

## LANGUAGE AND MODERN MUSIC

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THERE is a temptation to imitate Victor Hugo. For purposes presumed to have been musical, composers when he was young habitually set texts to music in disrespect of the organic life of the language, the words' natural accents and inflections. They disregarded the need to achieve relations between the poem's rhythmic and sonorous patterns, and meanings, and their own structures. And on the ms. of a volume of his verse, the author wrote "Commit no nuisance along these poems by setting them to music!" What rouses the temptation to repeat Hugo's drastic characterization of lyric works which violate the shape, cadence, spirit of the spoken word in the one sung and achieve no relation between text and musical quality, is the fact that in our own time and country certain songs, operas, cantatas are repeating the errors which justly revolted him. The texts of these offending works are not translations. Nor are the pieces the products of the foreign-born who in pardonable innocence declaim "All is die-ink" with a rising inflection. The texts are English, and the pieces are by native sons, some of whom are supposed to be in the vanguard of the musical column.

One of these pieces was a song which obliged its singer for no humorous purpose whatever to articulate the word "beautiful" as "beauTIful." Another was an opera which, also without humorous effect in view, accentuated "She is a good girl" and "She is very beautiful" with the utmost possible unnaturalness. A third, a cantata, left us in emotional dislocation: so little had the shape, spirit, color of the composer's elaborate symphonic texture been influenced by the "words of social significance" it set. And where the old sheep don't know the road, it would seem as though the lambs might be at a loss to find their way.

Perhaps these leaders themselves have been misled. Certainly it would be unfair to condemn their, and all similar, violations of the natural form of the language, its melody, timing, rhythm, inflection – the form natural to it even under stress of great excitement – without considering the disparagement of the word and of its usefulness to music by the outstand-

ing, most influential composers of the period, Schönberg and Stravinsky. Because of this disparagement, neither of these two artists could entirely be exonerated of blame for the existence of a contemptuousness towards text and language among present-day musicians.

The depreciation of the word on their part one takes to be the almost neurotic feature of the modern revolt against the excessive nineteenth century subjection of music to literature. Possibly because of the predominance of the "poet" over the "musician" in the late-nineteenth-century composers, the romantic musicians had tended to sacrifice musical form for the sake of literary construction; abandoned along with the song-forms, the charming vocalizations associated with lyric utterance, in favor of a "durchkomponiertes" declamation which identified musical with language patterns; subordinated all considerations to heightened word-effect and the musical intensification of the poem's impression. About 1910 the reaction set in. Always the seismograph and more the pure musician than Wagner, Strauss in *Der Rosenkavalier* revealed the drift toward the Mozartean music-opera and song-forms; in Zerbinetta's aria in *Ariadne auf Naxos*, the renewed magnetism of vocalizations.

Awareness of the charms of the purest musical means and the sober stylization of the oratorio shortly announced itself through that contrast with *Pelléas, Socrate* by Satie; through the accuracy plus sinewy swing and light melodiousness with which the tiny, nude "symphonic drama," (observe the denomination!) declaimed fragments of Victor Cousin's elegant Plato. In Berlin Busoni formulated the principles of the *neue Klassicismus*: prominent among them was the rule that operatic form had best evolve along absolute rathermore than musico-dramatic lines – paving the way for the triumph, *Wozzeck*, and the error, *Cardillac*. At this moment the "New Directions for 1914" – the unnaturalistically colored publication, *Der Blaue Reiter*, brought out a peculiarly sophisticated essay on "The Relationship to the Text" by Schönberg: from that essay a vindication of an attitude of extreme arrogance towards language and text indubitably could be derived with ease, and conceivably was derived and disseminated by the disciples.

It begins by informing us that music is the revelation of the inmost essence of the world, which essence defies attempts to capture it in words. (*Passons*: the "low valuation" of the word was in the air.) To insist on parallelism between text and music in the sense of correspondences of dynamics and tempo to specific events in the poetry, continues the article,

is to turn music into a language which "poetizes and thinks" for Tom, Dick and Harry. Suddenly comes "I got to know Stefan George's poetry entirely from its sheer sound"\* "The fact is that, intoxicated by the initial sounds of the first words of the text, I wrote many of my songs from beginning to end without concerning myself in the least with the further progress of the poetic events – without in the least grasping them in the ecstasy of composition – and only days afterwards came to recognize what indeed was the poetic content of my *Lieder*. . . . I was never so just to the poet as when, directed by the first immediate contact with the initial sounds, I guessed everything that had of necessity (!) to follow these tones." Without amazement we then read "When a music-critic or even a composer-critic writes of a creator that he has failed to do justice to the words of a poet, it is only for the reason that the writer is musically un-inspired. If he were (inspired), he would not indicate how the poem should be set. He would compose it." Meanwhile with its vicious distortions of Giraud's odious verses



*Pierrot Lunaire* was starting an irrational epidemic of language-deformations, and, incidentally, furnishing a perfect instance of maladroitness with text. This evidence of inaptitude doesn't by any means flow from the linguistic distortions, or even from the solution along quasi melo-dramatic lines – a solution weak at best – which the work attempts to give to the problem of combining language with music. For that experiment had its *raison d'être* in certain recent theories of science. While the nineteenth century had posited the interdependence of the two expressions and either considered language a derivation from song or song a derivation from language – thus doubly justifying their declamatory combination – twentieth century linguistics surmised that different cerebral spheres controlled their organs. Scholars began indicating how anything but coextensive they were in point of tonal range and rhythm – that musical rhythm for example had a capacity for intensification entirely beyond the rivalry of speech. Logically their combination thus would take its shape in a contrapuntal relation of distinct, idiosyncratic treatments of language and music – of a *Sprechstimme* semi-regulated like that of a declaimer, with *sinfonias* devel-

\*To recognize the irresponsibility of the entire statement, one has but to remember that the sound and sense of language are not identical: if they were we would understand Serbian at first encounter. Even though the sound of a poem is its wings, it is not the whole bird: this, of course is the sense.

oped on absolute lines. — No, if *Pierrot* exemplified inaptitude with text, it does so mainly through the frequency with which its *Sprechstimme* presents an obstacle to the enjoyment of the crystalline, petal-like, wholly admirable instrumental textures. Too often one gets the effect of competing monologues by two persons or portions of the brain that do not love each other.

Stravinsky in declaring "the word does not help the musician" also has displayed a baseless antagonism to language. "For *Perséphone* I wanted syllables — beautiful, strong syllables" runs his Manifesto of 1934. "The word, which lies between the syllable and the general sense or mode permitting the work (and) canalizes the scattered thought . . . is a cumbersome intermediate. The word 'syllable' and the verb 'to syllabize' sum up a whole policy." The pity is that more attention was paid to Stravinsky's syllabub than to *Les Noces*; and none to Plato who discerned the degradation involved in the use of the human voice without human speech; and little to Fred Jacobi when he wrote "Seated deep within us is the vague conviction that to tell a story is a primary function of the human voice. And many singers claim that words are the basis not only of their interpretative expression but also of the actual production of their tone." For in all their incommodiousness to the pure musician, the word and its meaning are of the greatest help to him and deeply his concern as the emancipators of that most flexible of all his instruments, the human voice! Sustainedly to project itself, the voice requires more than vowels. It requires the hardness of consonants, and not merely arbitrary combinations of consonants and vowels, but expressive symbols. In fine while it can accept a certain amount of syllabization, the voice requires content, something to "say," indicate, represent.\* The composers of those "great vocal works of pure music" so justly admired by Stravinsky, the old polyphonists, could have told him as much: by the signs of their care to articulate each fresh entry of the liturgical and oratorio texts with maximal distinctness, to underscore meanings with musical symbolism.

Still if the existence of statements of this character may excuse their commission, lyrical works which deform the spoken word in the one sung or do not weld text and music into unity nonetheless remain nuisances. Do not the former at least represent the selfish exercise of a right in transcendence of the obligation to respect others' welfare? The right is the right to use language; the selfishness inheres in the impairment of or indifference towards an irreplaceable means in the vital process. Language

\*Solmization, as in the vocalise, only provides an insipid meaning.

is meaning, and is irreplaceable as a medium for apprehending, expressing and imparting the sense of life for the reason that even if other mediums are less limited, in all probability it remains the single means of *intelligible* communication. This meaning is not identical with the sound of words, or the motor and tactual sensations which make them up; but they constitute its condition. To quote Professor W. M. Urban of Yale "The spirit which lives in human discourse works as a totality constituting the sentence, the copula, the word and the sound." Shattering the mold of discourse thus is tantamount to inhibiting the breath of life. And do not works which fail to make poetry and music sound and speak in harmony constitute a plague, an impediment, an obstruction? Such malformations have no power of endurance. They merely clutter up the way and hinder the progress of the hardier article. The lyric repertory – the vocal works preserved by use – provides a double proof of their infirmity. The first is its practical emptiness of songs, cantatas, operas, which do not relate the rhythms and meanings of speech and music.\* (The few exceptions to this rule are accounted for by the superlative worth of the music that is misrelated to the text.) Of course it will be claimed that this does not prove the inviability of disharmonious combinations of text and music but merely that the best composers happened to be most sensitive to words. The claim cannot be allowed: there is too much evidence that the choice which shapes the repertory disregards purely musical values where violations of the spirit of language are concerned. The fate of Haydn's songs is an example. Haydn was a great master; still his songs have disappeared: what has eliminated them plainly is their disloyalty to the rhythms and timing of speech. Nor can the fact that with all their defective accentuation Mozart's songs and operas endure, be accepted as disproof of the contention that disharmonies of language and music are fatal to lyrical work; any more for that matter than the fact that Handel, who intoned "For unto us a child is born" and Brahms with his "Wie bist du, meine Königin," also continue to hold their place. Mozart's accentuation in instances indeed was slovenly: still he frequently stressed with greatest correctness



and Handel's slovenly accentuations are infrequent, occurring only in the

\*I base this statement on the special research of Marion Farquhar, the poetic translator of the libretti of Pergolesi, Hindemith, Toch and others.



arias and choruses borrowed by him from his correctly stressed Italian cantatas and hastily set to English. Significant too is the disappearance from the boards of a musically engaging work of our own period, *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue*, for no better reason than the irrelationship between the visionary poetry of its text and the brutality of its lapidary score.

As for the second proof, it is the preponderant degree to which the lyric repertory is made up of works which through the essential musicality of their texts cause language and music to sound in harmony and sing in unison. Among them are the folksongs, the Negro spirituals for example. In the course of centuries their naive singers have worked the stresses of the language and melodies into wonderful states of harmony and synchronism. There are the madrigale, in which as has been said no conflict exists between speech rhythm and musical rhythm; whose quintessential loveliness is to no mean extent created by the inflections of the poetry. There are the lyrics of the great nineteenth century lieder-writers, with their almost thorough preservation of the natural accents of the words and synchronization of them with the notes of the melodies; their almost thorough coordination of the musical and emotive curves of text and song; and the songs of the modern French; and the scrupulously accentuated operas of Gluck and the post-Gounod opera from Wagner, Bizet and Offenbach to Strauss and Debussy. Above all as its jewels the repertory contains those most intimate combinations of text and music, the lyrical works of Bach: the cantatas for example where, as Schwiezer has pointed out, a declamation which is a kind of heightened emotionalized speech assumes a melodic form of a high order. Nor would it be just to overlook amid this array, the large number of pieces in which, through miracles of the composers' imaginations, music developed a capacity to signify an aspect of reality relative to the texts': not only in coordinating its evocative and emotive function with that of the language, but its indicative and representative ones as well. The madrigale's illustrativeness was well-nigh inveterate. Handel illustrated. Bach represented: harmonizing the words of the chorales together with the melodies. The nineteenth century romantics lavishly described. One of the principles of this general musical selectivity was indicated by us above. We find another in the law of the superior attraction of that which is entire, our special susceptibility to things exhibiting a form of symmetry in style and character, subordinating all their parts to one single design or effect.

Fortunately not all the leading moderns have shared either Schönberg

or Stravinsky's attitude toward language. The experience of certain of them, (Bloch and Milhaud for example,) exhibits their feeling of the word's essential friendliness to their art, the partnership of language and music in the lyrical forms that are their fee for the privilege of exploiting the human throat, the fact that the relationship of the components in line and meaning entails no inevitable sacrifice of musical freedom. In view however of the existence of "beauTIful" accentuations among us, it appears to the present writer that statements of their experience from these composers might be helpful. What renders such statements most desirable is the possibility that a boredom with radio and movies, together with a renewed desire for physical proximity to human beings in the effort of representation, shortly may reinvest interest in the theatre and restore a market for lyric work. This writer is not urging upon them the justification of a *durchkomponiertes* Wagnerian declamation which makes the text the exclusively dominant partner in the lyric forms. The unrequited disadvantages of such declamation were indicated in the late Sir Robert Bridges' preface to his *Ode for the Bicentennial Commemoration of Henry Purcell*, too clearly to permit the critical idea that declamation rigorous in point of pattern invariably is incumbent on the composer. Certainly the traditional song-forms and the vocal style which idealize speech seem peculiarly appropriate to lyrical utterances with their semi-regulated pitches, semi-melodious style, elliptic deliveries of meaning; nor can there be objection to Hindemith's sensitive concertante-style treatment of poetic texts in the latter part of *Das Marienleben*, or *Die Serenaden*: not even to Jocasta's *aria da capo* in *Oedipus Rex*. The composers will also know how plain it is that the flexibility, the readiness to give and take, prerequisite in married people, is equally prerequisite in language and music striving to unite: how plain that so long as no "beauTIful" violence is done the line and spirit of the husband, compromises for melody's sake like Mozart's



are harmless. Finally, they will not believe that what is being asked is justification of literal, cold methods of relating meaning, indeed of any short of those subtle, discreet methods uncalculatingly and unpredictably evolved by the imagination, plunging us into spheres super-poetical and super-musical.

Fortunately we already possess a few statements of this sort – one by Krenek, *Experience of Opera* (in *Der Anbruch*), with its words presumably born of an “experience” of Hindemith’s *Cardillac*: “Music in opera is and remains ‘accompaniment.’ Word and tone, music and drama should be conceived simultaneously and *gleichsinnig* – with evenly-distributed thought.” Another comes from Copland “The composer’s problem . . . is to give the (sung) word the naturalness of speech. Since speech has its own natural inflection the melodic line will sometimes take its inception from that inflection. At other times the melody will be only an idealized reflection of speech. . . . In *The Second Hurricane* I found myself using harmony and orchestration mainly to color the general mood rather than for specific underlining of separate phrases.” A third is that of the composer of the declamations of the rhythms and inflections of Bossuet and Racine (and Gertrude Stein), Virgil Thomson “When I write for the voice, everything in the music, but literally everything, is determined by the text. This does not mean that everything is determined by the meaning of the text. A great deal . . . on the contrary, is determined by the rhetorical and linguistic structure of the text. Sometimes I try to illustrate the meaning also. Sometimes I . . . prefer to throw that into relief against abstract musical formulae. Sometimes, also, I add music which might be considered as appropriate atmosphere rather than an expression of anything directly implied in the words. Any musical interpretation, illustration is amplification . . . is secondary to finding a correct verbal declamation. . . . Everything outside of a correct vocal declamation and appropriate instrumental emphasis constitutes expression. That can be as beautiful and as fancy as one likes, but sometimes the omission of it altogether throws the meaning of the text into such poignant relief that its omission becomes a very intense form of expression.”

There are still others. But we need more, in the general interest.