

AN EXPERIMENT:

**Learning about the voice
from borrowing and further developing
existing vocal repertoire pieces**

- **The unwritten chapter in the artistic research
‘Building the bridge between
the modern composer and the classically trained singer’
*by Georgi Sztojanov***

In my master research I observe the current relation between modern composers and classically trained singers.

As being both, I stumbled on many differences of attitudes by the two groups, and the bad reputation of both for each other started to make more and more sense.

The collaboration between a modern composer and the classically trained singer can many time end resulting in an unsatisfying musical product for both sides.

The communication in-between them can be often counterproductive, and they don't know how to achieve the best for both – often because of speaking different ‘languages’ and not knowing how to translate. That's why speaking both languages and seeing where and how to properly connect them - with my personal knowledge and experience I try to investigate how could a bridge be built.

In the research, after showing the problems, and some possible reasons where misunderstandings might be coming from, I focus separately on the side of the composer and the side of the singer. Through an interview with a singer of modern music and a composer I also show if my observations are relevant in examples of the ‘every day lives’ of singers and composers.

I reveal some of the experience I gained in mediating between the two in my coaching activities and teaching, and I draw conclusions that might be useful for both to consider when working together. I also set up a line of thoughts that could lead to a possible booklet as the outcome of this research, that would be to mediate creators and performers of new vocal music.

In this essay I am addressing an issue that popped up as a theme quite fast, yet while narrowing down my research topic, it slowly dropped out of the original plan.

In a stage of the research my suspicion started to prove itself true: in modern composition education there is not enough focus on vocal compositions. The students don't get acquainted with most of the vocal repertoire, on orchestration lessons often the voice is neglected, and the most popular view about the voice is that a good singer can sing anything: “look at Cathy Barberian”.

The idea arose fast: could we try educating composers about writing for singers by making them use repertoire pieces of vocal studies as starting points – but use the old material as their own to create something new?

Precedents, examples

After getting free from the post-modernistic influence of quotes being interpreted as a sort of reference to common culture, nowadays there are many different possibilities for using another composer's piece or music and embed it in one's own work.

Nostalgic remembering of certain genres, re-discovering the ancient sounding Gregorian in the search for purity or using the rawness of the folk music – all options with many popular and fruitful examples, some even resulting in new trends or mixed genres that didn't exist before.

An interesting approach in this topic is in the spirit of the large symphonic pieces of Richard Ayres.

I was stumbled on his music in the Young Composers Meeting in Apeldoorn in 2014, where he teaches every year. He showed us a few of his pieces, where he used a sort of 'musical diary' technique: notating imprints that a concert, a lesson, or a memory of a certain music left in him. The reason wasn't to quote, list or mock these little segments – even if the shortness of each of them and the rapid change between styles, genres and musical languages creates a somewhat humorous, absurd, ironic flavor – but much more to show the personal connection to the musical 'happenings' of his life. The brilliance of his orchestration, the playful ideas and the honest enthusiasm about all these musical snippets radiates an innate joy and admiration for Music in general –which is also highly contagious. While listening to his pieces, all the fragment strikes me as original, or more like 'genuine' music, no matter if the short excerpts were literal quotes, well-made style-studies or completely original. That made me think also how would this reflect on vocal music I study but want to observe also through 'my own composing glasses'.

Examples in vocal music

There are several great examples of using music of other composers and making it into one's own music. In vocal music, in particular, in modern choral music this approach was mostly famous in the Nordic and Baltic choir composers, such as Sandström and Nystedt, or Vasks and Esenvalds.

Taking a medieval hymn, a Gregorian, a baroque choral or a romantic motet as the basic material, but adding or taking away from it, reducing the focus of the piece to a few chords, characteristic lines or color changes, enlarging certain elements with aleatorics or choir improvisational effects became a well-known process to make new, 'Nordic-sounding' choral pieces. This 'recipe' became so popular, that some choir conductors and vocal groups started making their own variations or even instant compositions by singing some of their 'traditional' repertoire or vocal folk even with such techniques, building a meditation of modern consonant clusters based on ancient music.

One very well-known (if not the most popular) adaptation/re-composing in the choral world is 'Eternal Bach' by the Norwegian composer Knut Nystedt (1915-2014). He takes the choral from Johann Sebastian Bach 'Komm, süßer Tod, komm selge Ruh' ('Come, Sweet Death, come blessed rest'). The original melody is a song from the 69 Sacred Songs and Arias that Bach contributed to 'Musicalisches Gesangbuch' by Georg Christian Schemelli.

The text (by unknown author) expresses the desire for death and heaven. It was already adapted and transformed by several composers, such as Max Reger, Leopold Stokowski and Knut Nystedt. He takes the choral, and lets the audience first hear the original.

Then, we hear the same, but this time from 5 choirs in 5 different formations, each in their own related tempo. The end of each phrase the choirs wait for each other, and we hear again the clear chord of the original Bach harmonization. However, as the 5 tempi are related (depending how many beats you have to count for each note) the sense of movement in the sound mass is well organized, while the harmony is booming.

This elegant, but well-thought up construction results in a beautiful sequence of tonal clusters and chords, with the feeling of harmonies and functions colliding, and elevating indeed Bach's music in a timeless state.

This piece is still one of the most sung transcriptions-reconstructions, also by amateur choirs. That should be a proof that it is vocally well-thought up.

Another typical piece could be: 'Es ist ein Ros entsprungen' by Sven-David Sandström (1942-).

The original material he uses, is a Christmas carol and Marian hymn of German origin.

The title – commonly translated to English as *Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming*, and sometimes as *A Spotless Rose* – refers symbolically to the Virgin Mary and the text of the hymn also talks about the old testament prophecies of Isaiah – the Incarnation of Christ and the Tree of Jesse. These symbols and the prophetic theme makes this song one of the most popular during the Advent season. Although the melody appears already in 1599, Sandström takes one of the most well-known harmonisations by the composer Michael Praetorius from 1609.

This original is sung by a small choir or 4 soloists, while the big choir surrounds the audience and sings a sort of 'sound carpet' – a sound cloud created of long held notes, extracted from the melody and harmonization of the song 'Es ist ein Ros entsprungen'. The effect is mesmerizing, one feels flying in the eternal music of the stars, which resonate with the songs of angels. Yet it is a very simple tactic that the composer follows through, and the level of difficulty for performing the piece is also reachable by good amateur choirs, making it not just very popular piece but also proving: it is written very well vocally speaking.

This leads us to the questions: Could this attitude work with solo voices and not just a cappella choir setting? Is it a guarantee that by observing and using as starting point a material that is written with the good knowledge and approach to the human voice, our own piece would be also more singers-friendly and well suited for the vocalists?

To get an answer, we first have to see what techniques we could use to de-compose and re-compose an existing musical material.

A few techniques

This list is made without the wish to show a full spectrum of options, it is more a free flow of thoughts about my own experience and music that I encountered.

With aleatoric techniques known from Xenakis and Lutosławsky from the '60s and '70s (*gas-theory: individual molecule movement resulting in a sound cloud, where instead of controlling every molecule, the behavior of the group is controlled by a few rules*) through the extra complex polyrhythmic scores of Ligeti, creating a 'hyper-heterophony', the choir composing 'scene' quickly derived the essence of these techniques, and investigated giving more individual freedom to the singers, resulting in many more effects and options.

This freedom can extend to many parameters of the music, which some alternative choirs and their conductors experiment further with. I had the luck to investigate these with Halasto and Soharoza choirs, led by Dora Halas in Hungary.

Some choir improvisational methods that use a single melody can be: individual rhythm, keeping a common pulse or totally free, same with pulse, tempo or any time related aspect. By creating smaller 'rules' or 'games' you can create very different sounding textures. For example 'Scandinavian tempo' meant sing every motive note by note, hold each note as long as you want, and move to the next note when you feel it would be the best for the sound of the whole soundscape - different versions also include to wait for each other in the fermatas of each line or to continue till the end. (We did our own version of the Bach choral for example – and it sounded gorgeous.)

The 'choir pedal' (my own terminus technicus) is a method where a solist or more sings the whole of the melody and others hold a note of the melody – making the horizontal vertical, or, getting the pitch material turn into a sound cloud, a harmonic extract of each melody.

Later I investigated these options in my own choirs, and from my experience I composed a little booklet called 'Silesius etudes' that prepares singers, vocal ensembles and choirs for such techniques, and encourages them to make their own similar transcriptions and re-compositions.

I helped also by writing etudes on these matter for the research of Latvian prodigy-conductor Krista Audere in the Conservatory of Amsterdam, observing the different options in aleatorics and music involving individualized choices of performers.

Own try outs as composer

In my compositional work I also encountered such tasks of re-arranging, or de-composing and re-assembling music.

In 'The Dowland-process' I chose songs from the lute book by John Dowland (1523-1626). In the 12 movements for soprano, recorder player and guitarist, I had all kinds of levels of 'interaction' with the original material, from just re-orchestrating, to un-orchestrating (making the guitar play the melody in three octaves and the recorder play arpeggios of the accompaniment etc) to colliding different speeds of performing, detaching the poem and using it as a theater play, or add completely modern accompaniment to one melody.

Own try outs as singer

Further in my singing studies, the wish to perform the arias and songs in a way that I could share my admiration to the details that were in the score draw me to the decision to start making my own arrangements of arias and songs.

Many times while practicing, you stumble on an interesting chord change, a weird voice leading or some small detail that you admire. By composing your own version, you can show these little gems and enlarge them with a zoom, so you can share your discoveries in your performance.

On my final exam I experimented with this with a tenor recitativo from *The Messiah* by Georg Friedrich Händel. One level of change could be to keep the original vocal line, but change the accompaniment.

In this example I used only the chords on the portable organ of the original score, but made each chord fade out slower, every new chord change thus resulting in a cluster of two chords. Then removed slowly the notes of the old chord and 'cleaned up' to the new chord. I found this new chord progression, with its harsh and surprising chords and colors closer to our ears nowadays, expressing the same pain and desperation, a sort of 'translating' its content to our modern perception, yet preserving the original genius of Händel of composing these blood-freezing and extreme chords in his musical surroundings, way ahead of his time.

Imagine it like this: how in cinema our level of needing input gets constantly higher and higher, we are used to monsters and special effects more and more. It is the same in our consumption of dissonance. When film-makers recreate horror movies from decades ago, they have to put more effects and expose the audience with more input while preserving the original content and formal and aesthetical aspects of the movie.

The experiment turned out so well, that for some members it wasn't even clear that the chords are also just the Händel originals. 'You should always perform like this, with your own chords!' said a fellow tenor colleague to me.

Going further with this technique, I took a song by Gabriel Faure, Green, and created a new melody on the new-old harmonic progression (as mentioned above, two chords at the same time, clearing up). It was as a sort of meditation on his song, not just musically: the text was from my pianist/coach, who enlightened me about the basic energy and qualities associated with each chakra. In this example the original vocal composition didn't have an effect on the vocal lines, yet the knowledge about it definitely had an effect of how I wrote for the voice (in my case me also being the singer meant also having empiric experience).

Currently I am working in a similar way with Purcell's 'Hear my prayer, O Lord' where I extract the horizontal lines into vertical columns of clusters to create a sort of skeleton of the original piece, slightly reminding us of the original, but without inner movement or motives it is just a 'shadow' of it (the piece is a commemoration of WW1).

As the previously shown choir-improvisational experiments, and both as composer and singer my work so far with such borrowing and further developing of precedent material brought me not just exciting outcomes, successful performances, and happy interpreters, but also a deeper understanding of the quotes used and the material itself, I hope sharing this passion with other composers in a regulated form could bring them more knowledge about composing for the voice and using the full potential of me as a singer.

Setting up a plan

Would then all these experiments mean that one could learn more about the voice? Would the new modern pieces, and their composers understand more about the human voice and its unique possibilities? Would the stylistic usage of the voice determine too much each composer in their work or would they find their artistic freedom still? Would this de-composing/re-composing be as productive as for painters the copying/reproducing of famous paintings?

To figure those questions out, as a possible further research, such a plan could be created:

- Selection of a Possible test group (composers of different stylistic and notational background, one each: working with improvisation, graphic and special notation, extended techniques, folk, or just traditional notation)
- Selection of possible repertoire representing different vocal achievements of a test-singer (resembling a variety of genres and vocal styles, as the voice reacts very differently in different historical periods and musical paradigms)
- Setting up a level of transformation, for each one variation written:
 - o level 1 keeping original but rearranging accompaniment, orchestration, timing etc.
 - o level 2 more elaborate changes, extracting harmonies from melodies, interfering with timelines and meditating on special moments etc.
 - o level 3 using material only as chunks, as basic inspiration, as memories, as quotes next to creating own material (related to or derived from original)
 - o level 4 totally own composition, using the vocal techniques and specialties, discovered by the pieces of the first 3 levels, respecting the limitations of the voice but also discovering the unique opportunities in the framework of singability

Conclusion

I am, convinced that such guided work could result in deeper knowledge about the human voice within this circle of modern composers involved, that through the different levels they would gain experience about working with the voice, that even the stylistic differences with the original material would enlarge their aesthetic vocabulary, and would produce beautiful and exciting pieces, that would be exciting but also well-written for the instrument of the singers.

When time allows, I will conduct the experiment and use it as further research.