

From Orpheus to Bob Dylan: the Story of “Words and Music”

De Orfeu a Bob Dylan: a história “das palavras e da música”

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Abstract: This paper tells a story of the relationship between “words and music” from the viewpoint of changing tendencies to either convergence or distance between the two forms of communication, depending on whether aesthetic dispositions and cultural conditions favour the merging or the drifting apart of both media. Thus, “fusionist” and “separatist” tendencies in the development of the arts are identified as manifested, in Western cultural history, by the impressive span of intermedial interaction extending from early mythical origins (Orpheus) to most recent manifestations (Bob Dylan). The focus is on the history of European musical theatre and the European song tradition. In the latter case, “interpretive” and “non-interpretive” songs are distinguished depending on whether the link between “words and music” is on the semantic or on the prosodic level. Contemporary pop songs, as represented by Dylan, are finally discussed in the context of the terminological framework presented and in view of the age-old tradition of singer-poets.

Keywords: word-image relations; contemporary pop songs; European tradition.

Resumo: O texto trata da história da relação entre “as palavras e a música” do ponto de vista das duas tendências: a convergência das duas formas de comunicação ou o distanciamento entre elas, segundo as disposições estéticas e condições culturais que favoreceram seja a fusão, seja o distanciamento dessas mídias. Assim, na história da cultura ocidental, as tendências “fusionistas” ou “separatistas” no desenvolvimento das artes são identificadas na extensão da interação intermediática desde as origens míticas (Orfeu) até as manifestações mais recentes (Bob Dylan). O foco recai sobre a história do teatro musical europeu e a tradição da canção europeia. Nesta, as canções “interpretativas” e as “não interpretativas” se distinguem conforme o nível, semântico

ou prosódico, da ligação entre “palavra e música”. Por fim, as canções populares contemporâneas, representadas por Dylan, são discutidas no contexto da estrutura terminológica apresentada e em vista da antiga tradição dos poetas-cantores.

Palavras-chave: relação palavra-imagem; canção popular contemporânea; tradição europeia.

Introduction

The title chosen for this text promises to tell the story of “words and music”, a subject most suitable for a conference that is devoted to the study of intermediality. Intermediality is a field that is not only fascinating in itself but one that has recently seen a dramatic development as a subject in the world of academic studies. Not that a discussion of the various ways in which the different media and art forms can relate to one another is in any way a new thing under the sun. Yet their serious scholarly study with a strong methodological and terminological awareness is a fairly recent achievement. Particularly the discussion of the relations between words and music has a venerable tradition, and one can observe something like a friendly competition going on, a paragone, over priority and superiority between the study of “words and music” on the one side and the study of “words and images” on the other. The relationship of words and images is a concern equally noble and long-standing in intellectual history, at least so since Horace and his famous verdict, “ut pictura poesis” (“as in painting so in poetry”: poetry is like painting). Yet “words and music” can be seen as having an even longer tradition – as will be demonstrated –, and what this text will do is sketch the history of “words and music” and their relationships by telling its fascinating story from the early beginnings in the nebulous times of pre-history all the way up to our very own days – which is what the names given in the title point to.

In fact, I should not say *the* story of “words and music”, but rather *a* story, or – even more correctly – *my* story, of “words and music”, because – as is clearly evident – all stories are focused and adopt an individual perspective by highlighting certain aspects at the expense of others. Yet it is my claim that the chosen focus is of high relevance as it links up the development of “words and music” with the overall development of European intellectual history and thereby offers a meaningful frame of reference. What my specialized focus is will come out as I go along.

Orpheus

Let me start my story –necessarily sketchy in character, as indicated – “ab ovo”, as Horace had it, and go “back to the roots”, in more modern usage. The root I have chosen is the myth of Orpheus. Orpheus – setting aside whether he was a historical person or only a mythological figure – is no doubt the most highly-praised musician and poet of classical antiquity. He had the legendary gifts of charming fish, tigers and lions, of making trees and rocks move on the ground, of overpowering even the sirens and their enticing songs, and – most famously – of bewitching the gods of the underworld to let his beloved wife Eurydice return to the world of the living (although this last-mentioned incident of Orpheus’s life is only the very latest addition to the myth, but now its most popular part). Pindar, the most venerable master of Greek poetry, called Orpheus the “father of songs” and claimed him to be the son of the muse Calliope, the “beautiful-voiced”, who is the oldest of the nine Parnassian muses and represents the qualities of music, song, dance, and eloquence. Apollo loved Orpheus and taught him to play the lyre while Calliope taught him to make verses for singing. Thus, for the ancient Greeks, he was the inventor of song and music, of singing words to the lyre. He was both a poet and a musician. In the long tradition of the reception of the Orpheus myth in Western culture he is mainly seen as a musician whose music had the many magical effects already mentioned. Yet, interestingly, in antiquity he was more respected as a poet, and it is telling that Socrates, in his apologia, the famous defense speech delivered before drinking the deadly potion, mentions Orpheus in line with Musaios, Hesiod and Homer as one of the four oldest Greek poets; and Aristophanes, in his satirical comedy *The Frogs*, refers to Orpheus’s “holy words” which he uttered as the founder of mysterious initiation rites (known as the Orphic mysteries). One ancient source credits Orpheus even with having invented writing, which is a far more advanced and much later form of verbal expression and one far removed from the art of music. For the church-father St. Augustine he was the supreme “poeta theologus” – *nota bene*: a poet.¹

What all this tells us about the beginning of the story of “words and music” is that it takes us back to the earliest conceptions about the

¹ For factual information on Orpheus see: ORPHEUS. In: WIKIPEDIA: The Free Encyclopedia; ORPHEUS. In: WIKIPEDIA: die freie Enzyklopädie.

interaction of media in Greek antiquity, in particular to their conception of music, of that quality which they called *mousiké*. This term “covered not only music but also dance, lyrics, and the performance of poetry”.² *Mousiké* was an integral part of life in ancient Greece, as theoretical works about Greek music tell us. (In fact, we know far more about the theory than about the practice of ancient Greek music.) *Mousiké* had a central place in the social life, above all in education, as an essential influence on the development of young people. Apollo was seen as having introduced the lyre as an instrument that represented order and discipline, which reflects the views of the early master theoretician Pythagoras and his numerical conception of music. “Measure” was a central concept for them: “measured” music was considered to be an ethical force, one that is instrumental in shaping a “measured” life. As a consequence, it is not surprising that even the great heroes of physical strength and ultimate superiority, like Hercules or Achilles, in contemporary images were at times depicted with a lyre. (That there was an awareness of other musical effects than those ethical ones of shaping an “ordered” life is demonstrated by the presence of the counterpart of the lyre as a musical instrument, namely the aulos, which was a pipe of Phrygian, i.e., non-Greek origin and represented the wild and passionate, the Dionysian side of music. This recalls the famous distinction made by Friedrich Nietzsche between the Apollinian and the Dionysian sides of music.)

Thus, *mousiké* was more than only music, it also comprised words as an important means of enhancing ethical effects, and dance was a further part of *mousiké* as a disciplining factor in the act of performance. Similarly, the old term *melos* referred not only to “melody” or “music”, but to “a composition of words, tune, and rhythm”,³ and the *melopoioi*, the “makers of songs”, were composers and lyricists at the same time who performed their compositions in public.

These “makers of songs” had a prominent social position in ancient Greece and were epitomized in the common mind by the legendary singer-poet Orpheus, who was to become a powerful element in the cultural memory of our Western civilization. The Orpheus myth permeates our whole cultural tradition, and anyone who takes the trouble of checking the internet for works in the various media that reflect the myth will be

² CARTWRIGHT. Ancient Greek Music.

³ CARTWRIGHT. Ancient Greek Music.

surprised:⁴ almost 50 entries for music, mainly operas – among them Monteverdi’s *Orfeo* of 1607, to be mentioned again later –, more than 20 major literary works (from Calderón through Goethe and Rilke to Elfriede Jelinek, the Austrian Nobel Prize winner of 2004), famous paintings, e.g., by Breughel or Corot, and many popular films. *Orfeu Negro* of 1959, a French film based on the Brazilian play *Orfeu da Conceição* by Vinícius de Moraes, set in a Rio de Janeiro favela during the carnival season, is a most impressive example. (It was so successful that it was later turned into a musical both in Brazil [2010] and on Broadway [2014].)

It should be mentioned, however, that Orpheus is not the only figure from antiquity that represents the typical merging of music and poetry in a social performative context. The earliest Greek form of singer-poets from pre-Homeric times were the so-called *aoedes*, who were oral – mostly blind – story-tellers and divinely inspired preservers of the cultural memory. They took their name from Aoede, one of the three ancient original muses (before Apollo’s nine Parnassian muses entered the stage). Aoede, the daughter of Zeus and Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, was also, like Calliope, the muse of voice and song. The *rhapsodes* of a later period replaced the *aoedes* when writing came up and the performing singer-poets became artists that had more reproductive rather than originally creative abilities. Functions similar to those of the *rhapsodes* were performed in other cultural traditions as well; one can think of the Celtic bards, who were also soloists accompanying themselves on the harp or lyre. “Bards” is a term still used today and generally refers to singer-songwriters who appear in a public role. Similar roles were played by the medieval minnesingers, minstrels, troubadours, and trouvères.

Attic Tragedy

Returning to ancient Greek *mousiké*, it can be said by way of summary that Orpheus, as the prototype of a singer and lyre player performing in front of an audience, represented a fundamental fusion of the involved art forms. These art forms, in fact, could not be separated or distinguished from one another in the act of performance. This situation, in fact, was most characteristically also found in the dramatic

⁴ Cf. RPHEUS. In: WIKIPEDIA: die freie Enzyklopädie.

performances of ancient Greek theatre as manifested in the Attic tragedy of the 5th century BC. Such a fusion of the art forms was the most important element of Attic theatre performances, and it is interesting to note that not only the chorus, who stood for the reflective, lyric side of the drama, sang and danced, but also the protagonists did, representing the – in the narrower sense – dramatic, the plot side of the performance. This was true at least for the two earlier great dramatists, Aeschylus and Sophocles, who – which is essential for our discussion – as artists were responsible for both the words and the music of the performances.

It was a most significant and decisive change in the theatre practice of the time, however, when Euripides, the later, third giant of ancient Greek tragedy, hired specialized musicians to perform in his tragedies. This was made necessary by far-reaching developments in the arts at the time. On the one hand, music had become more elaborate and more virtuosic, which asked for refined technical skills that only specialized performers were in command of. Naturally this more highly developed and complex form of music emancipated itself from the poetry and became an independent artistic activity. And the poetry as well became more elaborate and more rarified; it was more “sophisticated” – quite so in the etymological sense: poetry began to show the influence of the sophists, a then newly arising school of philosophy which represented a far more intellectual way of thinking and a more self-conscious, complex approach to verbal expression.

“Fusionist” vs. “Separatist”

What had happened? For the first time in European mental history a vital change could be observed in the relationship between the art forms, as a consequence of a change in the degree of refinement in the use of the elements shaping the individual art forms. The change implied a move from simplicity to intricacy, a move that goes hand in hand with a move in the relationship of the art forms from a state of closeness to a state of divergence. This is a truly absorbing observation, and it is the one that sends us on our way to start telling our story of “words and music”. This, indeed, is the focus I feel is relevant for telling the story of the changing relationship between “words and music” over the centuries. In this story I plan to investigate how conjoining, associative, conjunctive phases between “words and music” took turns, or contrasted

with, disjoining, dissociative, disjunctive phases. To adopt a handy usage, I propose to discuss “fusionist” and “separatist” tendencies in the relationship of “words and music”, with the idea behind that they usually show a correlation with parallel tendencies to simplicity, or complexity, respectively. (Yet there will be exceptions, as will be shown.) The first such change, to come back, took place between the earlier and the later forms of ancient Greek tragedy.

European Musical Theatre

It stands to reason taking a first further step in telling our story by focusing on that particular phase in the history of European theatre which expressed for the first time as its supreme aim the revival of ancient Greek drama, that is, the birth of opera around 1600 in Italy. Above all, at the courtly academies of Florence the idea came up that – by following the ancient model, as it was understood – performances should combine drama, dance, song, and instrumental music; and tellingly so, the first known operas that followed this genre design were based on the Orpheus myth (the operas *Euridice* by Jacopo Peri and Giulio Caccini and Claudio Monteverdi’s early masterpiece, *L’Orfeo*). It is true, as more recent research has brought to light: there had been earlier forms of theatre combining various media and performance techniques, which interestingly were called *intermedi*. Many of them, incidentally, “featured the idea of music’s power as an important element of the plot”,⁵ which also reflects the Orpheus myth. In fact, there had been a great variety of earlier experimental forms of theatre that combined drama and music, among them – once again – a (now lost) work called *Orpheus* of as early as 1480. They had a great variety of genre designations other than “opera”: *attione in musica*, *tragedia musicale*, *dramma musicale*, and others.⁶ But of course the breakthrough of the new, extremely long-living genre of opera came with the Florentine revival of Greek antiquity, and this can be seen as a major example of the “fusionist” tendency of word/music relations, which found its characteristic expression in the delivery style of *recitar cantando*, a kind of “speak-singing”, for which Monteverdi is most well-known.

⁵ ABBATE; PARKER. *History of Opera*, p. 41.

⁶ Cf. ABBATE; PARKER. *History of Opera*, p. 39.

Yet this phase, as a reflection of aristocratic humanist attitudes, did not last very long. Opera entered a new stage when it expanded to Venice where by the 1650s it became a major entertainment spectacle at the famous carnival season, which was no longer restricted to circumscribed courtly circles but was open to the general public. Thus, opera in Venice became a very successful and highly popular genre which used sensational plots that appealed to the senses and the lower social instincts rather than reflected higher ethical and educational aspirations. The major attractions in these performances were the elaborate stage spectacles and, above all, the great virtuosity of the singing. Audiences were quite inattentive at performances and carried on their social lives of flirting and feasting in the theatre while the recitatives – thought boring – unraveled the complicated plots of scheming and intrigue; people paid attention only to the arias that were sung by the singers – particularly with their strained high coloratura voices – while standing up at the proscenium facing the audience. This setup of an opera performance is a typical example of the “separatist” tendencies in word/music relations, and – for better or worse – it remained basically in practice far into the eighteenth century and even later. It is true, there were reform tendencies around 1700 to reduce this anarchic side of Italian opera practices by introducing the *opera seria*, which produced works that are largely unknown today, although they culminated in some very effective works by George Frederic Handel. *Opere serie* showed a somewhat reduced vocal extravagance and had more earnest libretti which, however, were still artificial, formulaic and mannered in the typical baroque verbal style of the period: they remained representative of a “separatist” word/music relationship. And even the far more refined and disciplined neo-classical libretti written later in the eighteenth century by the highly esteemed Pietro Metastasio kept conspicuously independent and disconnected from the music, which was so prolifically written to them in the Handel tradition;⁷ dozens of works of this sort were using Metastasio’s libretti but had little to do with the texts.

It should not be forgotten that the neo-classical period of the eighteenth century was generally a “separatist” age, in the sense here used, most famously represented by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and his

⁷ E.g., Leonardo Da Vinci or Johann Adolf Hasse. Cf. ABBATE/PARKER. *History of Opera*, p. 99.

seminal essay called *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*,⁸ of 1766. There Lessing claims the arts to be incomparable, and any transgression of the limits of the individual arts is seen by him as a violation of taste. This is the opposite of Horace's "fusionist" view of "ut pictura poesis", as already mentioned. In the world of letters, the then fashionable form of the domestic tragedy was considered worlds apart from music, as was the newly developed form of the bourgeois novel, which, however, was readily accepted as a newcomer to the territory of "poetry", while on the other hand the cantata, the oratorio, and even the opera, which formerly had been seen as a literary genre, were excluded from "poetry" and assigned to "music". This was, after all, the "age of reason" and, from a rational point of view, poetry and music were clearly distinguished and dissociated.

The decisive opera reform that took place in the eighteenth century, however, is connected with the name of Christoph Willibald Gluck, whose influence reached far into the nineteenth century. Gluck had started out writing operas in the Metastasio mould, but in 1762 he brought out an opera which had the effect of an earthquake, and the title of the opera was – *Orfeo ed Euridice*. This work and later ones that followed were based on principles thought to be breaking new ground at the time but, in fact, were very old ones. The preface to the opera *Alceste*, written by Ranieri de 'Calzabigi, Gluck's favourite librettist, expresses them very clearly, speaking in Gluck's name: "I thought I would restrict the music to its true function of serving the poetry in the expression and situations of the story, without chilling it with useless and superfluous ornaments", stopping a singer for "a tedious instrumental introduction" or "a favourable vowel" "to display the agility of his fine voice".⁹ With these aims the formerly disjoined words and music were re-united, which finds its formal expression in the reclaimed style of declamation, the *recitar cantando* as formerly introduced by Monteverdi. Gluck's goals were naturalness and clarity in the service of expressive drama that is able to move the hearts and passions – goals that were reached to an even higher degree by Gluck's greatest follower, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

⁸ Cf. LESSING. *Laokoon oder über die Grenzen der Mahlerey und Poesie*. English translation: LESSING, Gotthold Ephraim. *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984.

⁹ ABBATE; PARKER. *History of Opera*, p. 105, *apud* WEISS. *Opera*, p. 119.

Yet Gluck's reform was not effective all over Europe and it should be kept in mind that particularly in Italy the established practice of a concentration on virtuosic singing at the expense of a deeper concern with text and drama continued to be in use, as is exemplified by the extremely popular works of Gioachino Rossini, who famously had the habit of using the same pieces of music for different operas – a clear case of a “separatist” attitude.

The heaviest attack against the practice of Italian and French opera in the nineteenth century then came from Richard Wagner.¹⁰ His influence on the development of the musical theatre was overwhelming, but what needs to interest us here is his radical move to a “fusionist” position of the relationship of words and music, in fact of all the arts, as expressed by the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* (“total work of art”), which he did not invent but made popular.¹¹ That, for Wagner, music and drama became most closely linked is reflected, above all, in the fact that he was the first composer who wrote his own libretti, obviously in order to guarantee their intimate association. He was also the one who rejected the term “opera” and replaced it by the term *Musiktheater* (“musical theatre”), again to indicate the fusion of the two elements of music and theatre. He envisioned the “artwork of the future” as one created by a *Tondichter*, a “tone poet”,¹² who is versed in both words and music. The profoundest statements about his radical reform ideas can be found in his essay *Oper und Drama* of 1852, where he expressed his view “that the Greek tragedies of Aeschylus had been the finest (though still flawed) examples so far of total artistic synthesis, but that this synthesis had subsequently been corrupted by Euripides”.¹³ This is a story already referred to, and

¹⁰ Wagner was impressed by Vincenzo Bellini's operas of the 1830s, particularly *Norma*, because of Bellini's ability to match his music very carefully with the words to be sung. Ulrich Schreiber calls Bellini's innovation a “clandestine revolution” in the history of Italian opera (“eine [...] klammheimliche [...] Revolution”) (SCHREIBER. *Opernführer für Fortgeschrittene*, p. 254, my translation) with significant consequences for Verdi and the development of later Italian opera.

¹¹ The term was first used by the German writer and philosopher K. F. E. Trahdorff in an essay in 1827, *Ästhetik oder Lehre von Weltanschauung und Kunst* (Cf. GESAMTKUNSTWERK).

¹² He also talks about “einen tonvermählten Dichter” (“a poet wedded to the tone”) (WAGNER. *Oper und Drama*, ch. 22, my translation).

¹³ WAGNER. *Oper und Drama*, ch. 22, *apud* GESAMTKUNSTWERK.

Oper und Drama culminates in the following fine statement: “[...] if Voltaire said about opera: “Words too silly to be spoken are left to be sung”, we to the contrary say about the drama lying before us: *Words not worth to be sung are not worth for poetry*”.¹⁴ This statement by Wagner clearly contrasts a disjunctive and a conjunctive attitude to the relationship of poetry and music and naturally favours the latter.

What distinguishes Wagner’s reorientation towards ancient models of a fusion of the arts from earlier attempts at such a reorientation is that earlier reform tendencies saw their aim in an increased simplicity of style and a return to subdued and more restricted forms of presentation and performance. This is certainly not true for Wagner, whose works, quite to the contrary, reach notoriously complex and sprawling dimensions. This was made possible by radical innovations in the form and the texture of the music, above all by doing away with the distinction of recitatives and arias, which led to the exclusive use of “through-composition” and to what Wagner called “endless melody”, and he also introduced his well-known technique of leitmotifs. Both these innovations allowed for a high degree of musical flexibility which enabled the music to follow all the ramified turns of the evolving drama and reflect even the subtlest nuances of the text.

Taking a look at the later developments of musical theatre, in the twentieth century one can observe a strong impact of Wagner’s style on such great composers as Richard Strauss, Arnold Schoenberg, or Alban Berg. But “separatist” tendencies equally continued to be active, of which a fine example is Paul Hindemith’s opera *Cardillac*. This is an interesting case as the opera exists in two versions, one of 1926 and one of 1952, where it is a striking fact that Hindemith heavily revised the text of the opera for the later version, following a decisive change in his political and ideological views. Yet he left the music of the opera basically unchanged so that one and the same music is heard for widely different words in the two versions.¹⁵ As in the eighteenth century, the neo-classical phases of twentieth-century arts as well, of which *Cardillac* is representative, clearly favoured such a strong independence of the media.

¹⁴ “[...] wenn Voltaire von der Oper sagte: “Was zu albern ist, um gesprochen zu werden, das läßt man singen”, so sagen wir von dem vor uns liegenden Drama dagegen: *Was nicht wert ist, gesungen zu werden, ist auch nicht der Dichtung wert.*” (WAGNER. *Oper und Drama*, ch. 26, my translation).

¹⁵ Cf. BERNHART. *Cardillac, the Criminal Artist*, p. 176.

European Art Song

Opera was the field in which throughout its history ideas of what ancient Greek drama was like were shining through, and we have seen that Orpheus usually was the myth to go back to, although that myth itself never associated Orpheus with drama and the theatre. Nearer to Orpheus, the exceptional singer-poet as the legends know him, is the later European tradition of non-dramatic singing, to which our story now turns for a while. The earliest form of such singing in the middle ages is the Gregorian chant, or plainsong/plainchant, which showed a characteristic monophonic melodic form of choral recitation of a sacred text, a form that features a particularly close association, a true fusion, even identity, of text and music on the rhythmical level. It is a very simple, monodic style of delivery, to which the term “plainchant” points, and it is an interesting phenomenon that it has found its quite unexpected place on recent pop charts.

There are later phases of Gregorian chant that indeed introduced a kind of polyphonic singing. Yet full-fledged polyphony became the overwhelmingly dominant form in the later middle ages and had its culmination in the Franco-Flemish School (formerly called the Netherlandish School) of music, but also in Venice, with such outstanding musicians as Du Fay, Ockeghem, Orlando di Lasso, or Giovanni Gabrieli. In the sacred motets of these composers the vocal writing occasionally ran up to even 32 voices and became so elaborate that the underlying text turned out to be essentially irrelevant. A telling example of the mismatch of words and music in such works is in a motet by John Dunstable, a contemporary English composer, where at a certain point in the music we find a lengthy musical pause in the very middle of a single word: *ange – lorum*. This is an extreme case, which once again can demonstrate that when music turns to complex virtuosity the frequent result is a drastic disjunction of words and music.

The Dunstable example is very critically quoted in 1597 by Thomas Morley,¹⁶ a well-recognised English musician who was one of the influential writers of songs at the Elizabethan time and who, together with John Dowland and Thomas Campion, started a radically

¹⁶ MORLEY. *A Plaine and Easie Introdvction to Practicall Mvsicke*, p. 177 (“Rules to be obserued in ditting”).

new kind of songwriting at the time, called ayres. It is significant that this innovation came up again around 1600, like the invention of opera, both, of course, inspired by a similar set of old ideas. Dowland – recently popularized by the singer Sting – defended his innovations by quoting as his main ancient authority Plato, who spoke of song as a superior form of “expressing some worthy sentence or excellent Poeme” where words and music are united by a common rhythm; and Dowland – once again unsurprisingly – also mentions Orpheus as a model for his new kind of song.¹⁷ Similarly Thomas Campion, who wrote both the verse and the music for his ayres, explained in one of his prefaces that in his English ayres he has “chiefely ayred to couple my Words and Notes lovingly together”.¹⁸ We can see that after the disjoining of words and music in the lavish Franco-Flemish and Venetian polyphonic style a simple form of monody came back with an intimate association of the two media.¹⁹

“Interpretive” vs. “Non-interpretive” Song

What a closer look at the practice of songwriting by Morley, Campion and Dowland can teach us, however, is that although they share the view that words and music ought to be closely linked, nonetheless the character and degree of that linkage can be quite different. In some kind of ayres the link lies mainly in a match on the rhythmical level. In this case the prosody of the words, the accents and lengths of the syllables, are accurately mirrored in the music; this is very much what Plato had in mind in the quotation just given, and it is what also Campion actually referred to when he talked about his words and notes “lovingly coupled together”. In such cases we no doubt have a close tie of the media, the tie, however, does not exist on the level of the meaning of the words. The music does not attempt to mirror in any way what the text is saying; it only carefully follows the text on the level of the signifier.

¹⁷ DOWLAND. *The First Book of Ayres*, p. iv.

¹⁸ CAMPION. *The Works of Thomas Campion*, p. 55 (Preface to *Two Books of Ayres*, 1613).

¹⁹ For a more detailed discussion of text-setting in Elizabethan ayres, see BERNHART. *Theorie und Praxis der Vertonung in den elisabethanischen Airen*. (Reprinted in: BERNHART. *Essays on Literature and Music (1985–2013)* by Walter Bernhart, p. 1-18.)

However, there is, of course, music which very well tries to reflect what the text is saying and suggest in musical terms aspects of the meaning on the level of the signified. In what has been labelled “word painting”, or “word illustration”, music can easily mirror, for instance, the rising sun talked about in the text by having the voice sing a rising melody, or suggest a girl running away by running scales in the accompanying lute; and also in “word expression”, i.e., in passages where feelings and emotional states are addressed, such psychological conditions can be mirrored in the music: slow minor keys expressing sadness, falling seconds reflecting sighs, quick dance rhythms suggesting happiness, and so on – all these forms can be found in Dowland or Morley, who in this respect, however, differ significantly from Campion, who took a clearly opposite position and sneered at what he called “such childish observing of words”;²⁰ he restricted himself to a prosodic fusion of words and music and avoided content matching.

Following this, it is possible to distinguish between two distinct forms of fusion of words and music in song writing, forms which elsewhere I have called “interpretive” as in contrast to “non-interpretive” songs.²¹ In the one case, the music enters into a dialogue with the text on the level of the signified and thus “interprets” it, concerns itself with the meaning of the text; this is the hermeneutic approach of text-setting; in the other case, the music shows no intention of interpreting what the text is saying and restricts itself to re-enforcing and strengthening the material basis of the text by affirmative identification with it; this can be called the enhancement approach of text-setting.

It is interesting to survey the history of song writing in the light of this distinction, and it can be observed, for instance, that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which was generally a tenuous period of art song, the most common form of monodic singing, the church hymns and anthems, were basically “non-interpretive”, which is also true for the elegant and gallant style of art song as it appeared later in the eighteenth century in the so-called Berlin school of song writing of Carl Friedrich Zelter, Johann Friedrich Reichardt and others, highly

²⁰ CAMPION. *The Works of Thomas Campion*, p. 15 (Preface to Rosseter’s *Book of Ayres*, 1601).

²¹ See BERNHART. Setting a Poem. (Reprinted in: BERNHART. *Essays on Literature and Music (1985–2013)* by Walter Bernhart, p. 53-73.)

appreciated by Geheimrat Goethe. It took the advent of romanticism to encourage “interpretive” song writing, in the sense described, and the great tradition of the German lied from Franz Schubert onwards showed an ever-increasing sensitivity to nuances of meaning in the text as reflected in the ever more delicate nuances of the music, culminating, let’s say, in Hugo Wolf or Benjamin Britten.²²

European Poetry as “Vehicle of Opinion”

The modern European art song tradition, as it started during the Renaissance period, basically represents “fusionist” tendencies of “words and music”, in the terminology here used, whichever form and degree of fusion the various song types developed in the tradition may have taken. It is, however, worth taking a brief look at the general development of modern European poetry from this perspective, and there we can observe a strong tendency to a “separatist” position after the flourishing of humanist-inspired Renaissance poetry with its tendency towards an association with music, as manifested, among others, in sonnets. Literary writing from the seventeenth century onwards, however, turned to more realistic approaches and to didactic aims in poetry, which also meant a turn away from musical associations. One need not go as far as Ezra Pound, who said: “From the Elizabethans to Swinburne, throughout all that vast hiatus English poetry has been the beargarden of doctrinaires. It has been the vehicle of opinion. For Swinburne it was at least the art of musical wording.”²³ This implies that only with the symbolists a renewed conjunction of “words and music” took place in the history of European poetry. This radical position neglects the musical leanings of romantic poets like Burns, or Eichendorff, to name but two, but basically it holds true that music and poetry essentially lived separate lives for a very long time.

²² For an example of a detailed analysis of refined musical text interpretation, see BERNHART. *An Exegetic Composer*. (Reprinted in: BERNHART. *Essays on Literature and Music (1985–2013)* by Walter Bernhart, p. 115-128.)

²³ POUND. *Literary Essays*, p. 363.

20th-Century Song

To return to song writing and take a look at the twentieth century, what can be observed is a gradual decline of art song; as far as it did remain active it basically followed the romantic tradition – which is true even for such forward-looking composers as Schoenberg, Berg, or Britten. The alternative was taking up the neo-classical attitude already mentioned. Thus, Hindemith, once again used as an example, wrote songs such as the cycle *Marienleben* (“The Life of Mary”) where the music relates very little to Rainer Maria Rilke’s underlying complex modernist text.

Pop Song

What obviously gained more weight in the twentieth century were popular forms of song writing, of which, in the earlier phase, the songs of Bert Brecht and Kurt Weill have meanwhile become part of the canon. And surely what happened later was the explosion of pop songs, which now dominate the media scene and have become an ever-present feature of our contemporary cultural life. From the viewpoint of the relationship between words and music, this pop song scene is basically in the “fusion” camp because in principle the songs are monodic and make it a point that the music should not distract attention from the text and should follow the lyrics’ prosodic pattern. They tend to be “non-interpretive” and only rarely the music also relates directly to the meaning of the text as it unfolds in the text-setting.

However, it is interesting to observe that, although these songs are “non-interpretive” and avoid hermeneutic text-setting, the music of pop songs nonetheless is linked to the text and to “meaning” on a more fundamental, deeper level of congruence. How can that be explained? Pop songs are basically a social activity and centrally perform a social function by expressing attitudes that reflect the prevailing values of the surrounding cultural life. Thus, the music does not “interpret” – as it were, internally, i.e. within the text-music combination – what the text is saying; yet, the music, by being performed in a social situation in conjunction with the text, assists the text in communicating – externally, as it were – a cultural “message”; the song essentially functions as a socio-cultural act. Thus, in pop songs we usually have a “non-interpretive” practice

which generally avoids internal text-setting; yet music shares with the text a strong impulse to communicate cultural values, expressed by the text, in a social act of performance.²⁴

Bob Dylan

This finally leads into talking about the most prominent Orpheus figure of today, named in the title, Bob Dylan, brought to renewed universal fame as the most recent – and partly controversial – recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature. Before coming back to the issue of the Nobel Prize, what is first in place is a discussion of his song practice and his position in the critical framework here developed. This is best done by looking at one of his most famous songs, “The Times They Are A-Changin’”, which has been called a “textbook example” of the way he is able to merge poetry and music.²⁵ It is a song firmly rooted in the bardic tradition of ballad singing to people gathered round the poet-singer, which comes out even in the very first line of the text, where it says, “Come gather ’round people”.²⁶ Dylan sings his words to the harp (i.e., the mouthorgan) and the guitar, the song is musically simple, following the (slightly disguised) standard four-bar model and a standard harmonic structure, only with some ambivalence between major and minor keys, and a heavy three-fourth measure.²⁷ Also the language is simple and colloquial, yet typically enriched by vivid images (the flood, the spinning wheel, the blocked doorway) and some biblical allusions (e.g., the deluge). We indeed have a high congruence of “words and music” on the prosodic level, the words can easily be followed, yet the music does not concern itself directly with the meaning of the text – which is typical for strophic settings like this one; thus, in terms here used, the song is “fusionist” “non-interpretive”.

The question, however, is whether the music is nonetheless concerned with “meaning” in another way, in the sense described before, namely, whether it carries – as a combined concern of both the words

²⁴ A more extensive description of the varieties of relationship found between “words and music” in songs, see BERNHART. *Words and Music as Partners in Song*; BERNHART. *What Can Music Do to a Poem?* (Both reprinted in: BERNHART. *Essays on Literature and Music (1985–2013)* by Walter Bernhart, p. 369-379; 405-412, respectively.)

²⁵ Cf. BERGERT. *Symbiose von Text und Musik*.

²⁶ DYLAN. *The Times They Are A-Changin’*.

²⁷ Cf. WICKE. *The Times They Are A-Changin’*.

and the music – some “cultural message”. This, of course, is clearly the case: “The Times They Are A-Changin’” has been called the most influential document of the 1960s protest movement, the Civil Rights Movement, which established Dylan’s reputation as the spokesman of his generation.²⁸ It is a plea for cultural change with an optimistic outlook in the last lines, saying that “the first one now will later be last”.²⁹ It is interesting to note that Dylan, in 1985, affirmed that “[t]his was definitely a song with a purpose. It was influenced of course by the Irish and Scottish ballads”.³⁰ Yet Dylan also left the words rather general and did not see them as a means of direct political intervention, in fact he did not at all think of himself as a genuine “protest singer” of “finger-pointing songs”.³¹ Instead he said: “I didn’t mean ‘The Times They Are a-Changin’” as a statement ... It’s a feeling”.³² This is an interesting comment and shows Dylan’s awareness that songs reach their desired effects – their “purpose” – not through an act of mental persuasion but through emotional involvement and a change of attitude towards the desired goal. This of course reminds us of the old rhetorical principle of *movere*, of “moving the passions”, and the age-old ethical wisdom that the combination of words and music, delivered in a social act of communication, is a supreme means for achieving changes of attitude.

That Bob Dylan is firmly rooted in the ancient tradition of song poetry is clearly acknowledged in the justification given by the Swedish Academy for awarding him the Nobel Prize. Horace Engdahl, in his Stockholm presentation speech, sees him as “a singer worthy of a place beside the Greek ᾠοῖδοί”,³³ and Sara Danius, the Academy’s permanent secretary, compared Dylan to Homer and Sappho, who also accompanied their poems with music.³⁴ The following statement from the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* makes a similar point suitable in the context of this text: “And is it not that the singer-songwriter and performer Bob Dylan, from a long-term perspective, can be seen as a modern revenant of Orpheus,

²⁸ Cf. WICKE. The Times They Are A-Changin’.

²⁹ DYLAN. The Times They Are A-Changin’.

³⁰ DYLAN *apud* BOB Dylan’s “The Times They Are A-Changin’”.

³¹ Cf. DETERING. Bob Dylan, p. 37.

³² DYLAN *apud* BOB Dylan’s “The Times They Are A-Changin’”.

³³ ENGDAHL. Award Ceremony Speech.

³⁴ Cf. DANIUS. Interview.

who has replaced his lyre with an electric guitar?”³⁵ Similarly, it has been stressed that Dylan is aware of “the oral-magical origins of art under the conditions of a globalized technological modernity”,³⁶ a merging of untaught popular and avantgarde intellectual culture. Dylan himself, in his banquet acceptance speech, made it clear: what interests him most – like Shakespeare before him, as he says – is the performance situation, the conditions under which the delivery of his songs can take place.³⁷ He said so in response to the delicate question of whether he deserved a Nobel Prize for literature and brushing aside the hairy issue of “Are my songs *literature*?”. This is not his concern.³⁸

The recent so-called “performative turn” in cultural studies opens a door for understanding such a position, not the least because it makes accessible a deepened understanding of the long story of “words and music” which I have been sketching. The Swedish Academy was very well aware of what was happening when Engdahl began his presentation speech with the following words: “What brings about the great shifts in the world of literature? Often it is when someone seizes upon a simple, overlooked form, discounted as art in the higher sense, and makes it mutate.”³⁹ It is the “performative turn” that can be made accountable for

³⁵ “Und lässt sich nicht der Singer-Songwriter und Performer Bob Dylan in der Langzeitperspektive als ein moderner Wiedergänger des Orpheus begreifen, der die Lyra durch die elektrische Gitarre ersetzt hat?” (MÜLLER. Literaturnobelpreis, my translation).

³⁶ DETERING. Bob Dylan, p. 12, my translation.

³⁷ Cf. DYLAN. Bob Dylan – Banquet Speech.

³⁸ Meanwhile, on June 5th, 2017 (in time to collect the Nobel funds), Dylan has delivered his Nobel Lecture. It does not centrally address the issues here raised, yet it confirms some points already made, when it says, e.g.: “I got to wondering exactly how my songs related to literature” (this is the opening statement); and (in the final passage): “[...] songs are unlike literature. They’re meant to be sung, not read. The words in Shakespeare’s plays were meant to be acted on the stage”; or: “If a song moves you, that’s all that’s important. I don’t have to know what a song means” (DYLAN. Nobel Lecture). The lecture’s last sentence refers to Homer and his invocation of the Muse. A fine commentary in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* makes the good point that this lecture only on the surface appears to be like a joke; it is certainly a provocation yet it makes a profound statement albeit in pronouncedly anti-academic terms as its apparent artlessness gives illuminating insight into Dylan’s views of poetry and the function of a poet as a mere vessel through which the “Muse” speaks (cf. WIELE. Bob Dylans Nobelpreisrede).

³⁹ ENGD AHL. Award Ceremony Speech.

a revived interest in fused medial forms of presentation, a presentation mode that goes back to very early beginnings and has seen many different formations as history evolved.

I need to stress, however, that while I thus share the Swedish Academy's view of the historical appropriateness of nowadays awarding a literature prize to a song-writer, I am at the same time in sympathy with those critics who regret this situation and take up the position that at a time when around the world reading and writing as cultural skills are in defense, if not already in decline, book-based "traditional" – in our terminology "separatist" – literature ought to be strongly supported. As one critic aptly phrased it in the *New York Times*: "Bob Dylan does not need a Nobel Prize in Literature, but literature needs a Nobel Prize."⁴⁰

Conclusion

To briefly summarize the findings of this text:

For one it can be asserted that the concern with issues of intermediality, which prove to be so virulent today, has a venerable tradition and goes back to antiquity where the combined use of medial forms of expression was a common, indeed the dominant practice.

It was then demonstrated that the earliest combination forms showed an intimate fusion of media, put to basically ethical purposes; yet that in later developments the alternative of a separation of the media arose, caused by the increased refinement and elaboration of the individual media which asked for highly specialized skills in execution.

As a consequence, "fusionist" and "separatist" tendencies could be distinguished, with a general inclination that this distinction also implies one between simpler and more virtuosic forms of medial presentation. Yet the example of Richard Wagner and his followers has shown that this is not necessarily the case.

It was a further finding that in the "fusionist" cases the degree of fusion can vary and that the congruence between the media either works mainly on the prosodic level alone – in "non-interpretive" songs –, which generally guarantees high verbal intelligibility; or, otherwise – in "interpretive" songs – the music additionally concerns itself with the meaning of the text and reflects its semantic side.

⁴⁰ NORTH. Why Bob Dylan Shouldn't Have Gotten a Nobel.

As a further observation it was shown that in “non-interpretive” cases, where the music does not try to illustrate the verbal meaning of the text on the surface, nonetheless both the words and the music together may communicate a deeper-level “meaning” in the form of a cultural message transmitted in a social act; this is particularly true for pop songs.

It was further demonstrated that at certain points in history deliberate moves were made to cause historical changes, mainly in the form of declared reforms leading from “separation” to “fusion” with an impulse towards increased simplicity and naturalness. Yet it could also be demonstrated that both “separatist” and “fusionist” tendencies can likewise exist side by side and represent distinct contrastive options of artistic activity at the same time. This should lead to the important observation that, in principle, the distinction between the two tendencies implies no value judgment, no matter what inflamed reformers historically may have thought and propagated. The different forms merely reflect different social and artistic demands and expectations.

From a methodological viewpoint, it needs to be added and emphasised that the categories here used – “fusionist”/“separatist”, “interpretive”/“non-interpretive” – are only heuristic tools and have been devised for mainly practical purposes; they are expected to be helpful in meaningfully describing distinctions between phenomena in order to identify and thereby possibly better understand characteristic features of the phenomena under scrutiny. These categories should in no way function as dry formal labels for putting things neatly into pigeonholes, and of course there are gradations and unclear cases. Rather the categories are meant to assist us in sharpening our minds and encourage us to look more closely at what is going on when “words and music” start their fascinating flirt with one another. Filling in the many blanks left in the sketchy story here told could, and should, test the strength and validity of the story, and the richness of the field of “words and music” clearly asks for a great number of other stories as well than the one told here to be brought to light.

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