

Institute of Music Research, School of Advanced Study, University of London

Inside Song Performance: mapping the interior of the performative act.

Venue: Chancellor's Hall, Senate House, University of London

Friday, 13 May 2011, 9.30-18.00

A Royal Musical Association Supported Research Event.

Organiser: Dr Kathryn Whitney (Institute of Musical Research)

Chair: Professor Amanda Glauert (Royal College of Music)

SUMMARY

"Inside Song Performance" was a public, performance-led, cross-disciplinary research event that formed the second stage of our research into the "art" or the "making" of song performance in concert. In this event, we aimed to identify characteristics and qualities of the act of song performance that will aid our understanding of the process of live song creation for performers, composers, and audiences. We were especially interested in exploring the performative potential of poetic text - how poetry requires performance to have meaning - and what this might mean for song performers, composers and audiences. We hoped to learn more about the role performers play (if any) in determining text / music relationships in concert (can we say that live performance is "creative" or has "structure", or has this been determined in advance by poets and composers?).

Throughout the day, our focus was on the act of performance - our concern was not to understand the rehearsal process, but rather to learn more about what performers can (and cannot) do expressively and/or creatively in the moment of performance before a live audience. The study day featured a series of lecture-demonstrations - each including both discussion and live performance - and a moderated panel discussion.

Research Questions

1. What is the performer's role in creating poetry and song in a live concert setting?
2. Can we describe performers' contribution to poetry and song creation in concert, and if so how?
3. What (if anything) can we learn from "internal" (performers') descriptions of performance by poets, actors, singers and pianists?
4. How might poetic structure dictate the expressive content and structure of the performative act in a live concert setting?

FORMAL PRESENTATIONS

Welcome and Introduction: Professor Amanda Glauert (Royal College of Music)

1. The Singer's View: Dr Kathryn Whitney (Institute of Musical Research): "Inside song performance: structured or unstructured space?"

2. The Poet's View: Dr Fiona Sampson (Award-winning poet; author "Music Lessons: Poetry and Musical Form"): "Point Counterpoint"

3. The Pianist's and Scholar's View: Mr Sholto Kynoch (Oxford Lieder Festival) & Dr Helen Abbott (Bangor University): "Collaborating with performers: Baudelaire's poetry revisited through music"

4. The Actor's View: Professor Jane Boston (Central School of Speech & Drama; International Centre for Voice): "Re-constructing the voice of Elizabeth Bishop: An exploration of interpretative vocal pedagogy within contemporary actor training"

Round Table: Respondents: Professor Paul Alan Barker (Central School of Speech & Drama; author "Composing for Voice"), Professor Amanda Glauert (Royal College of Music);

REPORT (Published in the Autumn 2011 newsletter of the Royal Musicological Association)

Can we study the act of live song performance in concert? If so, what methodology might we use, who might best devise it, and what new aspects of the nature of the performance event – or the music featured within it – might such research identify? This cross-disciplinary study day, organised by the SongArt Performance Research Group (www.songart.co.uk) and held at the Institute of Musical Research in London on 13 May 2011, addressed these questions by engaging four competing perspectives on the "interior" (or descriptions of the personal experience) of professional song performance in concert: that of the singer, the pianist, the poet, the actor.

We took as our starting point the performance of poetic text, seeking to explore whether practitioners' approaches to the "creative" unfolding of language-based poetic content in poetry performance may have structural parallels in song. We also wished to explore whether the methodologies currently applied to the study of poetry in performance (an area well advanced in theatre studies) might be useful for musicians and musicologists. The four formal papers, each of which featured live experimental performance (making good use of the superb Steinway D in Chancellor's Hall), offered a "prismatic" view the act of song performance as a creative, generative event. The study day ended with buoyant round-table discussion, led by (music theatre ["not musical theatre"]) composer Professor Paul Barker of the Central School of Speech & Drama. Could practitioners and theorists agree on the role in song performance of "authority, ownership, and abandonment," he asked? Delegates were coaxed away in the second hour only by the insistent popping of corks at the back of the room.

What did we learn? The outcome was three-fold. First, like many such cross-disciplinary events, we were confronted with difficulties of translation. When practitioners talk about the “craft” of performance, what do they mean? None of the performers at the workshop was willing to be put on par with an author, and yet each presented unique creative content that was more than just “interpretive”. A new investigative area certainly hove into view. Second, our focus on the performance of poetic text – in particular in the talk by poet Fiona Sampson, formerly a professional violinist – highlighted how poetic structures necessitate, rather than merely invite, performance. Music theorists have long described musical structures in a similar way, but this, it appeared, was different. Performance is not the unique interpretation of a formerly created poetic object, but is the act of creation of a poetic object, since a poem contains too many competing possibilities in its unuttered state to be said to “mean” anything outside performance.

Finally, perhaps the most research-intensive part of the study day turned out to be the least methodologically rigorous: the open discussion of the personal experience of the featured live song and poetry performances with our broad, and in part “inexpert”, delegate audience. Actress Jane Boston’s “invocation” of the poetry and character of Elizabeth Bishop affected audience members differently. My own performance of an unknown song by Canadian composer Stephen Chatman – then repeated with its text (a Margaret Atwood poem) available via powerpoint –prompted listeners to describe experiencing a “completely different piece” the second time round. Indeed, no two audience members appeared to have heard the same piece, even within a single performance. This underscored how free listening can be – and how little performers may lead audiences with their “interpretations” – when a culture of “knowing what a piece is about” has yet to be established.

It was at this moment that SongArt co-director Amanda Glauert’s introductory caution, that we needed to be “brave” as we entered into this atypical research space, took on its full meaning. Do audience members in some way co-habit the creative interior of song? If so, which part, and how can we know? What might this mean for the composer and performer, and how should musicologists respond? Further collaborative, cross-disciplinary events, it is hoped, may tell.

Kathryn Whitney