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Perspectives of New Music, Vol. 22, No. 1/2. (Autumn, 1983 - Summer, 1984), pp. 631-638.

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COMPOSER SURVEY: Opinions on Solo Vocal Literature

VIRGINIA PALMER

The Harvard Dictionary defines the song as a "short composition for solo voice, usually but not necessarily accompanied, based on a poetic text, and composed in a fairly simple style so designed as to enhance rather than to overshadow the significance of the text."¹ The challenge of the genre lies in the fact that it is a marriage of two art forms, words and music, and rarely are they equals in the partnership.² Although poetry was the favored text medium in the past centuries composers now feel free to draw from a vast pool of possibilities: poetry, prose, letters, documents, advertisements, nonsense and phonemic sounds as compositional material.

Perhaps the need to express a text is one of the major reasons for the continuous activity in this genre. A good text supplies a ready inspiration for the composer, giving him emotions to express, verbs to put into motion, visual images to auralize, individual words to color and phonemic combinations that have a music of their own. The voice itself, the beloved instrument unique to each human, provides the composer with a dramatic, sensual and flexible instrument with which to express the chosen text.

Between October, 1980 and June, 1981 I conducted a selective informal survey of composers regarding their solo vocal music.³ While working with many pieces by contemporary composers as a singer and music theorist, I became increasingly curious as to their opinions regarding the union of words and music, for the way that they articulate their understanding of this hybrid art can provide an important clue to the analysis of their works. The composers were chosen from a broad range of stylistic groups, and I was

fortunate in that the few who had the time and interest to reply represented a cross-section in their diverse approaches to musical form, timbre, texture and the vocal idiom. Rather than present an analysis of their comments, I would prefer to let the reader draw his own conclusions from a comparison of their answers.

I. WHAT IS YOUR DEFINITION OF AN ART SONG?

T. J. ANDERSON: A poetic setting for voice and piano.

DOMINICK ARGENTO: A composition for solo voice and one (or a few) other instrument(s) having as its purpose the subjective interpretation of a particular text being articulated by the singer.

MILTON BABBITT: I don't like the category . . . what is art? I prefer to talk about vocal music.

JOHN EATON: Ideally, an art song is a marriage between poetry and music in which neither art form surrenders its integrity, but in which each contributes significantly to the total experience in its own terms.

LUKAS FOSS: A folksong is a perfect wedding of music and words—a unity. An Art Song is a contrived combination of music and words.

DENNIS RILEY: I'll leave that one for the musicologists.

GUNTHER SCHULLER: I really don't think I could define art song in the latter half of the 20th century and certainly [not] for myself. The possibilities are too varied today to be able to arrive at a single definition. The only common denominator (also with the past tradition) is the composer's need or desire to express the essence of a text through musical means and to enhance that communication in some original contributive way.

JOSEPH SCHWANTNER: ? [sic]

II. HOW DO YOU CHOOSE TEXTS? WHAT POETS, WRITERS OR MATERIALS DO YOU PREFER?

T. J. ANDERSON: [Through the] Subject of poem and personal contact with author.

DOMINICK ARGENTO: I choose texts which attract me by their suitability to the kind of music I am able to write. I have no special preference regarding writers or poets, but I tend to avoid “modern” ones because the complexity of language or image makes my task all the more difficult or makes it redundant.

MILTON BABBITT: I have a terrible time finding texts and have turned down commissions for lack of suitable texts. The English language has many problems . . . I prefer German poems. Some things work in a poem but will cause laughter when sung. [Condensed notes from an interview: He looks for texts of suitable length, divisions, sonic aspects and meaning.]

LESLIE BASSETT: Very personal choices.

JOHN EATON: Instinctively. (I sometimes feel that the texts choose me!) Generally those which use clear simple imagery carried mainly by verbs. The closer poetry is to painting, the less settable it is. I also tend to be more interested in religious poetry than other kinds. The poets I've set most frequently are Donne, Yeats, and the modern Irish master whom I've been honored to have as librettist for three operas, Patrick Creagh.

LUKAS FOSS: Visually suggestive poetry, which seems to be written by a kindred mind and which I love.

DENNIS RILEY: Some texts are fore-ordained, e.g. liturgical texts, such as the *Pater Noster*, or *Magnificat*. In the case of the *Cloud Songs*, I just looked for appropriate texts, having decided to “do” clouds. The Haiku texts were in a book given to me by my grandmother. In some cases, friends suggested readings out of which texts were later drawn (sometimes years later). I read quite a bit of poetry

(including German, French, Italian, English, American, Spanish, a little far-Eastern and most, of course, in translation). I love Emily Dickinson's work, and am working on a cycle of her poems. I often find things "accidentally."

GUNTHER SCHULLER: Again too varied to generalize. Have no preferences as such, although I tend to look for poems/texts that are profound, subtle, and combine beauty/depth of expression with a degree of abstraction and "philosophy."

JOSEPH SCHWANTNER: I choose texts from poetry that speaks to me personally. Poetry that I find evocative, compelling, timeless, with a sense of mystery and the universal. I'm fond of poetry by Issa, Basho, Buson, Li Po, Tu Fu; contemporary American poets Ursula Le Guin and Agueda Pizarro.

III. WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEXT AND MUSIC IN YOUR COMPOSITIONS?

T. J. ANDERSON:

1. Expansion of its psychological meaning.
2. Rhythmic sources.
3. Expanded new word factors.

DOMINICK ARGENTO: The music is essentially a reflection of the emotional response evoked in me by the text—its meaning, its beauty, its insights, its ironies, its timidity, its vulgarity, etc. etc. The music attempts to force the listener (and performer) to share *my* point of view about the text.

MILTON BABBITT: A multitude of relationships. What do you do with sonic aspects? Syntactical things? Do you match them? I have been influenced by linguistic analysis of poetry, and use that approach when setting texts.

JOHN EATON: Music, being the more abstract of the two arts, must primarily define the rate of motion; poetry, the type of motion and

sonority (through music). Music generally dominates—sometimes as in “Repose of Rivers” from *Songs for R. P. B.* [by Eaton] to an extreme where I wonder if what results is an art song in accordance with the definition given above. Often the import of the song is different from that of the poem, as in *Thoughts on Rilke*. This should certainly not be called an art song but is a composition for voice and electronic music inspired by a poem.

LUKAS FOSS: See my article in Univ. of Columbia Magazine, Spring issue, 1981. “On the Uneasy Marriage of Music and Poetry.” [One paraphrased excerpt that particularly pertains to this question—a composer exercises one of three options in any text setting: *imitation*, an attempt to illustrate the meaning through sound by following the inflections of the poetry in rhythm and pitch; *contradiction*, the opposite of imitation which is used primarily for relief from the former method; and *independence*, ignoring the text, thus allowing the arts separate coexistence.]

DENNIS RILEY: The color, “weight,” rhythm and “meaning” of a text are all very important and controlling factors in composing the music. (The type of voice is important too.) I think I am fairly traditional in my approach, but I would have to deal with each setting individually; it’s impossible to generalize.

GUNTHER SCHULLER: Again too varied—over the years, ranges from “descriptive, evocative” in my early songs to “abstract, phonetic translation” in *Meditation*.

JOSEPH SCHWANTNER: In my work *text* defines the form, musical materials and content—all structural elements of the work, both large and small, relate to the text.

IV. HOW DO YOU VIEW THE ROLE OF THE SINGER? WHAT SPECIAL (NON-TRADITIONAL) VOCAL TECHNIQUES DO YOU REQUIRE? HOW SHOULD THE SINGER BE TRAINED IN PRODUCING THESE SOUNDS WITHOUT INJURY TO THE INSTRUMENT? WHAT WOULD AID COMMUNICATION BETWEEN COMPOSERS AND SINGERS TO

FACILITATE AND FURTHER PERFORMANCES OF CONTEMPORARY SOLO VOCAL WORKS?

T. J. ANDERSON:

1. To present the text.
2. Reflect their personal musicianship/experiences through the performed work.
3. Be influenced by composer “intentions.”

DOMINICK ARGENTO: I view the role of the singer in the traditional way: i.e., I expect him or her to be my collaborator in re-creating the music—I expect (and wish) my music to be filtered through the singer’s own sensibilities. No special techniques required: I’ll happily settle for a very trained voice commanded by a decent brain. Last question above: have composer write more and better songs.

MILTON BABBITT: The new level of virtuosity in many female singers encourages composers. I have worked long and hard with Bethany Beardslee and know her voice. When I wrote a vowel on a high pitch I expected and wanted the necessary modifications for range and vowel. I prefer voice and electronics so I can control the dynamics, tempo, etc. This medium can become comfortable for the singer—no accompanist to worry about. They can practice with the tape, which then gives a sense of security in rehearsal and performance.

LESLIE BASSETT: Many singers lack precision—rhythm, pitch, tempo—which all musicians must have. That has been my greatest complaint with many of my performers.

JOHN EATON: As music ought generally to dominate over the poem, so the voice must stand over the instrument(s). Throat growl, harmonics, cheek tremolo, all kinds of microtonal trills and tremolos, controlled degrees of vibrato, occasional non-vocal sounds, non bel canto traditions of singing (jazz, middle-Eastern, Chinese, etc.). There is a way of producing all these sounds that feels good and is not harmful to the voice. All these have been

explained to me by traditional bel canto singers or singers of other traditions. I have always tried to collaborate as closely as possible with both kinds of artists and this would be my suggestion to composers interested in exploring new vocal techniques.

DENNIS RILEY: The voice is the oldest of musical instruments, and all instrumental performance for hundreds of years aspired to embody the qualities and characteristics of the singing voice. Since the time of Bach, the situation began slowly to reverse, and instruments developed capabilities which would leave most singers gasping (and not always in admiration!). What is more difficult to sing well than, say, *Erbarme dich*? Yet what is difficult is now done every day. And what is impossible just takes a little longer.

GUNTHER SCHULLER: I am not too interested in stretching the non-traditional vocal techniques and the role of the singer. Correctly trained/produced voices are not harmed by contemporary vocal literature of quality. But training in this area, in general, still is quite inadequate and affects performance—the lack of—of contemporary vocal music.

JOSEPH SCHWANTNER: I use the singer in a traditional manner except that I often enlarge the singer's role by asking the singer to play additional instruments such as crotales, triangles, glass crystals, tambourines, etc. Communication between composer and singers could be enhanced if singers actively commissioned composers to write works specifically for them in a collaborative relationship.

V. WHAT FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS DO YOU SEE IN THE GENRE OF SOLO VOCAL LITERATURE?

T. J. ANDERSON: Shall always be meaningful to composers because of our relationship to both text and singers.

DOMINICK ARGENTO: None in the area of requiring freakish vocal stunts. Much in the area of finding new and interesting

“dramaturgies” in the composition of songs; in the area of alternatives to lyric poetry; in the area of subject matter.

MILTON BABBITT: Many young composers are interested in speech/music with little explicit pitch. There are many possibilities with phoneme pieces, combinations of live singer and computer speech, tape modifications of the singer and computer synthesis of speech.

JOHN EATON: Continued infusion of other traditions of singing, continued development of new techniques by Roy Hart, Michiko Hirayama, the Contemporary Vocal Techniques Ensemble of La Jolla, and others.

LUKAS FOSS: I am not a prophet.

DENNIS RILEY: Whatever else happens, I think as long as there are composers, there will be song, however it might be redefined, because we all have a voice however bad, which is part of our body, sensuous, and immediate.

GUNTHER SCHULLER: Don't know — cannot predict.

JOSEPH SCHWANTNER: ? [sic]

NOTES

¹Willi Apel, *The Harvard Dictionary of Music* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1958), s.v. “Song.”

²Lukas Foss, “On the Uneasy Marriage of Music and Poetry,” *University of Columbia Magazine* (Summer 1981): 26-27.

³The only exception was the response from T. J. Anderson, which is dated Nov. 29, 1982.