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Foreword

Susan Youens: The Ivory Tower and the Stairway to Paradise

As long as I have been a song pianist, I have sensed a gulf between those free-as-air spirits who specialize in vocal performance on one hand, and highly intellectual and analytical musicologists on the other. Occasionally, these skills appear united, as in the writings of Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Ian Bostridge. A few singers went on to become significant song scholars (e.g., Max Friedländer, Walther Dürr); others published interpretative guides (e.g., Lehmann, Bathori, Bernac, Panzéra). Those who penned personal reminiscences are too numerous to mention. But the few singers willing to step into musicological shoes fail to mask a fundamental difference in *Weltanschauung* between most of the musicians practicing these two careers. Coexistence has often been "managed," neither side engaging very deeply with the other.

The furthering of a strong and healthy relationship between singers and musicologists is clearly the raison d'être of this collection of essays in honor of Susan Youens. All her working life, Professor Youens has encouraged performers and academics to work together and to pool their resources. Nevertheless, it might be of interest to ponder the background to the manifold personal wrangles and misunderstandings she has always done her best to transcend. Here I attempt explanations, based on personal experience, as to why each group of workers has often failed to connect with the other. One may choose to add "in the past" to everything I write: In the last thirty years, Youens's work has made an enormous difference in how song specialists write their commentaries and how singers read them. Things are changing at last. I admit that my strongest memories are of interactions experienced many years ago and that I have always lived in a blasé metropolis, where self-sufficient singers are more or less detached from academe.

One has to go no further than a famous Lied lyric to find a singing actress trouncing the highbrows: Goethe's lyric "Singet nicht in Trauertönen" (Philine's song in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, set by Schumann in 1849 and Wolf in 1888). In Book 10, Chapter 5 of the novel, Wilhelm is deep in discussion with Serlo, the director of their joint production of *Hamlet*; Philine interrupts them, first with impatience and then with flirtatious

innuendo. Their colloquy has bored her; she claims to see something in the Shakespeare play that has been missed by the men, although she bluffs her way out of quoting the exact passage when questioned. Nevertheless, she is certain she knows better. How many thousands of earnest coaches and dramaturgs working in opera houses and theaters have discovered they can get so far, and no further, when dealing with the Philines of this world? Another actress in the troupe, Aurelie, finds her infuriating and accuses Wilhelm of treating their maverick colleague "with a respect of which she is by no means worthy." Philine draws her inspiration from an entirely different wellspring of learning – that of her own experience in the real world, something she trusts far more than anything propounded by men who take themselves far too seriously. In short, she "does her own thing."

As attractive a character as Philine may be, hers is a limited viewpoint; some of the things she breezily discounts *are* crucially important, and she flippantly accuses people of boring and irritating her with a nonchalance that borders on willful ignorance. Philine's exit on defiantly clacking heels, leaving a nonplussed Wilhelm and Serlo behind her, was an augury of many a tussle between singer and musicologist: the performer's cheery disregard for theorists; the theorists' tendency to give up the fight with a shrug, having hoped for something more rewarding.

Singers are the wild cards of the music profession, a special case even by the standards of an ordinary music school, where they are often somewhat older than other members of the student body, a species apart. This was certainly the case during my student years in the Royal Academy of Music in London, where the singers' table in the student restaurant was a no-go area for the rest of us, entirely different territory from where string and wind players congregated.

In my late teens and early twenties, I was absorbed by chamber music, and the instrumentalists' tables of the Royal Academy dining room were my comfort zone – abuzz with genteel arguments about fingerings, evaluations of reeds (oboists!), and the virtues of different teachers. Here one encountered a seriousness and (now I look back on it) a touching earnestness that reflected a dedication and focus that was simply a continuation of our childhood experiences as well-behaved young musicians. Of course, the less high-minded (and usually slightly older and more experienced) instrumentalists talked about gigs (the lifeblood of musical London at the time) and other ways of earning money, a commodity always in short supply for the student musician. Many of these young players already had romantic partners, but with the instrumentalists this was always a private matter; the venting of personal passion or private anguish was not up for

discussion. Talking about music was a shield against needing to analyze the emotional vicissitudes of life that might get in the way of practice.

Like everyone else in my sonata-performing circle, I was initially taken aback by what went on at the large circular singers' table in the Royal Academy canteen. The commotion that emanated from a gaggle of people who spent a lot of the time screeching with laughter (and with a resonance lacking in the rest of us) was alarming. This song-throng (opera people as well, of course) looked decidedly dangerous to me. When I was eventually invited to sit among them by the first singer I had ever accompanied (a kind gesture, as if sponsoring me to become a member of an exclusive club), I felt very vulnerable. You had to earn your place at that table pending your appraisal as a person, not just as a musician. Above all, there was no room for anyone stuck-up or pretentious. The string players had put up with my prematurely professorial manner, but this was teasingly mocked by my new friends. I was not yet a Schubertian, but my earnest desire to talk about Beethoven was dismissed as relatively harmless; "quite sweet really," someone said. It turned out that singers were more interested in me as a person than in my shtick. If I wanted to inform them about anything, it had to be in an entertaining manner. It is not as if they were anti-knowledge, but they chose where and how to acquire information palatably. Any talk about music was considered far less urgent than the concerns of the here-and-now – for example, who had been sleeping with whom, and who was going to be doing so that very night. Philine, whose acquaintance I had not yet made via Schumann and Wolf, was sitting somewhere among us and smiling knowingly while her lyric (Goethe's really) encouraging nocturnal enjoyment was taken as practical advice. Maria Callas, one of the great performing geniuses of the twentieth century, would have been equally at home with us: "I'm a simple woman who watches TV, reads junk, likes to listen to nice things, and tries to be the intellectual I'm not because I've never had the time – I've been too busy working. So to improve my intellect I just pick up stuff here and there."[1]

Whatever standing I believed I had earned at the institution (already in my fourth year of studentship) was of no import; in this new world of accompanying vocalists, I started again on the bottom rung. An ability to make people laugh was a definite plus, and after a while, I realized there was a wonderful new freedom in being with this bunch. The ringleaders were wonderfully outspoken women, some of them better singers than

[1] "Une heure avec Maria Callas," television interview with Bernard Gavoty, Paris, June 14, 1964, 4:38, www.youtube.com/watch?v=hSb-7Tb2dmQ, accessed May 3, 2022.

others, not that it mattered to me, nor was I any judge of voices at that time, a skill that takes years to develop (I had not yet played for a thousand singing lessons). In the early stages, I still tended to size up singers as if they were instrumentalists (some musicologists never grow out of this) but, somehow, I knew I was "home." It was as if a boy from the Midwest had found himself a walk-on role in Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City* and suddenly felt no desire to quit San Francisco in favor of returning to Des Moines. Indeed, it was at the singers' table at the Royal Academy that I realized that my new colleagues made me feel better about myself than any of my instrumentalist friends and that the whiff of makeup that came my way from the school's opera productions was the kind of make-believe that made me feel a functioning part of the drama of life.

Where might musicology fit in with this bunch? For their part, the singing teachers I encountered, some of them truly inspiring people, seemed strangely impervious to recent developments on the musicological front: The whole of the Lied was stuck in a self-satisfied bubble of *fin de siècle* indulgence whereby the taking of thoughtless liberties with the text was second nature. It was as if art song (excluding the Early Music sphere) had somehow been excused from the need to consider the questions being posed in almost every other musical discipline as a result of recent musicology. Certainly, the production of beautiful vocal tone was the top priority with many of these teachers and their students, the songs at hand merely a means by which the beauty of voice might be demonstrated while freely employing material composed by the uncomplaining dead. (Much later, I learned that someone had to do the complaining and it would have to be me, if there was no one else around.) I encountered an attitude, still to be found, sad to say, where great music was appraised as the *matériel* with which a singer could achieve hegemony over rivals by ensuring audiences were (metaphorically) slain in the aisles. "Will this song be good for me?" is a question more often asked than "Will I be good for this song?"

It was an important day for me when I realized that the best singers had a great deal in common with athletes and swimmers – their breath was connected to their bodies in a different way from mine, and their thoughts were governed by a sequence of visceral physical actions and reactions, reflexes that were beyond my own experience as a pianist. There was a flair that defied all logic, a warmth, a lust for life and the here-and-now that was revelatory. On paper I knew more than many of them, but so what? It was humbling when I realized that, without thinking about it, they understood things that often went beyond book-learning. It is true that some had a problem with rhythm and a tendency to drag, but as soon as a pianist

realizes that it is impossible for a singer to produce a note exactly on the bar line without an often-eloquent consonant sounding before the vowel, this so-called "dragging" was the very thing that allowed light, air, and *meaning* into the music.

Singers usually best respect people who *show*, people who *do*, people who make their presence felt in a personal way. The singers I worked with when I was a younger man (it may be very different now) seldom sought out scholarly journals; they seldom read books about music (Susan Youens's books were not yet written); singers hardly ever commented on, or read, the program notes I had written for their own discs, let alone for the discs recorded by others. I soon learnt not to mind about things like that; I understood that my vocal colleagues, eminently practical people, had more immediate need of translations of song texts and studying the phonetics of foreign languages. Because I could actually play their accompaniments (the presence of a coach or pianist in singers' lives is indispensable for all sorts of reasons), my opinion counted for something, but often not all that much. There was always closer rapport between singers and those of their pianists who had become more or less singing teachers (to the rage of the singers' official teachers) and who could offer them the kind of suggestions where technical improvement doubled as an interpretative upgrade.

As so often is the case when one examines questions about Lieder – in this case "what kind of singer is the best for the art form?" – it is also possible to review the opinions of the great song composers themselves. Robert and Clara Schumann initially welcomed the dramatic vivacity of Pauline Viardot, with her amazing *Ausstrahlung*, into their lives, but after a while they found her southern theatricality problematic. They had been diverted by her personality but felt that Lieder were better served by the dutiful and heartfelt singing of the trusted Livia Frege, although this gifted Leipzig amateur lacked the presence and pizazz of a stage performer. The golden mean was discovered in Jenny Lind, famous as an opera singer, but also convincing as an engaged singer of songs (Mendelssohn was besotted with her). Franz Schubert clearly preferred the former opera star Johann Michael Vogl, his narcissism and mannerisms notwithstanding, to the seamless but dull vocal perfection of the small-minded tenor Ludwig Titze. We might suspect that this had a lot to do with Vogl's imaginative projections of the song texts, and because Schubert enjoyed the company of someone with a larger-than-life personality. The composer seemingly admired the Italian bass Luigi Lablache, a great actor, but I doubt if he would have approved of the exaggerated and melodramatic delivery of Josef Staudigl, active after Schubert's death and so disapproved of by Spaun and Sonnleithner. Each

case has to be judged differently, precisely because each singer who has ever existed is a mixture of things; it is often worthwhile putting up with some things because of what else may be on offer – a question of balance. While personally identifying with Schubertian qualities that might be termed "Biedermeier" (stoicism, humility, industriousness, and a sense of duty), there is something about my reaction to sheer vocal glamour that is equally Schubertian. The composer was fascinated by Henrietta Sontag and allowed himself a hopeless pipedream: that the famous (and sexually notorious) soprano, star of Rossini's *La Donna del Lago* (where the Italian composer's Elena had been Schubert's model for his Ellen, Lady of the Lake), might be interested in appearing in his own *Alfonso und Estrella*.

My own experience of older musicologists was many and various, and the range was enormous. The Principal of the Royal Academy was that somewhat lofty figure Sir Anthony Lewis, a great Handel and Purcell scholar. The ivory towers of Oxford and Cambridge were only day-dreaming spires for me (at that time, the very existence of an "Oxford Lieder Festival" would have seemed bizarre), and I missed out on meeting that great British Schubertian, Maurice Brown, who was a schoolteacher outside London. I never knew Otto Erich Deutsch (Vienna was far away, and in any case, I was about a decade too young to have done so), but I was often in contact with John Reed in Manchester after he had published his admirable single volume on the Schubert songs in 1985. In playing the piano for singers I soon realized that the accompanist, sometimes *faute de mieux*, occupied the role of coach, adviser and, for want of a better expression, resident musicologist. This had been the case with my teachers Gerald Moore (who wrote books about song) and Geoffrey Parsons (who didn't). But it was only in meeting Eric Sams, a civil servant and Shakespeare scholar who published books on the songs of Wolf, Schumann, and Brahms, that I encountered the first of the two musicologists who have been truly dear to me in my life. The second of these, Susan Youens, met Eric Sams in London in the late 1980s; she had sent him an essay on a Wolf song that began by gratefully acknowledging what other people had written about it. "I am interested in what *you* have written," Eric declared to Susan over a mug of coffee – something she remembers as liberating advice. Eric took me to task for saying "seems" too many times when I should have had the courage simply to write "is." I owe to him countless university-like tutorials (always conducted by letter, my essays passing back and forth and marked in donnish pencil) during which I gradually learned how to write about the music I had already performed. More importantly, he made me feel that I had a right to do so in my own way.

I met Susan Youens face-to-face in August 2000 in Bloomington, Indiana, and I was already a smitten admirer. I took it as a great honor that she had traveled from South Bend to meet me (at the invitation of the Dean of Music at Bloomington), and it was love at first sight. I immediately sensed that she and I were able to talk with each other in a way that I had never experienced with any other famous academic. It was taken for granted from the beginning that a song was something that began with the poem and went outwards from there. Of course, I had already read and admired her *Retracing a Winter's Journey* (1991) and the handbook *Schubert: Die schöne Müllerin* (1992). In taking the reader through the stories of these Müller protagonists, Susan gave the miller boy and the winter traveler lives of their own, just as Schubert had; she showed us how the composer had allowed the poet and his characters to influence and inspire his musical responses, an act of translation from Müller's medium to his, thought by thought, line by line. His genius lay in his astoundingly detailed reactions to words.

It is singers who phonate the text, and Susan, once a singer herself, has always seen things from their viewpoint – which is also, inevitably, the viewpoint of the poet. The protagonists of Schubert's songs had been given musical life by the composer, but they in turn had also inspired, renewed, healed, and saved him, creatures of his imagination who had taken his identity and he theirs, in a mysterious way that defies analysis. The title of Susan's *Schubert's Poets and the Making of Lieder* (1996) says it all in the correct order (the Schulze chapter in this book is one of the most groundbreaking ever in terms of understanding the settings of this complex poet, the one on Gabriele von Baumberg a beacon of feminist revelation). This was writing about song for lovers of literature, for historians, linguists, and psychologists. Susan aimed her work at singers and pianists who had studied a wide range of the humanities at university and had come, later in life, to approach music from an angle where the purity of musical discourse (whatever that is) was not the first consideration.

I can still scarcely believe that there was someone who could write about songs in a way that was this innovatory. Sams, the great expert on cyphers, had written superbly epigrammatic books, not a word too many. But Susan Youens was a writer who flew fearless and lyrical into the song firmament, taking us with her on all her exploratory adventures. So many surprises! She has perused more forgotten nineteenth-century nonoperatic vocal music in sought-after photocopies than anyone else I could ever think of. (My nickname for her is "The Queen of Libraries," a worldwide kingdom in which she is revered and loved.) For example, who would have known

the ballads of Martin Plüddemann if it had not been for her *Hugo Wolf: The Vocal Music* (1992)? Who would ever have sufficiently valued Franz Lachner and Vesque von Püttlingen without the amazing chapter in her magisterial *Heinrich Heine and the Lied* (2007)? (And I must emphasize that these chapters about the unknown composers are simply entrancing embroidery on works of huge substance and perception regarding their mainstream subjects.) *Hugo Wolf and His Mörike Songs* (2000) is my personal favorite, the most perfect and enthralling study of Lieder that I know, a dazzling distillation of a lifetime of Wolfian love and devotion. The depth of how closely Susan Youens has led her life with Schubert and his poets is to be found in *Schubert's Late Lieder* (2002). After reading the chapter on Johann Ladislaus Pyrker, every writer on songs will forever be challenged to unmask any villain as definitively as this! Carl von Leitner is correspondingly, and touchingly, elevated to his deserved place in the pantheon.

Of course, this new approach initially made a few musicologists very unhappy because rules and time-honored demarcations were being broken and transcended. Entering into the poet's world in this way was thought to be improper, a soft option where only "hard" musicological analysis would do – either Schenkerian or new documentary revelations – as if the discovery of the internal lives of the songs through their poems were not exciting enough. On the other hand, there were those singing teachers who felt Susan was a dangerous radical for spreading thoughts with which their students did not need to occupy themselves. It has been Susan's destiny to be a bridge between the singing world and academe; she must often have felt as if she were caught between Scylla and Charybdis, bent in two, stretched and suspended over the Hellespont in ritual punishment for wanting to get things across. She must also have felt trampled underfoot, but in truth, those using the bridge, thanks to her, were singers and song pianists, gifted people who had been encouraged to read about the music which was *their* music. At last, this was writing about song by someone who knew how to lure them onto the banks of musicology. Throughout her career, she has needed a strong back, and in this volume, it is we, her admirers, who have her back – and every institution where she has been a visiting teacher will gratefully have her back too!

Susan has done more than almost anyone else in our world of song to enact a power-sharing protocol; may all musicologists similarly dare to make themselves less remote and sit at the singers' table rather than hovering around the edges. Like all singers' pianists, I have always found myself standing somewhere in the middle, neither purely a singer (may my piano sing instead!) nor musicologist *pur sang*. There will always be others of my

ilk, and talented young singers and pianists are as numerous now as they have ever been, as if nature herself seems determined to protect the art song tradition. But the world of song also needs committed scholars, significant thinkers with the energy of a new musicological age. Connectivity between musicians has accelerated, thanks to the new intensity of instant electronic communication. Bold new tactics are required: The strategist-generals must come up with bold new plans and join the singing troops.

The bridges between performance and musicology built by Susan Youens are not only horizontal and curvaceous but seem to ascend into the heavens with Piranesi-like grace, flying buttresses on their way to the stars (these would have to be the Leitner-Schubert stars, of course!), a "stairway to paradise / with a new song ev'ry day" (apologies to Gershwin), each new book or performance representing a further step heavenward. During this ascent, despite her wonderful and enlightening prose, Susan Youens will never forget the crucial and pervasive importance of singers and singing in her life and work. As the Australian poet Peter Porter put it:

And Paradise till we are there / Is in these measured lengths of air.[2]

Graham Johnson

[2] Peter Porter, "The History of Music from 'Three Poems for Music,'" in *The Rest on the Flight: Selected Poems* (London: Picador, 2010), 65.

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