Book Review


Why do songs move us? How is it that some songs seem to condense the immensity of human experience into a single page, even a single passage? Yonatan Malin’s book, *Songs in Motion: Rhythm and Meter in the German Lied,* offers a fresh perspective on such questions. Songs move us, he implies, in part because of how *they* move—how they mingle the rhythms of music and poetry. Malin is not the first to write about the rhythms of song (throughout, he shows his debt to Arnold Feil, Susan Youens, Harald Krebs, Ann C. Fehn, Rufus Hallmark, David Lewin, and Deborah Rohr, among others), but he is the first to do it so thoroughly and so broadly, spanning the entire nineteenth century. The result is a model of music analysis at its best—detailed, historically sensitive, lucid, probing, often inspiring—and a book that deserves a place on the shelf of anyone with a serious interest in text and music.

Malin begins with two introductory chapters that lay out his methodology and offer background on such topics as poetic meter and rhythm, hypermeter, metric conflicts, and the relations between musical meter and rhythm. These chapters will be a welcome resource for those with little prior experience with either poetic theory or recent theories of meter and rhythm, but they also have a lot to offer specialists. The most significant contribution here is Malin’s discussion of how poetic lines and couplets are set in various musical meters (pp. 15–27). These “declamatory schemas,” as he calls them, reveal how composers transform lines of three, four, and five poetic feet into different musical gestures, depending on where each foot falls in a given musical meter. Malin cites examples of different schemas from songs by Hensel, Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, and Wolf, touching

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on all of the songs in Schubert’s Winterreise, Schumann’s Dichterliebe, and Hensel’s Opp. 1 and 7 in the process. This is more than merely a labeling system. Attending to patterns of poetic and musical declamation allows us to understand which patterns are most common—and hence why a composer might deviate from an established pattern for expressive effect—and which songs hew consistently to one pattern, shift between different patterns, or use such variable declamation that no pattern is evident. Malin’s schemas, in short, have meaning, depending on the context in which they appear. He is sensitive to these meanings and aware that musical theories are most useful when they bring the music to life. “Rather than imposing a set theoretical framework on the genre [of song] as a whole,” he writes, “I develop approaches that allow each song or set of songs to come forth” (p. x). Declamatory schemas are but one approach among many that he uses in conjunction with metric and rhythmic analysis, harmonic analysis, formal analysis, and all varieties of poetic analysis, as context demands. Early on, Malin writes of his desire to “get to know the work intimately”—the phrase comes from Theodor Adorno (p. x)—and to “work [the rhythms of music and poetry] like clay” (p. vii). In this he succeeds beautifully because he lets the musical material shape his analytical tools, not the other way around.

The core of Malin’s book consists of five analytical chapters, each focusing on one of the five composers cited previously: Fanny Hensel, Franz Schubert, Robert Schumann, Johannes Brahms, and Hugo Wolf. Rather than surveying the lieder of these composers (daunting for any scholar and surely taxing for the reader), he instead wisely concentrates on specific rhythmic and metric devices that characterize their idiosyncratic approaches to the genre. Malin should be commended for devoting a chapter to Fanny Hensel, whose songs have only recently begun to receive the analytical attention they deserve. Taking the six songs of her Op. 1 and the first of Op. 7 as a representative sample, Malin manages to put his finger on one of the most distinctive aspects of Hensel’s songwriting style: a sense of freedom and fluidity. Elsewhere I have suggested that this fluidity is in part a product of her novel approach to harmony and her use of non-duple hypermeter, but Malin shows that it also has to do with the “lyrical flow” of her vocal melodies: changing declamatory schemas, expansive lyricism at the ends of strophes, and phrase expansions and elisions that adjust the melodic flow in response to the meaning and structure of the text, even in the context of

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normative four-bar hypermeter. These analyses ought to inspire scholars to seek out similar phenomena in other songs by Hensel.

The next chapter explores the lieder of Schubert, focusing on moments of heightened subjectivity and “reflective consciousness” when the lyric persona “steps outside of the regular musical pulsation, breaks from the form, in order to reflect, comment on, and express the full intensity of the consciously felt emotion” (p. 97). Often, Malin notes, these moments are marked by some sort of rhythmic irregularity, particularly a shift from song-like to speech-like declamation. In “Wandrers Nachtlied I,” for example, the regular, almost commonplace declamatory schema of the opening measures gives way to a moment of quasi-recitative when the lyric persona says how weary he is (“Ach, ich bin des Treibens müde!”). Only after experiencing such pain does he sing of the peace that he hopes will soothe it—hence the freer song-like declamation of the closing bars (“Süsser Friede, komm’, ach komm’ in meine Brust!”). “Die Nebensonnen,” from Winterreise, features a similarly expressive shift to recitative-like declamation when the wanderer laments that the suns he sees overhead shine for others but not for him, as does—even more dramatically—“Gretchen am Spinnrade,” when Gretchen cries, “Sein Händedruck, und ach, sein Kuß,” the only words in the poem not set with the rhythm of one accented syllable per bar. Analyses like these work so well because, to paraphrase Charles Rosen, they “explain the obvious.” I mean this in no way pejoratively. As I read Malin’s analyses I kept having the feeling that I was discovering something I somehow already sensed—like the perfect purity and sincerity of the “Süsser Friede” melody in “Wandrers Nachtlied I” or the wrenching stoppage of time at the high point of “Gretchen”—but lacked the vocabulary, or the acuity, to articulate. I kept saying to myself, “Yes, this is so true!” and wondering how I had not spotted it before.

Chapter 5 turns to Schumann, whose rhythmic and metric experiments have, of course, been studied extensively (most notably by Harald Krebs).
Malin dwells mainly on two facets of Schumann’s approach to rhythm and meter: the “reverberant doublings” of vocal line and piano accompaniment, found in a number of songs from his Liederjahr, and the rhythmic irregularities characteristic of his late songs. Here again, Malin proves himself to be a sensitive interpreter of text and music. In an analysis of “In der Fremde,” from the Op. 39 Liederkreis, for example, he comments not only on the “offset doublings” in voice and piano, which are resolved when the poet imagines a future moment of rest, but also on the enjambment toward the end of the poem (“Da ruhe ich auch, und über mir/Rauschet die schöne Waldeinsamkeit”), which Schumann responds to but does not “reproduce musically,” since the musical phrase runs across the poetic break (p. 148).

Malin also shows that he is not afraid to make a provocative claim, as in his analysis of the late song “Einsamkeit,” Op. 90, No. 5, where he writes that Schumann’s setting of each succeeding couplet “seems to begin anew. . . . The music documents a form of consciousness that is trapped in the present, apparently unable to reflect back or think forward or back in time” (p. 143). The idea is rich with implications, and it profoundly affects how one experiences the song. I only wish that Malin had allowed himself room to explore the entire song rather than just one third of it, because his argument is so compelling.8

In a chapter on Brahms, Malin returns to Schumann’s “In der Fremde,” juxtaposing it against Brahms’s setting of the same text. He argues that one of the main differences between the songs—that Schumann does not reproduce the enjambment in the poem while Brahms does—highlights an important difference between the composers’ lied aesthetics: Brahms’s songs are “musical performances” of poetic readings rather than musical settings of poetic texts (p. 150). This statement is also provocative. Brahms, Malin suggests, moved beyond Schubert and Schumann’s manner of setting text in which the music “completes” the poem and the poem is frequently viewed as somehow deficient. For Brahms, a poem was often complete on its own, “a historical object, . . . something that is given in and of itself” (p. 152). What mattered most, therefore, was the reading of the poem and the composer’s effort to faithfully reflect that reading in his musical setting. Viewing Brahms

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8 Here I echo Justin London, who wrote in a recent review of Malin’s book that at times he wanted “more details and discussion” (“Review of Yonatan Malin, Songs in Motion: Rhythm and Meter in the German Lied,” Music Theory Online 17/2 (July 2011), 10). The book is laudable because it does not try to cover every topic and every interesting song by these composers, but on occasion my appetite was whetted but not satisfied because Malin wrapped up some analyses rather quickly.
in this way not only sheds light on how and why he controlled the temporal flow of poems as he did; it also challenges a strand in Brahms reception history, which faults him for his poor declamation. His text setting was not flawed; his aims were different.

Malin also confronts misconceptions in his final analytical chapter on Hugo Wolf. Wolf’s lieder may give the impression of consummate declamation, but in fact they “go beyond (and at times against) the literal rhythms of speech” (p. 178). In particular, they juxtapose irregular speech rhythms in the vocal part with rhythmic regularity in the accompaniment—as in “Im Frühling,” which articulates four-bar spans in different ways in the piano (sometimes as long phrases, other times as two-bar segments or accumulations of one-bar segments), all the while the vocal melody carries over those spans. The music may sound rhythmically free, but it is nonetheless organized around recurring “musical markers of time” (p. 195). This is an apt phrase—musical markers of time—and it describes very well what Malin’s book brings to our attention both in this chapter and elsewhere. These markers of time are sometimes coordinated with the rhythms of the text, other times not; they are sometimes plainly evident and other times veiled (as in Wolf’s songs), working silently in the background until we become attuned to them and the expressive rhythmic mechanisms of a song suddenly snap into focus. I had this experience often while reading Malin’s book, and it made me want to listen again, or pick up a new song and ponder how it, too, marks time in meaningful ways.

What I picked up, after finishing the book, was not German song but French and English song—specifically, the work of two composers with a highly developed sense of rhythm, Hector Berlioz and Benjamin Britten. Thanks to Malin, I now have a better sense for the “musical markers of time” in a song like “Au cimetière,” from Les nuits d’été. Although Berlioz’s mélodie is written in 3/4 time, grouping dissonances often suggest duple meter, or no meter at all: the musical meter is as shadowy as the ominous cemetery scene (and as vagrant as the song’s harmonies). Yet there are well-placed moments of clarity, like the first reference to the dove’s sad song (“Chante son chant”), when the music settles finally, albeit fleetingly, into a lilting triple meter, and the later mention of a memory that slowly returns (“On sent lentement revenir/Un souvenir”), which coincides with the appearance of another triple-meter tune. Ultimately, “Au cimetière” is about metric obfuscation and moments of clarity that are all the more painful for their brevity—its metric drama is a metaphor for the process of memory described in the text. I have also developed a deeper appreciation for Britten’s rhythmic and metric innovations: the layering of different meters in voice and accompaniment in “Since she whom I loved” from The Holy Sonnets of John Donne; the conflict between notated and heard meter and the haunting “out-of-time” declamation in the middle section of “Midnight on the Great Western” from Winter Words; and the shifting, interlocking periodicities in “Death, be not
proud” and “At day-close in November” from the same two cycles. Malin’s book has laid a solid foundation for future explorations of rhythm and meter in song, and offered analytical approaches that will transfer easily to other repertoires and other time periods.9 May it set others in motion, as it has me.

Stephen Rodgers
University of Oregon

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