

Lieder 2.0 : 'footnotes to Schubert'

For some time now, a number of prominent singers have been noting that the art-song tradition seems to be in crisis, having apparently fallen out of favour – if not with the public, then certainly with concert organizers. This is especially alarming for those of us who were brought up listening to the great interpreters of the Austro-German Lieder tradition such as Hermann Prey, Christa Ludwig, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau or Hans Hotter. Partnered by pianists of the calibre of Gerald Moore, Sviatoslav Richter or Alfred Brendel, their legendary recordings still stand as the epitome of the union of music and poetry, of vocal and pianistic artistry, yet despite the noble efforts of their successors, a problem of transmission has clearly arisen. The signals coming from the profession are that the niche for the song recital seems to have become worryingly narrow; the texts on which the core repertoire is based are no longer familiar (even in the German-speaking countries), while the static, small-scale format of voice and piano scarcely counts as a *spectacle* in an obsessively visual age.

In this climate, it is perhaps logical that contemporary composers should by and large have shied away from the art-song genre, irrespective of language. Since the deaths of Benjamin Britten and Samuel Barber, it is hard to think of substantial song-cycles written in recent decades that have attained repertoire status, with a few possible exceptions such as Valentin Silvestrov's iconic *Silent Songs* (1974-1977). The problem partly stems from the sometimes mistrustful relationship between composers and vocalists which developed in the second half of the twentieth century (and has persisted in many quarters, with singers still equating New Music with anti-vocal writing and even danger to the larynx). It has to be said that the singing community's suspicion was often merited, given that relatively few composers during the 'high modernist' period demonstrated an in-depth understanding of the voice as an instrument, or indeed much empathy with the singer's perspective. "We don't have a pitch-button!", a soprano friend of mine quipped to me recently... Conversely, there also seems to be a relative lack of enthusiasm for sustained engagement with art-song on the part of living composers. Practical concerns are certainly a contributory factor in this respect. The unfortunate reality is that very few established professional singers have the luxury of being able to invest the time and effort necessary to learn complex and unfashionable new works - ones which can prove hard to programme and for which the material rewards are negligible in comparison to, say, contemporary opera.

The present *Lieder 2.0* project can be seen as a modest personal response to some of these considerations; the hope is to encourage both performers and listeners to re-engage with the classics of the Lieder repertoire by presenting the poetry in a contemporary musical idiom which nonetheless remains in constant dialogue with tradition. I have purposely sought out song-texts that transcend the historical and geographical context in which they were written. Dealing with universal spiritual and existential questions, they retain the capacity to move and challenge us today - on condition that they are not simply relegated to the status of what might be termed 'museum culture', but are seen as *living* texts.

The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead famously described his intellectual discipline as 'footnotes to Plato'; what we have on this recording could be termed a series of 'footnotes to Schubert'. In juxtaposing the original songs with my re-imaginings, I have approached my models in the same way as a jazz musician would approach 'standards'; in contrast to the *tabula rasa* view of composition as starting from scratch, here it is precisely through interaction with the past that an individual vocabulary emerges.

I am convinced that I speak for many in saying, both as a instrumental/vocal performer and as a composer, that art-song has been fundamental in shaping my perception of music since an early age. If *Lieder 2.0* is even the smallest of stones contributing to the renovation of an edifice with foundations in perennial human experience, but whose facade may be in need of renewal, then it will have served its purpose.