

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

Study Day: Report

Performativity, Poetry, Creation: Investigating the Creative Space of Live Art Song Performance

Venue:

Chancellor's Hall, Senate House, University of London

Tuesday, 18 May 2010

Introduction

Singers and pianists are “creative” in a live performance context. On this point, we can quite confidently state, we broadly agree. And yet when we ask exactly *how* the musicians are creative in performance – by which artistic mechanism, for example, or through which part of the piece – scholarly vocabulary typically fails. “The singer draws on personal experience to express the essence of the text,” we might say, or “The work channels universals that are offered for our contemplation in performance.” Neither notion is what scholars would call “measurable” or “immutable”, and neither invites the sort of questions that are appropriate to empirical scrutiny. Indeed, even the most pragmatic enthusiasts use notoriously woolly language to describe what happens in a live concert setting. “Keenlyside captured the ambiguity that runs through the cycle” (Anthony Thommasini, *New York Times*, 02.03.10, C3); “probing levels of emotional recession that few singers dare discover, [Alice] Coote and [Julius] Drake’s recital was often breathtaking in its sheer conviction...” (Hilary Finch, *The Times*, 17.02.10). Even the analyst Jonathan Dunsby is not entirely immune. Speaking of his own experience in concert as pianist, he writes: “...it is the third performance [of a new piece] where magically everything seems to come together.” (Performing Music, 1995, 10)

How is the “ambiguity” technically and creatively “captured” in art song performance? By what vocal, pianistic, theatrical or psychological means were the “levels of emotional recession” effectively “probed”? Do the qualities described in these reviews reside (if they exist at all) in the musical and poetic text or in the performers, or are they manifest somewhere else entirely? Is it all “magic”, or can we develop a meaningful critical language for speaking about the phenomenon of live performance that will illuminate the *act* of performance, rather than either the process of preparation for performance, or performance’s remnants?

New questions such as these require new approaches, and new approaches, in turn, require new methods of enquiry. Our meeting addressed the question of creativity in art song performance by identifying and opening a new critical window: that of a possible shared “performative” potential in both the act of live art song performance and the nature of the lyric poetic and musical text. The study day featured a series of lecture-performances, an open coaching session and a round-table discussion. Crucially, we put live experimental performances at the heart of our presentations, and both presenters and audience were invited to engage with the musicians in performance throughout the day.

Our participants included professional singers, pianists, music historians, aestheticians, poets, performance studies specialists and song enthusiasts, whose shared perspectives allowed us to take important first steps toward developing an effective scholarly language for identifying and describing what happens during a live art song performance event. Our venue, the Institute of Musical Research in the School of Advanced Study, London, provided a unique opportunity to step into the

uncharted territory between established institutions – musicology, performance studies, professional performance and pedagogy, and poetry and literature. The study day offered a new critical platform on which to collaborate both *about* performance and *through* performance from widely differing perspectives to see what new insights might emerge.

Structure and Content

Our study day opened with a welcome from IMR Director John Irving, followed by a general introduction from Amanda Glauert (Kingston University).

1. Definitions

Our first two sessions offered related perspectives on what it might mean to be an art song and/or poetry “performer”, how the act of performance may be structurally and/or philosophically intrinsic to the notion poetry, and how live song performance might manifest poetry’s “lyric” potential.

In the first presentation, a lecture-recital titled **“Investigating the creative space of live art song performance”**, **Kathryn Whitney (RWCMD, IMR Visiting Research Fellow)** introduced the idea of “performativity”, a term that encompasses: 1. the content of a poem and/or song that is only manifest in the act of the performance; 2. the aesthetic quality of that content coming into being; and 3. the (creative?) act the performer undertakes to realise this content. She discussed the opportunities for – and limitations of – creativity in live art song performance from the perspective of the practitioner, centring her discussion around two main questions: “Is good art song performance really good poetry performance?;” and “How might a singer’s understanding of the poetic text impact its delivery in performance – or does it?” These questions were explored in theory (in relation to speech-act theory, for example) and in practice through live experimental performances (sung with pianist Briony Williams) of music and poetry by Vaughan Williams, Butterworth, Stevenson and Housman. Kathryn highlighted possible connections between art song performance and the “romantic performative” (the notion that the performance, in the sense of writing, of poetry in a way creates experience, and through it, the world, Esterhammer, 2000), a key feature of the 18th-century poetry that initiated the art song tradition. Although unable unequivocally to locate the “space” of creativity in art song performance (is it in the text, the performers’ live enactment, the audience’s observation, or the broader “event” of the performance?), she concluded that “performativity” was clearly a primary feature of poetry, and that this feature, which is both structural and aesthetic, made the act of art song performance an essential “folding-out” of poetry’s power to influence and to create change.

In the second presentation, **Amanda Glauert (Kingston University) spoke on “Doing a Mignon: Finding Lyric Spaces,”** a theme that she explored in association with soprano April Fredrick and pianist Briony Williams, who performed settings of Goethe’s “Kennst Du das Land?” by Beethoven, Wolf and Hensel. Amanda’s presentation highlighted Goethe’s vision of the “poet-(composer)-performer” as personified in the character of Mignon within the Wilhelm Meister story. Drawing on the parallels between Goethe and Herder (specifically the latter’s definition of the lyric as “I sing”, which calls forth the response “I hear that you sing”), she discussed the lyric as the “land of the soul,” and the performance of a poem as (the making of) a “flight” from elements of the epic (story), dramatic (illustration), and lyric (essence). Goethe’s depiction of the composer (exemplified by the Harper in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*) as one who creates only “fragments” was contrasted with the creative insight and generative potential of Mignon as performer, whose “voicing” of his fragments transformed them, bringing them into the “land” or “lyric space” where poetry happens. Amanda concluded that the lyric was the foundation both of the poetry and of the impulse to “performance”, both theatrical and philosophical, in this period; indeed, neither should really be separated from the

other. She then asked how this knowledge might impact actual art song performance. Briony Williams and April Fredrick offered interesting insight into how they applied their understanding of the lyric practically, both as part of the rehearsal process and through characterisation and visualisation in performance.

2. Elaboration and collaboration

The afternoon session, which aimed to delve further into related questions about the connection between the lyric and live performance, was divided into three parts: a paper on the role of the pianist in creating the lyric; a session on Goethe's "Rules for Actors"; and an interactive open coaching session designed to engage all participants.

First, **Briony Williams (RAM) delivered a lecture-recital titled "Finding words for the piano's song"** in which she argued that the piano, rather than being "voiceless and mute" (Cone), was a lyric voice in its own right. Wordless, but not "voiceless", she argued, the piano can in fact offer a "far more truthful utterance" of the content of a poem than the words themselves achieve. She discussed three pieces in detail: Clara Schumann's "Lorelei" (Heine); Fanny Hensel's "Wenn ich mir in stille Seele" (Goethe); and "Warnung vor dem Rhein" (Simrock) by the singer and composer Pauline von Decker. In each song (performed with soprano April Fredrick), Briony highlighted the uniquely effective, primary position of the piano in illuminating something "beyond" or "behind" the words: the content or inner nature of the text. She concluded that the piano was and is in fact the "first listener", and that, if there can be such a thing as a lyrical commentary, "this is what the piano sings."

Second, singer and pedagogue **Norbert Meyn (GSMD, RCM, Lieder Theatre London) lead a session titled "Goethe's Rules for Actors: Reconciling historical models and modern song performance."** Having undertaken a close study of Goethe's music collection in Weimar, Norbert was in a unique position to be able to offer insight into Goethe as not just a writer, but above all as a man of the theatre, where he spent the majority of his professional life, both as an actor and as a director. Stressing the extent to which there was little difference between "singers" and "actors" during Goethe's time, as well as the fact that Goethe programmed "theatrical" music at his private salons, Norbert took us through a reading of a selection of Goethe's "Rules," highlighting how his guidance for singers and for actors was virtually indistinguishable. What might this mean for art song performers today? Norbert suggested two possible conclusions: first, that there is no essential difference between a song for the salon and one for the stage ("Das Veilchen," for example, is from a *Singspiel*; Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin* descended from a *Liederspiel*, and opera by Paisello); and second, that singers today should be free to "characterise," or to sing "theatrically" in lieder performance, if that approach appeals to them as artists. In conclusion, Norbert stressed that Goethe's rules were rooted in practice, and that there is little historical evidence for suggesting that the "lyric" was not also "dramatic"; indeed, it would be ahistorical to conceive of a separation of the two.

We concluded the afternoon programme with an **Open Coaching Session** in which all participants, including our audience, were invited to probe the act of performance in an interactive session with **soprano April Fredrick and pianist Briony Williams**, who started us off with a performance of von Decker's "Warnung vor dem Rhein." Half-way through the coaching, **pianist Stephen Coombs** (who knew neither the piece nor the singer) replaced Briony at the keyboard and performed a "spontaneous" realisation of the same song with April.

This session threw up a number of unexpected findings. First, we learned that what performers intend to present in their interpretation of a text does not necessarily correspond to what an

audience perceives. The interiority of the performers' live experience was stressed here, as was the contribution the audience makes to the "interpretation", indeed, even the "performance" of the song. It was agreed in general that our audience responded more strongly to "clear" or "simple" presentation from the performers (sharper contrasts, or more consistent dynamic or colouristic realisation over time, for example), which was perceived to be emotionally "complex", than to a (for the performers) emotionally or stylistically complex presentation (ones in which they reported thinking more deeply and broadly about the meaning of the text as they performed), which was in some cases perceived to be "conflicted" or "unclear".

Second, we learned that spontaneous music-making from expert musicians can produce powerful "interpretations" of an art song that are as "clear" and seemingly "coherent" as performances that were heavily rehearsed. This strongly undermines the (pedagogically inspired?) belief that careful joint preparation always turns out better performances. It also threw up two important findings: 1. That much of the lyric "content" of the piece (if such a thing exists) may be more about the "performance" offered in a song by the poet and composer, than by the "performance" (so-called "interpretation") of their creation by the musicians in concert; and 2. That the "performative" dimension (the potential for "come-into-being" and the space in time in which that happens) of a live concert event is both an effective "creative space" for performers (somewhere they can make important musical and theatrical decisions that can be clearly understood), and an "expressive (or possibly creative) space" for audiences, one in which their joint experience of the event of the performance of the song contributes significantly to its meaning.

Finally, we learned that a barrier of language exists between how performers describe what they do and how audiences describe the experience of what the performers are doing. Repeatedly, the audience described sections of the performances with words such as "powerful", "thoughtful", "complicated", or "clear". When the musicians were asked what they did to achieve those effects, however, they typically responded in musical terms: "I was louder"; "I slowed the tempo"; or "I was thinking in triplets"; "I enunciated the consonants more clearly". This finding is especially interesting in light of the overall goal of the day, which was to uncover possible new critical directions in art song performance research that would be relevant across disciplines. While our study day confirmed that the act of live performance can be said to strongly resemble the "lyric" or "performative" potential of poetry – and indeed may be the key act that manifests it – these similarities are most clearly observed, and perhaps most critically relevant, from the perspective of the audience, rather than the performers. That the "creative" contribution of performers to the revelation (in the sense of bringing-into-being) of an art song is both qualitative and quantitative was strongly manifest in the live performances that illuminated our discussions throughout the study day. More work needs to be done, however, to clarify what performers are doing in a live art song performance *from their perspective*, and how scholarship can meaningfully engage in the study of *the attributes of actual live performance* without mistaking the act of performance for the *remnants* of performance (memories of performances, comparative study of acoustic features of recorded performances, or of the influence of pedagogy or rehearsal patterns, for example), the *intention of the performers* (often an expectation derived through the rehearsal process, and not always perceived by the audience), or the *received experience* of performance from the perspective of the audience (if that is a separate thing).

Our meeting closed with a **Round-table Discussion, which was led by pianist Stephen Coombs and musicologist Sophie Fuller (TLCMD)**. The purpose the Round Table was to invite discussion of broader general issues surrounding art song performance and here the topics raised reflected the wide range of training and experience of those attending the study day. Topics raised included: gender issues and women as salon musicians in the 19th century (Sophie); "chamber music" and how performing with instrumentalists was different to performing with singers, where the text has

such a strong presence that it can sometimes create a hierarchy (Stephen); the “conflict” or “fight” between text and music that is an essential part of the art song recital (Stephen); the perceived “banality” of English song, and the 19th-century English Ballad Concerts, which would feature the top singers of the time (Sophie); how the private experience of a Lied in 18th-century, for example at home at the piano, was sometimes used as a kind of “restorative,” a fact that speaks volumes about music’s role in that culture (Norbert); how, especially in training, singers can often be very strongly led interpretively by pianists, and how professional performance can be quite different (Carola Darwin); a composer’s choice of poetry, especially so-called “simple” poetry, and how our belief in so-called poetic “quality” often obscures the beauty in less complex works (Norbert); how new (uninitiated) audiences are especially open to contemporary works, which contrasts with the conservatism in much art song concert-going culture (Norbert & Stephen); the question of whether good music needs good poetry and how composers respond (Sandrine Anterrion); how some composers (Wolf, for example) “dress” the performers, offering them fewer interpretive choices (April Fredrick); how we talk of musical “text setting”, but how words can also lead, for example, as a structure for music (Stephen); the “lyric I” as the “universal I” and how gender plays out in songs where the singer’s voice does not correspond to the gender of the voice in the text (Carola Darwin; Sophie Fuller; Briony Williams).

3. Conclusions

We began our day with three clear intentions: 1. To investigate how musicians may be “creative” in live art song performance, and to probe the possible connections between the act of song performance and the notion of the “lyric” in poetry and music; 2. To take the first steps toward establishing a new critical language for discussing the act of live art song performance that would be useful across disciplines; and 3. To assemble cross-institutionally on a new platform designed to allow us to see more clearly, and to learn from, each other’s quite different perspectives on art song performance with a view to gaining new insight into the nature of art song performance. The day was strongly successful on all three counts.

Two features of our meeting were exceptionally profitable: 1. Our mixing of musicologists and professional performers; and 2. The integration of live experimental performance.

The fact that we brought together professional practitioners of both music scholarship and music performance strongly influenced the direction of enquiry our both our formal presentations and subsequent discussions; at no time in the formal sessions was there a separate space for pursuing the institutional concerns of just one discipline. There were many instances in which information about music scholarship was immediately tempered by first-hand knowledge of practice, for example, and vice versa. It was a wonderful opportunity for participants to begin to see both how their training and separate professional activities influence their understanding of the ontology of art song performance. More importantly, however, the presence of both musicologists and performers shaped the very nature of the questions asked; these needed to be cast in a language that would be relevant to all, and this criterion pushed much of the inquiry into the fascinating uncharted middle-ground between scholarship and practice. Specifically, this brought forward the possibility of discussing the “live” aspect of performance, and how the (aesthetic?) quality of “liveness” may be a key “creative space” (possibly jointly inhabited by performers, composers and poets, and audience) about which little is presently known.

Without a doubt, the incorporation of live experimental performances, and the opportunity for participants to interact with the performers and engage directly with the performance process, were the most productive, in the sense of research-intensive, aspects of our study day. Quite unlike papers featuring recordings or videos of performance, and unlike even the established “lecture-

recital” model (in which the speaker performs live to “show” the piece, feature or technique under discussion), our interactive sessions allowed us to probe the definition, as well as the apparent boundaries, of performance, looking at it, crucially, from the perspective of both the performers and the audience. This was illuminating for all concerned, and impacted the research results of all formal papers.

4. Future Directions in the form of two questions

(4.1) Can we profitably discuss what happens during the presentation of an art song in a live concert setting? Our study day confirmed that there is huge interest in discussing the act of art song performance across disciplines; however, more work needs to be done to establish a new, shared, critical language for discussing the performance as an *act* that would be relevant across disciplines.

(4.2) Can we separate the creative contribution of the performers from that of the composer and poet, or indeed audience in the presentation of the “lyric I”?

This question leads in two directions. First, we learned that, from the perspective of reception, there is no clear boundary between what the performers and the composer/poet contribute, and that the audience themselves strongly shape the performance, both for themselves and for the performers. This underscores how participatory the performance process is, and how no one element can fulfil its potential without the other. More (perhaps empirical?) work needs to be done to investigate how this co-creation plays out in a live performance context. This finding also has implications for future research on isolated aspects of the performance process, which, our study day strongly suggests, is weaker if undertaken without an audience present.

Second, we learned that a new research space exists – that of the ontology of art song performance – that is largely uncharted, and that, when better understood, may offer the key to understanding how musical works relate to musical practice, as well as how musicological research itself may have “performative” potential. Before we can probe further into what performers and composers and poets do, we must have a clearer idea of what performance *is*. To answer this question, further work must be done to clarify the elusive character and structure of live performance, about which, it turns out, we know much less than we thought we did.

Kathryn Whitney (co-convener, with Amanda Glauert)

IMR Study Day Participants:

Stephen Coombs, pianist

April Fredrick, Royal Academy of Music

Sophie Fuller, Trinity Laban College of Music & Drama

Amanda Glauert, Kingston University

John Irving, Director, Institute of Musical Research

Norbert Meyn, Guildhall School of Music & Drama, Royal College of Music, Lieder Theatre London

Kathryn Whitney, Institute of Musical Research / Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama

Briony Williams, Royal Academy of Music