

ABOUT WORDS FOR SINGING

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I think the right words for singing are words which are clear. Words are clear when from one to the next there is a change in vowel, in length (quantity), in accent, and in the kind of meaning. If this change is small the words are crowded, if it is large they sing, if it is not noticeable they become jumbled and noisy. Each effect is permissible, but the main tone of words to be sung should be a clear separation of each word from the words on either side of it. Here is an example from a nursery rhyme:

And when the weeds begin to grow
It's like a garden full of snow
And when the snow begins to fall
It's like a bird upon the wall.

and a more complex example:

One day I wrote her name upon the strand
But came the waves and washéd it away
Again I wrote it with a second hand
But came the tide and made my pains his prey.

Care to separate words one from another in this way – their oral articulation – has not been the dominant literary method for centuries. It is a principle of craft every one fully understands in theory. But separation means diffusion. It is almost impossible to be striking in diffusion and very difficult to have even just a lively expression. Though the sense of each single word is clearer when they fall distinct, the sense of a string of words is less pointed. The general tone of a passage takes on a certain placidity that in a minor poet becomes vacuous.

For the last three hundred years poets have generally separated less by sound and more by meaning, less by the oral phenomenon of a word and more by its silent image. The simplest example is the break in "a shave and a haircut, ten cents." A literary example is:

Built floor by floor on shafts of steel that grant
The plummet heart, like Absolom, no stream.

Such intellectual separation is effective in reading to oneself because

the imagination can jump further and faster than the tongue or ear and the articulation of images is bolder than that of sound. The poet can squeeze tight together at one point, and isolate far apart at another. He can contrast whole groups of words that have coalesced in imagination. He can set images at different levels of meaning. Some sense of such a passionate effect can be given by reading aloud, if one shouts or moans or hiccups. But singing in the usual sense requires a steady flow of breath and a steady focus of pitch and resonance. Presented so evenly, the poet's cries become absurd, his words are heard one by one and they do not carry one by one, they carry in groups by their meaning. The composer may resort to recitative, but recitative is vocally less powerful than straight song. Other composers make touching mezzo voce *lieder* out of verses that can only be properly expressed by stamping of feet, mumbling and howling. Beethoven had such a difficult time with the *Hymn to Joy* because he was generous enough to set it as if it were a good poem. When it is good, this is what intellectual poetry, the poetry of meaning, means. It is ferocious. It can be ferocious because it doesn't make a sound. The silence gives to ferocity a curious humane sweetness. Everyone understands in himself how that is.

Meaning is a peculiar thing in poetry – as peculiar as meaning in politics or loving. In writing poetry a poet can hardly say that he knows what he means. In writing he is more intimately concerned with holding together a poem, and that is for him its meaning. For several centuries poets have been tempted to choose an intellectual touchstone to judge their own coherence – the total subject or the dramatic sentiment. This appears to be an objective standard. It cannot be strictly applied however to poems written by the acoustic method. Poems acoustically separated word by word are judged by their acoustic unity, by following the sound.

Historically speaking this is the literary craft of classic Greek poetry. The Greeks have, so to speak, plenty of air, plenty of time between words, even in prose. When the piece is over the whole room is full of sound. In the amplitude of the sound you appreciate the scope of the meaning, it allows it to spread clearly over an extended period of time. The literary craft of the Greeks makes even their intellectual poetry (the tragic choruses and the *Odes* of Pindar) carry by sound like an intelligent incantation. The humanist poets of the Renaissance, who understood the classics from the craftsman's viewpoint (not as we do from the anthropologist's) practiced the same method in Italian, French and Spanish. Spenser did, con-

sumately, in English, and might have founded a school. Instead came the screaming splendor of Shakespeare, whose divine virtuosity overpowered the plain academic tradition. English poetry has been reeling ever since. And when general education shifted from craft to psychology, from classicism to romanticism, in the course of the seventeenth century, the continuity of humanism and the basis for its modesty were lost completely.

Milton in his wretched blind old age, Gay slumming on a sly drunk, Cowper between fits of psychosis, each tried singlehanded to revive the easy classic integrity of sound. Quivering Shelley at last in 1820 re-invented the song of clear words. But he was drowned, the poems in this style were too few, and they left no school. At the same time in Germany Hölderlin, another poet of intense literary education, released from an insane asylum to dishonored senility, wrote as if offhand a dozen poems in the limpid articulation of language that is an honor to our millennial intelligence. He made no impression. And now, a hundred years after, unconnected apparently with any of these previous attempts, the classic technic has been re-invented once more, an intellectual feat which – as you can see from this historical sketch – is a prodigious one. And so it is simple for me now to be academic about the proper words for singing, because there is an excellent model at hand, in Miss Stein's lyric pieces; and specifically in her libretto for *Four Saints*. Unfortunately it does not seem to be leading to a school, either.

I say this to explain to composers why, although the technical principle involved is easy to understand, it is difficult to get poets to write according to it, and still produce something they can be pleased with. Good hack writers, whose literary conscience is less strict, can more readily furnish a workable libretto (once the method is made clear to them). If a poet were to try, he would throw most of the writing away, and the only parts he might feel had some expressive quality would be unsingable from the musician's point of view. I think composers need poems more loosely woven than any literary poems are, poems that are clear and definite in tone but not completely expressive when read quickly. A poet should remember that the verse will go much more slowly when sung than when read or spoken. The more intellectual expression a poem has, the faster is its proper tempo.

Since the accepted literary manner is so complicated, it occurs to some poets who would like to write for singing to sidestep the convention by imitating non-literary language, or making a virtue out of primitivism.

For me personally, one of the clearest impressions of how words should be written for singing came in listening to the provincial simplicities of the religious poems Bach set chorales to. Other impressions have come from the easy doggerel of the *Magic Flute*; from the less fancy Elizabethan songs,

O Love they wrong thee much
That say thy sweet is bitter
When thy rich fruit is such
As nothing could be sweeter
Fair house of joy and bliss
Where truest pleasure is
I do adore thee . . .

Or from straight folksong:

If you don't love me
Love whom you please
But throw your arms round me
Give my heart ease.
Give my heart ease, dear
Give my heart ease,
Throw your arms round me

Or from contemporary jazz songs:

She was so pure
And so bright
Looked so sweet on Basin Street
Walking on my right
She was so mild

Or the Tin Pan Alley line:

I'm jealous of the birdies in the trees.

Or from some of the lines the Leonard Ware Trio now sings. And of course from the amazing lines in spirituals and old style blues, though their dialect effects appear to me too particular to serve for general usage.

In all these one finds a tradition of words for singing, a tradition perfectly familiar both to the poet and the audience, and which uses the classic craft of clear words often enough so that a poet could refine on it and use the technic more consistently than the folk poet, without the nuisance of breaking an established convention. It is possible that such an Alexandrianism might solve the difficulty a poet finds himself in, if the other solution, an imitation of Miss Stein, does not appeal to him. I myself have tried the "stylization" method, and found it interesting to me, but unsatisfactory to composers. They felt that local flavor in words demands local flavor in the music. I don't agree, but I am not a composer. There

is another difficulty however, in using the folk style for dramatic lyrics, and that is that the generalized and modest tone of folk song, at least of our folk song, is in opposition to the individual self-revelation necessary for solo song. And the range of emotion, as well as the choice of words appears restricted.

For me it was a pleasure to write in the simple verse forms that are characteristic of folk song, where the sense falls line by line, and usually halfline by halfline, in obvious units; and the lines rhyme clearly without extra stress. As I understand it, American folk verse is quantitative, but the units are groups of syllables dominated by a major stress on the word that is the key to meaning, short groups and long groups being contrasted, but kept in balance. The separate words are not as clearly defined as in academic poetry, but a certain soft slur in provincial speech and grammar gives them a euphony that is very attractive. None of these considerations were of much interest to composers.

The only conclusion I am now sure of is that for singing the words should be separately clear in sound. I am inclined to think that on the whole regularity of verse form is an advantage in song, because it separates one verse from another, and one song from another, and so one knows where one is: a method in large like that applied to individual words. By a regular form I mean a system of making halflines, lines, couplets and quatrains independent and self-sufficient in the general meaning they establish; and distinctly related one to another in length. Rhyme makes these divisions and balances still clearer. (Such a form is similar to that of the nonsense arias of Verdi libretti.) An aria so constructed should tempt the composer to find anything but a straight song to set to it, a straight open direct lyrical expression. Recitative should be kept distinct from song, and spoken words from recitative. It gives a clear variety.

Another advantage in arias constructed in so meticulous a manner is that they invite the composer to repeat anything anywhere, and repetition of single words or of phrases or of whole lines is essential to lyric emotion. At times the poet may have an idea about such repeats, but as a rule they are for the composer to decide on. He is the one to tell how long he wishes a song. A poet however has to furnish material which can be cut or repeated without losing its literary quality, or its general sense.

I am of the opinion that a libretto is mostly an arrangement of vocal numbers in an order which is dramatic. It should be planned to contrast voices and groups of voices, tempi, and emotions expressed. These num-

bers should have a definite beginning and end, and should each be long enough to register definitely as a piece. I do not understand planning an opera as a glorification of life or as a comment on it. Such terms to me personally describe an indirect, apologetic attitude, a critical attitude natural in a hearer after the opera is over, but absurd until it is. The poet and composer who make an opera are making the most interesting concert they know how. The moral aspect of what they do is guaranteed by the fact they intend to please, to thrill and to satisfy.

The general sense of an aria should be clear from hearing the words of the first line. (A rule in popular songs.) A poet should not expect the audience to hear more of it distinctly no matter how clearly he writes. I don't think every word of an opera need be heard distinctly. Although of course the composer cannot alter the syllabic quantity of a word, he should not be asked to spoil his tune for the particular sense of some words. I don't believe either in "singing" actors replacing singers; because their kind of song gives a cute and pitiful effect to what they express. I believe in the strongest vocalists possible, regardless of looks, too, because it is the singing that carries the emotion, the power and the thrust of it.

But I am convinced that the quality of the poet's work will become clear in the course of the performance, even if a great many words are missed. He has to work in detail because first the composer and later the singers need every word. But the audience needs only the drift of the piece, it needs only the tone of his language, the tone of his style. The poet's function in opera is like that of the composer of ballet music. Cheap music ruins the show and so do cheap words, they give the wrong tone to the company and to the occasion.

And it is his sense of responsibility that makes a poet careful of every word. When I used to take the overnight train going back to prep school, from vacation, my mother always insisted on my taking freshly laundered pajamas to wear in the sleeping-car. Once I asked why since no one could see me in them inside the berth. "But supposing there's an accident," she said, "how would it look?" So the poet's words have to be fresh at every point, because he can't ever tell what might happen to them when they are actually sung.