-first century.”

We can argue that it is our duty to educate audiences, and I have always concurred with this opinion. On the other hand, I believe that it is important to stay relevant to the time we live in and take note of the preferred ways of communication between people. The elitist image of the art song recital does not bode well for its future. In South Africa with its wealth of beautiful voices and its strong tradition of telling stories through song, it should not be a huge stretch to cultivate an interest in this beautiful music, even if initially it needs to happen by way of incorporating non-traditional elements in the performance. We should ask ourselves if composers would rather have preferred new look performances or settled for the disappearance of their music. Is it time to change traditions to reflect current communication practices? It is my belief that it is possible to make changes to the presentation of the songs while retaining the integrity of both the original poem and the composition in its entirety. Ilban (2010) speaks of “truth seeking”, as adding layers to art song performance can reflect in different ways the essence, or truth, of the text, and does not have to be changing the meaning or looking for something which is not there already. It is worth reflecting on the words of Beaumont (2014): “Schubert’s (...) Lieder (...) engendered the genre in which the popular

and the individual were both represented, and in which the drama and effects of opera were distilled into something that could be powerfully conveyed wherever the setting.”

4. The theatre of art song and art song as theatre project

Acting is often used in rehearsal to help young singers move beyond technique and vocal production. My aim for this project is to bring acting from the rehearsal room to the concert stage and, while doing so, explore the perception and experience of audiences in both traditional and staged performances of art songs. The project is designed around four programmes, each of which will be performed twice, first in traditional format and then in a varied format. A group of respondents who attend both formats of a specific programme will be interviewed after the concerts to gain insight into their experiences and preferences. Different performance approaches will be followed for each concert, depending on the programme. Decisions will be made as to which communication skills and variables are most effective to illustrate or even enhance specific texts and music.

The four programmes that will form part of the project are:

1. *Krämerspiegel* (Richard Strauss): Unlike most art songs, these songs are not based on poetry, but rather a text commissioned by the composer that lampooned the publishing industry. As the text is laden with puns, idioms, slang, and other word play, it is virtually untranslatable. The text meaning will be highlighted by a dancer and through the use of caricature projections.
2. *Cinq poèmes de Beaudelaire* (Claude Debussy): The sensual and atmospheric symbolist poetry of Beaudelaire will be layered with lighting, minimalist staging and impressionist image projection.
3. Dramatic Lieder (Franz Schubert): This collection of songs will be staged and accompanied by a non-narrative film.
4. South African art songs: The programme will consist of a collection of art songs by various contemporary South African composers. These songs are mostly in Afrikaans, my mother tongue, and all were composed for me. Projections and staging will be added to the distinctive sounds of Africa encapsulated in the songs to create a unique experience.

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