On Text-Setting as Aspect-Seeing by Means of Music

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1. Listening to music (then talking about it)

Listening to music is logically prior to analysis. Analysis (or at least the kind I would like to argue for) gives you the chance to spend quality time with the music you love; to live again imaginary sound trajectories; to try to re-present (*vergegenwärtigen*) privileged moments played out inside a richly differentiated temporal frame; to get carried away (again and again) while talking about all this, before the next time you listen again to the music (which will then set you anew to the analysis mode and so forth).[1] Of course, analytic discourse has a logic of its own and once operating in this mode things can't go exactly parallel to the listening mode. You may linger on one or the other 'privileged moment'; you can recourse to necessary background knowledge; you may see all of a sudden a hidden aspect you did not think of while listening to the music; you could spend an hour discussing a piece of music which only lasts a few minutes. At any rate, this kind of analysis (or its best parts)[2] will offer no *causal* explanation whatsoever, as Wittgenstein used to say about Freud's best interpretations: it will only be "an expression of ideas which led us from one end to another of a [piece of music]" (*Lectures,* 18).[3] And, of course, it will not so much name causes as it will *show* what is beautiful or interesting or clever or … about the beloved piece of music.

2. Music-setting and Aspects

I suggest we consider text-setting, e.g. in a *Lied*, as *text-aspect exemplification by means of music.* Wittgensteinian 'aspects' concern duly a concrete way of *seeing-as*; i.e. a cognitive act between mere seeing, physiologically speaking (if there ever is such a thing), and actual interpreting; in other words, aspect seeing or noticing is a bit of both (a kind of 'seeing', in a large sense). While Wittgenstein's original discussion and much of the subsequent attention are focused on the visual domain and the change from one aspect to another (the famous rabbit/duck example), my attention is directed to aspect-seeing as *understanding* in poetry and music, esp. in the form of the art song:[4] a poem is by definition semantically dense and interpretatively open; any single reading and/or interpretation (by a composer, an actor or simply a reader) must necessarily pick out some but not all possible aspects. The setting itself (the music) *is* the aspect change.

Musical picking out is brought about more by way of *exemplification* than *denotation.* I use those two terms in Goodman's sense (*Languages of Art*), e.g.: 'red' denotes red; 'black' exemplifies (and denotes) black. Exemplification is denotation plus possession of the property denoted. Denotation is mainly at work in speech/literature and thematic painting. Exemplification is found in music and abstract painting. In song, exemplification might occur in all three levels of voice, text and piano, in many interesting combinations: the music set to a poem speaking about (denoting) immobility may exemplify movement; the music set to a poem denoting alertness and exemplifying sluggishness may exemplify sluggishness, etc. In general, the music will normally exemplify, while at the same time the poem will denote *and* exemplify. This means that a. the relation net is inherently rich, and it determines the resulting quality of the song, as well as directly involves the listener (exemplified aspects are the aspects noticed by the listener; or put in another way: the composer *sees* certain – a few out of many possible – text aspects which he then *exemplifies* musically which then the listener may *notice*) , b. the text-to-music relationship can transcend the local word-to-music level and spill over, as it were, onto the whole of music (a word at one point of the song can influence the music at (an)other point(s) of the song).

3. Case Study Schumann (I)

Schumann songs present an inexhaustible well of subtle possible relations between text and music, one actually involving three distinct levels: the piano, the voice-as-music, the voice-as-text. I'll take a lied rather from the periphery of both audiences' and critics' attention: no 7 from the *Liederkreis*, op. 39: "Auf einer Burg". Here is the Eichendorff text:

> Eingeschlafen auf der Lauer/ Oben ist der alte Ritter;/ Drüber gehen Regenschauer,/ Und der Wald rauscht durch das Gitter.// Eingewachsen Bart und Haare,/ und versteinert Brust und Krause,/ sitzt er viele hundert Jahre/ oben in der stillen Klause./// Draussen ist es still und friedlich,/ alle sind ins Tal gezogen,/ Waldesvögel einsam singen/ in den leeren Fensterbogen.// Eine Hochzeit fährt da unten/ auf dem Rhein im Sonnenscheine,/ Musikanten spielen munter,/ und die schöne Braut, die weinet.

The poem is enigmatic by itself but interpreting the poem is not my concern here. I am interested in showing the aspects of the text that Schumann reacts to musically, and this, I believe, can be shown even if we don't get down to the bottom of what is really meant, either by Schumann or Eichendorff (which might or might not coincide).

The poem consists of four verses, two focused on the 'Ritter', two on the wedding and the 'weeping bride' [!].First, we can *notice* that Schumann musically *sees* the poem's reference to old times: pseudo-polyphonic texture (the dotted rhythm also exemplifies metaphorically the 'auf der Lauer'- aspect) in the first part of the song together with choral texture, in the second. The song is modified strophic. Schumann uses the folk-like strophic form only to enhance his musical reaction to the incredible punch-line with the word 'weinet' at the end: as the song unfolds, the listener is aware of something going extremely wrong, already by the time of the second verse music, with its perverse harmonies; more even so, since the style alluded to is a pristine *Choral* style; The listener's uneasiness is confirmed at the end of the second verse (the end of the first half of the song) with its uncanny dissonances and distorted cadence. On the other hand, when weinet comes at the very end of the song, the music has nothing disturbing whatsoever: on the contrary, Schumann sets it in a buoyant euphonic cadence on *e*, which exemplifies rather an early-music sounding cadence, as if he saw an early-music aspect in 'weinet'. We realize, however, in hindsight, that the semantics of the 'weinet' is the source of the uneasiness in the first half of the song. At a closer look, the reason why the setting of the second verse (and of the

fourth) *is* disturbing, lies in the way the piano is made asynchronous to the voice (in rhythmical dissonance, as it were, with it). It seems, like the overall aspect Schumann elicits from the Eichendorff poem has to do with the lack of synchronization between the two worlds that correspond to the two halves of the poem. The local words-to-music re-action model is not adequate to account for this. We notice that the weinet-aspect, as well as the aspect of two contrasting temporal orders are the two principal aspects that Schumann sees in the Eichendorff text; in a way that his musical reactions to these spill over into different points in the course of the unfolding of the song.[5]

4. Words and Music

As users of language we are able to make the distinction between actuality and different temporal frames of reference; also, the distinction between indicating, guessing, ordering, wishing, believing, comparing etc. What if one applies to language the filter of another medium, like painting, dance or music? (E.g. if one tries to render a certain text by composing music, or doing a painting, or performing a dance): one looses negation, temporal reference other than the actual, modalities like possibility, counterfactuals, necessity (or maybe is it all necessity?). In such a 'translation', apart from nouns, adjectives can be rescued too, but one needs to spend some time in the other medium to realize this: In an indirect way, the temporal element is rescued after all, and after a while one realizes that one can in the end have both actuality and long-term second order emerging qualities, which is what I think the equivalent of the adjectives. What, however, is for sure *out* of this list is: pronouns, prepositions, all the little syncategorematic words, and acts like the ones mentioned before: negation, as well as disjunction, entailment, conjecture, belief, doubt, wish, order etc. Ultimately, what gets lost in the passage from the linguistic to any other domain is the very distinction between Truth and Falsehood. All these is generally true for language set to music. Schumann (again) is exceptional: He has managed to set to music even the little syncategorematic words that introduce a simile: the comparative conjunctions 'wie', 'als', 'als ob'.

5. Case Study Schumann (II)

Another song also from the periphery of audiences' and critics' attention is "Kommen und Scheiden", no 3 from Opus 90, poems by Nikolaus Lenau. Here is the text Schumann set to music:

> So oft sie kam, erschien mir die Gestalt/ so lieblich wie das erste Grün im Wald.// Und was sie sprach, drang mir zum Herzen ein/ süss wie des Frühlings erstes Lied [im Hain].// Und als Lebwohl, sie winkte mit der Hand,/ War's, ob der letzte Jugendtraum mir schwand.

The song is in *g* flat major at the beginning and *f* sharp major, at the end: a first, almost visual hint (six flats – six sharps), at the Romantic identity-paradox (cf. Luhmann, 364). The presence in the text of the feminine figure is also ambivalent: she is a human person and/or an immaterial 'Gestalt'. This ontological ambivalence is emphasized through the tone-setting use in the text – and their

ingenious setting to music – of similes. Through its embedment in the context of the overall ambivalence of 'her' presence, Schumann is setting to music not the specific content of the similes (e.g. 'das erste Grün im Wald' or 'des Frühlings erstes Lied'), but the very notion of a simile. Musically, this is brought about through *the setting of every simile-introducing word* to an ingenious harmony that clearly deviates from the principal tonality (all in all something like the musical equivalent to Eichendorff's 'metaphysical tact' (Adorno, 73)). The other music-textual aspects relate to the composer's reaction to the semantics of concrete verbs: 'drang', with the harmonic friction of the 2nd; 'schwand', with the homologous 'elimination' a. of *b* sharp to *b* natural, b. of the voice; opening the way to the piano postlude in *f* sharp major.

Listening to music is logically prior to analysis – of course, other approaches to analysis (e.g. more on the *poetic* side) are possible that might even dispense altogether with the listening experience. However, for the kind of analysis counting on the analyst's involvement as a critical listener,[6] listening to music is to analysis what dreaming is to planning.

Endnotes

[1] We can't say about somebody 'She is musical', says Wittgenstein [T], if she is not able to *talk* about the music she seems to appreciate (*Lectures*, 6 n. 5; my emphasis); conversely, it could be agued that talking about music is meaningful only in relation to the quality of our involvement as listeners.
[2] We may call it with Boerthold Hoeckner 'distant analysis', an allusion to Novalis.
[3] Wittgenstein refers originally to the Freudian explanations of jokes.
[4] Wittgenstein brings indirectly music in the discussion: "Doesn't it take imagination to hear something as a variation on a particular theme?" (*PI*, 181).
[5] Another example of spilling over: the drone on *c* in the setting of the second verse is related to the auf der Lauer-aspect of the first line. In the second (fourth) verse, except for the early music- aspect, Schumann also notices musically the aspect of the passing years - aspect through the use of harmonic sequence.
[6] 'Analysis and criticism are deeply related modes of perception', in Hoeckner, 82.

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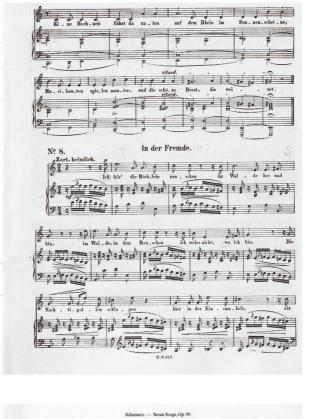
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Appendix

a) Robert Schumann, "Auf einer Burg" (*Liederkreis*, op. 39; no 7):

b) Robert Schumann, "Kommen und Scheiden" (op. 90, no 4):

* The meter is mistakenly printed as 9/8, instead of the right 6/8; see Robert Schumann, *Lieder für eine Stimme mit Klavierbegleitung*, ed. Max Friedlaender [1856 – 1934] (Frankfurt/M: C. F. Peters, s.d.).