Introduction

The literature on words and music is vast. This was already the case even before the proliferation of writing about Western classical music that was evident in books, journals, encyclopaedias, and more ephemeral sources during the 1980s and 1990s, not only in English, and not only restricted to 'pure' studies but also in the realm of intra- and intercultural research. So why is yet another book needed? If it is difficult to pinpoint a conclusive answer to that question, the direction of thought leading to *Making Words Sing* is clear enough.

Firstly, musicological thinking moves on from one short period to the next as each new wave of writers brings fresh insight and knowledge, and in particular as taste changes. For example, in the specialized field of music analysis – on which I draw throughout these pages intermittently, although without importing too much of its fascinating and necessary jargon and technical routines, or, all being well, its tendency to redescribe the known and even to state the obvious – a sense of the appropriate repertoire has changed beyond recognition in recent years. There was a time, say twenty years ago, when those interested directly or vicariously in music theory and analysis would rightly joke that 'analysis' could be defined roughly as: the detailed study of the music of Anton Webern. And if that pleasantry is nowadays wearing very thin, this is a sign of the broadening of technical engagement with music that some would say has led to dilution and lack of focus, but that others welcome as a way forward from the perceived tyrannies of high modernism in its ascetic intellectualism, and of structuralism in its obsession with the apparent mechanisms of art. At least it is no surprise now if the repertoire drawn on in a book is not either 'Romantic' or 'Modern' but both, reflecting this author's conviction that composers of the twentieth century were always much closer to their predecessors than historians, by and large, were able to understand and convey effectively; and perhaps even more intriguingly that composers of the nineteenth century were often far in 'advance' of historical interpretation, and

their work could remain so, long after their deaths. Think only, for example, of the complete transformation of musical form ('form' as understood from the model to be found in Beethoven) worked out by Schubert over hundreds of musical compositions during Beethoven's lifetime and in the further, golden months until Schubert's death in 1828, only to be misunderstood by about five generations of musicologists in any number of languages, infatuated (who can blame them?) with Beethoven's way of writing music.

Secondly, there emerged in musicology of the 1980s and 1990s not only a rather priggish liberalism coupled with a naïve – in my view – psychologism that masqueraded as a kind of psychoanalytical savvy without, if the truth be told, having much at all to do with psychotherapeutic scholarship or understanding, but also much more positively, what has been called a 'eucrasia', a sort of general wellbeing based on openness, in technical musical discourse. To some extent this has to be put down to a growing discomfort among those who write about music with 'formalism' in any of its many guises, including the 'classic' music-analytical approaches enshrined in various textbooks of that subdiscipline.[1] It was not so much that 'meaning' was somehow rediscovered in the critical free-for-all that often seemed to be sanctioned by 'New Musicology', but that histories – the use of reliable historical data at least – could once again be part of the *interpretation* of the past rather than the past being merely, purely, supposedly, revisited.

Thirdly, and possibly most importantly at least as to intellectual matters, the eucrasia that relied on the readmission of historical fact (albeit symbolic fact) on to the critical palette brought with it the possibility of what I call an 'evidence-based' musical discourse that seems able to mediate between extremes of structuralism on the one hand and critical fantasy on the other. This epistemological position has long been championed, and argued out in detail, by Jean-Jacques Nattiez in the area of music semiotics.[2] One may well ask why, then, *Making Words Sing* is not based on Nattiez's subtle methodology and its careful terminology. Actually, in many respects it is, covertly perhaps, in that I have always tried to keep clearly in mind the three 'poles' of the 'tripartition' that invites us to be clear at all times about whether we are discussing matters of production, reception

[1] Perhaps the most widely used analytical textbook has been Nicholas Cook's *A Guide to Musical Analysis*, London, Dent, 1987.

[2] Among his voluminous writings I particularly recommend, as to applied methodology, *Wagner Androgyne: A Study in Interpretation*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993, and for the broad sweep of his thinking, *The Battle of Chronos and Orpheus*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004; this in addition to his standard work to date in English, *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990.

or description/explanation ('poiesis', 'esthesis' or the 'neutral' level), and nearly always to keep in mind that there will be some specific interaction among these poles;[3] and I have always tried to keep in mind the kinds of meaning that are supposed to be on offer in any musical explanation or musicohistorical argument. Yet a building ought to stand up once the scaffolding is removed, and without the smell of wet cement lingering; one wants to see the marionette dance without also seeing the strings. Nothing, however, is deliberately *hidden* in my work here. Where epistemology and methodology are implicit rather than discussed in detail (and implicitness is not uncommon in the pages to follow), this is for the reader's benefit, it is hoped, and it is of course at the author's own risk. A similar risk is taken on those occasions where I do feel it necessary to comment on issues of knowledge and approach, and to the extent that this narrative does tend to carry along its own critique – often saying or trying to say *why* it is saying what it is saying – then the reader can be assured of one simple motivation in the author: enthusiasm.

Finally by way of general introduction, however, and although this, too, may be an 'intellectual' matter, there is what has the guise of a more overtly musical question, which is why one would want to be so concerned with words, with song, with text, with 'vocality'. I touch on this in different terms in Chapter 1 below, but in this less formal introductory setting I simply say that 'song' is what music is all about: a radically indefensible statement, of course, once we begin to unpick it historically, aesthetically, philosophically, yet it is also a kind of truism for anyone acculturalized to modern Western music – in other words, for the modern 'music lover', or Donald Tovey's 'ordinary listener' of yore (see p. 69), or Mozart's 'amateurs' as well as 'cognoscenti' of centuries gone by. This is not only a physiological matter, an assertion of the primacy or certainly of the 'firstness' of the voice in human development both of the species and of the individual. In our contemporary minds, too, words and, in the case of most people, music of one kind or another intermingle, almost whether we like it or not. Although this phenomenon has been as little studied in the pure or the human sciences according to their own agendas as it has been in the 'humanities' with any serious grasp of scientific 'reality', everyone knows that as a fact of human experience this is true. Often music and words are understood to be in apposition with, even opposition to, each other, and for specialist enquiries

[3] I attempted to formulate the essence of Nattiez's approach, at least in respect of music-analytical procedures, in 'Thematic and Motivic Analysis', in *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory*, ed. Thomas Christensen, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, 907–26.

this can be an important distinction.[4] Eventually, however, there must be a place for taking things together, as the 'vast'-ness of the literature referred to above seems to indicate.

More specifically, it will be apparent that whereas in these discussions of ideas and propositions the ideas and propositions are fully present and where appropriate discussed in considerable depth, their whole object, on the other hand, the repertoire of beautiful music (and if it is not always pretty music, then it is certainly always memorable), is missing at least in the sense that it is not literally to be 'heard' or directly experienced in a book. This is a familiar brute fact of books about music. Perhaps it has a special piquancy in a context where the music itself already has a profoundly inveigling reality as it draws on our linguistic and musical attention at the same time. How so?, as anyone would be likely to ask, is one way of asking what this book is about. Music and words, words with music, surely amount to a special kind of musical experience, although we might speculate, and learn from the prehistory of human kind, that it is also the most natural kind of musical experience in its plenitude of engagement of human faculties. And because it is a special and by definition multifaceted experience, then it needs to be experienced unmediated, if any music does (as of course all music does at some level). All the music mentioned here is readily available in recordings, and its scores are readily available from libraries or from their publishers. In one case at least, Copland's Emily Dickinson songs, even images of the composer's sketches are readily available, online at the flick of an electronic switch, and a good deal of other virtual information relevant to the music, composers, poets, critics and other characters and topics of this text exists on the worldwide web, although I decided not to point to any of it or render any of it integral to reading and absorbing the book.

I have indicated in essence what this book is about by mentioning the 'special piquancy' of vocal music. I am in search here of an understanding of what is going to be called 'vocality'. Now clearly there is the potential to irritate the reader in using a rather effete word such as vocality. It has a specific (and, here, irrelevant) technical meaning in linguistics by referring to the quality of a sound that is voiced (as with the sound usually denoted by the letter 'd' in English rather than the unvoiced 't') or to the nature of a sound as being a vowel. I am interested rather in its meaning as, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'the quality of having voice' and more particularly 'vocal quality or nature'; but of course in that I am referring by

[4] Hans Keller offered notably trenchant accounts of this dissociation; see, for example, his *Criticism*, London, Faber, 1987.

'vocal' not in the primary sense to what is spoken or oral, but to the musical meaning of the word, 'performed by or composed for the voice'. Rather in the way that the great Romanian ethnomusicologist Constantin Brăiloiu asked us to consider seriously in what respect any music can be said to have been 'composed' by one person,[5] which may *appear* to be the case here and there in world cultures and histories (songs 'by' Schubert or Copland, say, as we assert unquestioningly in Chapter 5, while straining to capture what is unique about them, and unthinkable though these songs would be without their cultural histories, the 'style' that makes them comprehensible at all), so I want to ask here in what respect some music can be said to express vocality, other than in the trite fact of it being music in which words are sung. Vocality certainly overlaps with concepts to be found in two centuries' worth and more of discussion of vocal music, but I do not think everything has been said that can be said. Vocality as exposed here might be thought, for example, to be more or less coextensive with Lawrence Kramer's notion of 'songfulness', but this is not so. 'Songfulness', Kramer insists, 'is a fusion of vocal and musical utterance judged to be both pleasurable and suitable independent of verbal content. It is the positive quality of singing-in-itself: just singing.' Add to this his idea of 'loss of meaning', that 'songfulness makes meaning extraneous, if not downright superfluous', and the long and the short of Kramer's position has been aired.[6] It makes some kind of informal sense, undoubtedly, when we think of ourselves as being 'lost' in performing or listening to song, and it almost goes without saying that whatever verbal language and musical language are in themselves, they are not a mere addition of the two intact 'languages' when they occur together. But as I understand Kramer (from study of as many of his writings on music as have been available to me, which is probably most of them), he is for all the elaborate enjoyment to be gained from his critical perceptions merely reducing 'song' to some kind of idealized third language that is beyond analysis, beyond interpretation. Not the least of my objections to this position is its unhelpful implication that somehow we do have a clear picture of what 'musical language' is itself prior to the 'fusion' of which Kramer writes, and in different ways writes very often. We do not, as the philosopher Peter Kivy has tried to argue (see Chapter 1, pp. 14–15), in my

[5] Constantin Brăiloiu, 'Reflections on Collective Musical Creation', in *Problems of Ethnomusicology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984, 102–9.

[6] Lawrence Kramer, 'Beyond Words and Music: An Essay on Songfulness', in *Musical Meaning: Toward a Critical History*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002, 51–67; 53 and 63 respectively. Kramer has written extensively and stimulatingly on words and music, and some of his other ideas are quoted or discussed further in these pages.

view rather successfully and certainly persuasively. On the contrary, our ability to get at any of the essentials of vocality will rest crucially on the depth and substance of our music-analytical hermeneutics in the first place. There can be no other worthwhile starting point, or so I shall try to argue and exemplify.

* * *

Although I am not offering a theory of vocality or anything approaching it, we shall nevertheless have to explore notions of music and text as interacting entities, which I aim to do in Chapter 1, focusing in the second section on poetry and language, and in the third on 'untheory', which is my word here to capture the sense I seek to share with the reader in which a 'theory' of music and words is not something easily imagined or obviously desirable: this is no eccentric position to take, in that Schoenberg seems to have thought so, too, as will be described and discussed; and what Schoenberg thought is worth any of us thinking about. In Chapter 2 there is a complete 'reading' of Brahms's song 'Von ewiger Liebe', 'complete' in the most modest sense that I discuss all of the song, 'reading' in the equally modest attempt to indicate one pathway – a hermeneutical pathway, I believe it would be right to call it – through music that can be understood in as many different ways (musicians like to say, in theatrically exaggerated expression of their theoretical inefficacy) as there are listeners. Actually, there is just the *one* way to hear this song, if you subscribe to the astonishingly powerful explanatory theory of tonal masterpieces elaborated by Heinrich Schenker and filled out, supplemented, some would say enriched, by at least three generations of Schenkerian practitioners since the 1930s. There is no doubt that Schenker was some kind of musical Freud taking us deep into stories of the musical mind, or, as he would have written, the mind of the musical 'genius'. Like it or not, Schenkerian theory is integral to understanding – to being able to keep up with – one important strand of musical thought in the twentieth century; I, who used to ask why Schenker could be expected still to stalk twentieth-first-century musicology,[7] must be the first to admit it.

Chapter 3, for those made to squirm at all by formalist, explanatory theory (although I hope to have made Chapter 2 as comfortable as possible, perhaps even enjoyable), takes a nonprescriptive view of a song by Schoenberg, 'Premonition', Op. 22, No. 4, music that is in contrast modernistic for its times – it is, for instance, 'atonal' – and raises rather different

[7] See my 'Recent Schenker: The Poetic Power of Intelligent Calculation (or, The Emperor's Second Set of New Clothes)', in *Music Analysis*, 18/2, July 1999, 263–73; 263.

questions about vocality. I have deliberately chosen here music that is 'hard to understand', not merely in my opinion, but taking my lead from Alban Berg's essay on the early music of his revered teacher. Is vocality something of a different order in this context? We shall discover that it is probably not, but the context leads to many different kinds of investigation that would hardly arise in Brahms or in Classical and Romantic music, and that begin to consolidate here the potential range and depth of the subject even within the narrow constraints of a repertoire and an approach in this book that have been necessarily imposed on a project designed to be concentrated and digestible, and anything but comprehensive. If Chapter 4 hardly goes on to open Pandora's Box, since again the view of time and place is not allowed to waver too much, nevertheless it offers a potpourri from the sacred to the profane, from the European to the American, from notes to gurgles, and its actors – Schoenberg once more, Goehr, Kurtág (with Schumann), Berberian – would not be too puzzled to find themselves in each other's company, every one a dogged seeker of vocality, and in Berberian's case a world-class practitioner of it. Here we also expand on some of the generalized discussion of poetry and language from Chapter 1, since each text – late Romantic religious, early existentialist, medieval eschatological, post-World-War-Two comic strip – steps aside from the mainstream of the poetic lyric that can be read about (and should be) in any number of studies of the Lied, chanson, art-song and the like. Chapter 5 then offers some final relaxation, its own kind of musical eucrasia as (in chronological order of birth) Goethe, Schubert, Dickinson and Copland are knitted into a picture of vocality in examples where it is at its most sublime, it can surely be agreed, and looking out across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as over the same waters, when love and death were constants, as always. This will have been, it will be clear, a very particular kind of journey, not a 'history', not a theory, but an exploration. It aims to be coherent but it is also recognized that the limits it sets itself are pragmatic rather than epistemological; these limits have not been inevitable, and if some use can be made by some readers of these pages it will undoubtedly be as much or more through what they suggest as through what they determine.

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Too much introspection is perhaps some kind of neurosis and always in danger of stemming creative processes, including those of the reader, but a few words about the apparent origins of this study may provide some useful orientation here. In some convoluted way it seems that the book title was, on this occasion at least, a genuine impetus to its completion, for it was a surprisingly clear guide, elliptical though it may be, as to inclusion and

exclusion, as to tone, as to where to begin each level of enquiry and also a guide as to where to stop it. Who, it was being asked above via Brăiloiu (see p. 5), can ever accurately be said to be the 'author' of a piece of music? Similarly, it is not at all clear now, and it matters even less, just where the title *Making Words Sing* came from, and if there is some person or some previous publication or constellation of words to which acknowledgement deserves to be made but now through the mists of time cannot be made, no offence is intended. Without doubt, though, a primary impetus in general came from the author's formative experience of being given a project to do in a very much younger incarnation: the suggestion was to compare settings of Goethe's 'Mignon' poem 'Kennst du das Land?' by Beethoven, Schubert and Schumann, while little knowing at the time that there were many dozens of settings in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, that only a few years previously an entire graduate thesis had been devoted to a comparative study of some of the most interesting settings,[8] or that one day an entire large file of my own subsequent studies of 'Kennst du das Land?' was going to be excluded from *Making Words Sing* (despite the original intention to include it) because this is not, in the end, a philological book, one that can comfortably carry a basically comparative exercise.

The revelation, however, was quite specific. Through it one could experience for the first time that a setting of a text is unique, that the creative urge in a composer of what some call 'genius' can transcend what the literary critic Harold Bloom was to name the 'anxiety of influence', that the self-same words can be made to sing in different ways.[9] How? Again it was only much later that I came to see this as a specific instance of a general class of questions, not least when one considers the rather obvious fact that certain texts have been made to sing not across the decades but across the millennia – especially perhaps the Mass, as Georgiades discussed with such musicological virtuosity.[10] And needless to say malleability was not only a phenomenon of sacred music, as the history of opera as well as music drama amply demonstrates: one need only ponder the fact that, as Jean-Jacques Nattiez notes in a study of Baudelaire's Wagner-reception, 'in actual fact,

[8] Donald Ivey, 'The Romantic Synthesis in Selected Settings of Goethe's "Kennst du das Land?" ', DMA dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1962.

[9] Harold Bloom's book *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1973, became fashionable in certain quarters of American music theory in the 1980s and 1990s, although it never became clear what it adds to our understanding of musical influences. Its undoubted strength lay in the refinement it brought to the notions of literary influence, above all in poetry, and it is easy to see that the more specific and useful it was in poetics, the less applicable to musical epistemology it was likely to be.

[10] Thrasybulos Georgiades, *Music and Language: The Rise of Western Music as Exemplified in Settings of the Mass*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Wagner never stopped revising *Tannhäuser* over thirty years, every time the opera was given a new performance', and Nattiez tellingly subtitles the closing section of his study of *Tannhäuser* 'A Work that is Complete but Unfinished'.[11] An endless deferral of 'meaning' in music with words of which *Tannhäuser* is one of a number of spectacular, well-known examples goes a long way to explaining how certain words may be enshrined in starkly distinct musical manifestations, and it is part of the potential continuum of that thought to ask, then, what in any particular manifestation makes it what it is. The elusive intermingling of the fluidity of meaning on the one hand, and the stark specificity of works of art on the other – that specificity that is, for instance, what I understood in general by the philosopher Theodor Adorno's many references to the 'truth content' of a piece of music – is what I mean by 'making' words to 'sing'.

[11] Nattiez, *The Battle of Chronos and Orpheus*.

CHAPTER 1

An introduction with no words, with intended words, and untheory

MUSIC WITHOUT WORDS

One of the most clearly descriptive generic titles of Western music of recent centuries is also one of the most intriguing: 'Das Lied ohne Worte', the Song without Words. Mendelssohn published six volumes of forty-eight such pieces in 1832–45, often charming, sometimes deeply moving, in some cases composed simply, very 'playable' and in 'folk' style, in other cases – rather less commonly – extremely skilful compositionally in ways that are easy to perceive (for example, in the A-flat 'Duetto', No. 18, which combines on one instrument the female and male 'voice', separately as well as 'singing' together, with full piano accompaniment).[1] The very title 'Song without Words' triggers unusual questions. Why, for instance, would anyone *want* to write a wordless song? How do we know in the absence of words that a 'song' is what this kind of music is designed to be? And is music of this kind supposed to be *instead* of song, some kind of complement to the 'real' thing, or is it perhaps the best that can be done alone at the piano (assuming that the pianist lacks the ability to sing and play simultaneously to the same standard?), and is it thus a makeshift of some sort?[2]

Julian Rushton is right, I believe, to point in his essay 'Music and the Poetic' to the aura of heightened expression and what will be called here a

[1] The standard work on this repertoire is Christa Jost, *Mendelssohns Lieder ohne Worte*, Tützing, Schneider, 1988.

[2] In *Schumann's Dichterliebe and Early Romantic Poetics: Fragmentation of Desire*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, 57, Beate Perrey reminds us that there were at least two such genres, Schumann having written about those Songs without Words 'inspired by poems' (he is thinking of the composer Taubert) compared with Mendelssohn's, which, as Schumann wrote, 'perhaps stimulate one to poeticize'. A balance between the more literal and the more suggestive was already well in place in the early nineteenth century when Beethoven famously mentioned that his Pastoral Symphony was less concerned with depiction than with feelings. Whether or not it is true that Mendelssohn's sister Fanny Hensel actually invented the title *Lied ohne Worte*, it is certainly the case that this genre was strongly connected with the feminine world of domestic musicmaking.