

Words and Music

In the past year I have written a lot of words. This is partly because it is through writing that I process 'stuff' (and there has been quite a lot of 'stuff' to process in the past year) but it is also because the gaping hole left in my life from cancelled performances needed filling with something that felt creative. In April 2020 I wrote 'An identity in lockdown', a short paper for the eavesdropping symposium; later in the year I grappled with a long essay on collaboration for the Fragility of Sounds lecture series (hosted by the Kunstuniversität in Graz, but finally held online); in March 2021 I produced 'Inside Out', an hour-long video essay for MaerzMusik – Festival for Time Issues. I've also done an Arts Council funding application which demands a lot of words (but somehow always fewer than you need). All these words were about my practice as a musician. Whilst my public singing stopped, I have been composing quite personal statements about who I am and how I work, alone and with others, as a singer.

I've never considered myself a writer but I have always loved words. I was an avid reader as a child and, at one stage, wanted to be a poet when I grew up. To me they are potent, as in full of potential *and* powerful — a carrot and a stick and a spell and a balm. Curiously, though, words and music exist in quite separate spaces for me. I know many singers for whom the text is their way into the music: we describe this approach as being 'text-led'. This makes sense for a lot of music (perhaps most obviously that of the Baroque period and 'song' generally, whether by Dowland, Schubert, Fauré or Britten) but I've never found that approach very natural and now I am wondering why, given my love of words.

Fundamentally, I find the business of interpreting the music more interesting. Of course the two elements are not completely separate, but it's the *openness* of the musical proposition that excites me, the blankness of the canvas before me or the oblique and sometimes opaque sense of the path ahead. The performer's task of wrestling with, sensing and then communicating the meaning, mood or impetus of a phrase or piece of music is enticing and challenging precisely because it is beyond words. When I describe to you what I think a piece is about, inevitably the magic evaporates or falls short through that verbal articulation, otherwise why would we need to hear the piece?! Perhaps I also feel that it is the composer's job to worry about how to set the text and that it is my job not to over-egg those efforts. Effective text setting needs no 'artful' highlighting. Clarity of delivery *is* my job but only to the extent that it serves the music, and it's a thin line between clear and camp.

One has to admit that many texts set to music are pretty dull or banal; also, that many great texts set to music somehow fail to sing. It is a delicate partnership between words and music and one that is side-stepped altogether in instrumental music without, to my ears, any significant loss. Maybe this is key to my approach: I was an instrumentalist until I was twenty and, when I did start singing, I never had a conventional singer's training. I acknowledge, too, that I come at this from a postmodern perspective, steeped in mid-to-late twentieth-century repertoire by composers as varied as Feldman, Berio, Lachenmann and Aperghis who did such important work in reimagining the relationship between words and music and examining the potential of text as an ambiguous or even neutral sound source, separated from sentiment or learned erudition and so re-democratised.

For performing artists, a vital mode of expression, communication and interaction has been cut off. In the absence of live music and with limited face-to-face social contact, words may have become more urgent for us all. We exchange them on the phone or via Zoom, we write them in emails and on postcards. Many of us may be journalling our way through the months. Words have become a refuge for me as, through all this writing, I have found a new creative outlet, and I'm sure that, in ordinary times, lack of time and lack of confidence would have prevented me from discovering this. There is an implicit assumption that performers don't write and that we should leave the writing to other people, whether marketing departments who sell our performances, academics or 'experts' who write the liner notes to our recordings, or critics who write up our performances. I don't think this model serves us or our audiences well, and I fear it limits us in many small but significant ways. Hélène Cixous's essay *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976) has influenced my thinking on this topic, and I encourage all performers (and most especially women and all those who feel underrepresented) to write, to put yourselves and your artistry into text, to open your mouths and pour out unheard-of songs.

For words are powerful. Words sell: we employ them in publicity blurbs, programme notes and funding applications, and I believe we empower ourselves as artists when we are involved in that creative process. Words signify: we point to crucial and sometimes radical degrees of relationality when we say 'commissioned by...' 'in collaboration with...' or 'co-composed with...', and these credits can reinforce or crack existing hierarchies. Words transform: we have to harness them to digest and communicate to others the state of affairs, and to bring about the change we want to see. Performing artists are experiencing the sharp end of this pandemic and Brexit. We need to raise more than our trained and beautiful voices: we need words and music.

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