The Fourth Dimension of a Song

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How do composers respond to the sounds of language when they set words to music? What prompts them to elongate a particular vowel in a melodic line, to emphasize an especially expressive consonant, to highlight or exaggerate the purely sonic elements of a poem? Inspired by a recent article by the eminent literary critic M. H. Abrams called “The Fourth Dimension of a Poem,” which focuses on the physical sensation of reading poems aloud, this article explores the diverse ways that song composers musicalize the different speech-sounds, or phonemes, of poetry for expressive effect. Case studies include Schubert’s “Nacht und Träume” and Britten’s “The Little Old Table,” from Winter Words.

Keywords: song, poetic sound, phonemes, text-music relations, M. H. Abrams, Schubert, Britten.

In a recent essay called “The Fourth Dimension of a Poem,” the eminent literary scholar—and centenarian—M. H. Abrams writes about the physical act of reading a poem, the oral actions that we make in uttering its words. This, for Abrams, is a poem’s so-called fourth dimension, the tactile sensation of producing the sounds of a poem, which he sees as distinct from a poem’s other dimensions (the appearance of a poem; the sounds of a poem, irrespective of how it feels to make them; and the meaning of a poem). “We produce those sounds,” he writes, “by varying the pressure on the lungs, vibrating or stilling the vocal cords, changing the shape of the throat and mouth, and making wonderfully precise movements of the tongue and lips.” These wonderfully precise movements, Abrams argues, are not ancillary to poetic meaning, a mere backdrop to the “real stuff” of a poem (its form and content); they are central to how we experience and understand poetry, and they deserve a more prominent place in discussions of the art form. Attending to the material dimension of poetry, he claims, reveals how the activity of enunciating the words of a poem interacts with the meanings they convey.

Anyone who has ever savored a poem by speaking it aloud will know what some of these actions feel like. Singers certainly know them and train for years so that they can produce sounds that are beautiful, consistent, intelligible, and evocative. It could even be argued that the enunciative component of language is especially evident in song, even more than in poetry. Many (though clearly not all) songs exist on the page; like poems, songs can have a visible dimension. But unlike poetry, the normal mode of experiencing a song is through performance, not silent reading.

It is this very notion—that the performative aspect of language is highlighted in song, essential to its very nature—that got me thinking about what Abrams’s ideas might have to teach us about musical settings of poetry. The very act of putting words to music would seem to require an awareness of how the mouth moves as it performs those words and a sensitivity to the effects that can be produced by emphasizing certain sounds over others—which is why it is so surprising that the physical dimension of poetry has seldom been explored in analyses of music and text. It is not uncommon for song analysts to discuss the sonic aspects of a poem (commenting on rhyme schemes or noting instances of assonance or alliteration). Yet more often than not the sounds of poetry have been regarded primarily as structuring elements within the text rather than as sonic elements that a composer might respond to in and of themselves. Thus far there has been no thoroughgoing study of

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1 Abrams (2012).
2 Ibid. (2).
3 Abrams slightly overstates his case. Some recent scholars do in fact write about the physical act of reading poetry. The most prominent among them is the former United States Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky, Pinsky’s books The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide (1998) and Singing School: Learning to Write (and Read) Poetry by Studying the Masters (2013)—as well as his Favorite Poem Project (favoritepoem.org)—celebrate the sheer pleasure of reading poems aloud, and the rich and diverse meanings that we derive from experiencing poems as physical, embodied things. See also the collection of essays The Sound of Poetry/The Poetry of Sound (2009), which grew out of a 2006 conference organized by Marjorie Perloff and colleagues, and the chapter on “Sound” from X. J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia’s An Introduction to Poetry (2010), which addresses not only the different vowel and consonant patterns of poetry, but also the different sensations involved in uttering them.

4 There are, to be sure, some exceptions. The most notable is an article by Don Michael Randel (2014), published just this past summer, which explores the material aspects shared by music and poetry and analyzes the interaction of musical and poetic sound in four songs from Schumann’s Dichterliebe. (I learned of Randel’s article as I was making final edits to my own.) See also a recent book by the German scholar Konstantin Voigt, Pers und Atonalität: Verfahren der Texterzeugung in den frie atonalen Liedern Arnold Schönberg und Anton Webern (2013), which includes some lovely observations about Schoenberg’s and Webern’s responses to rhythm,
the ways that composers musicalize the speech-sounds, or phonemes, of poetry for expressive effect.

My article offers just such a “phonetic” analysis of song. I want to suggest that talk of fricatives and plosives and open vowels can be extended beyond the private voice studio and mingled productively with discussion of modulatory schemes and metric dissonances and structural melodies. Indeed, I would argue that the expressive power of musicalized phonemes is as responsible for our emotional response to song as the semantic content of the words and the musical expression of that content. For listeners and composers alike, how words sound matters no less than what they mean.

In support of this claim, I offer close readings of two songs, Schubert’s famous “Nacht und Träume” and Britten’s “The Little Old Table,” from the cycle Winter Words. Each song shows a composer responding sensitively to the phonemes of a poem—but to different types of phonemes. In “Nacht und Träume,” which is in many ways the subtler of the two examples, Schubert controls the timing and length of the poem’s vowels so as to highlight a progression from one predominant vowel sound to another and back again, a progression that reinforces a related poetic and tonal shift. In “The Little Old Table,” Britten even more dramatically treats different consonant types in different ways, setting certain words percussively and other words lyrically, thereby underlining phonetic contrasts that might not be obvious on a first reading of the poem.

“NACHT UND TRÄUME”

I chose this song in part because of its unnaturally long note values, which bring the poem’s vowels to the forefront of our attention. The singer, for example, enters on a D♯ and holds it for nearly a full measure, at a “sehr langsam” tempo, and then does virtually the same thing with the B in the next measure, before continuing the melody as it arpeggiates downward. The melodic stasis obviously works in conjunction with a harmonic stasis—a single tonic triad pulsates for two full measures, a musical representation of the vast, still night sky that surrounds the lyric speaker—but the particular vowel sounds in the opening line of Matthäus von Collin’s poem also contribute to this sense of spaciousness. The entire poem appears in Example 1; I encourage you to speak the poem aloud, concentrating on how it feels to produce its various vowel sounds. The first two stressed syllables of the poem, “Heil-”ge and “Nacht,” feature an [a] vowel, one of the most open vowels in the German language. (The “ei” of “Heil-”ge is a diphthong, a combination of [a] and [e], but it is the [a] vowel that would be emphasized when singing the word.) The sound of the words

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Collin’s Nachtlied contains two different versions of the same poem, one called “Nacht und Träume” and the other “Nachfleyer.” The latter closely resembles the familiar text of Schubert’s song, but the former does not. It is impossible to know whether Schubert received both versions and then constructed a blended version of his own, or whether Collin gave him an unpublished copy that looks just like the song’s text. See Youens (2002, 83–84) on the complexities surrounding the poem’s various versions.

I derive my translation from Youens (2002, 84).

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7 Since many readers will be familiar with this song, I have not included a score here. A free score can be accessed via the IMSLP Petrucci Library (imslp.org).

8 In keeping with standard texts on lyric diction, I will refer to vowel and consonant sounds with IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) symbols and place these symbols in square brackets.

9 The [a] vowels in both words are the same, even in spoken German (both are so-called short [a] vowels).
conveys a sense of wonderment that accords beautifully with their meaning. Susan Youens describes the opening note of the vocal line as a “long-breathed, quietly ecstatic exhalation of awe”,10 the word “exhalation” is apt, for the vowel sound of “Heil’ge,” and also “Nacht,” resembles a sigh.

Schubert’s musical rendering of these two words emphasizes the expansiveness of their sighing sounds—sounds that are of course already present in the text but that need not have been treated in such a way. “Heil’ge,” after all, is an adjective, syntactically less important than the noun that follows it. A more “normal” approach might have been to set this word as an upbeat (reading the line as “Heil’ge Nacht” rather than “Heil’ge Nacht”). Schubert, however, gives the modifier even more weight than the word it modifies, exaggerating the assonance that connects the first two words. Moreover, he downplays the assonant vowels in the second half of the line (“du sink-est nie-dër”): the first syllable of “nieder” may be a half note, but “sink” is a mere eighth note; the speech-sounds may be similar, but the note values associated with them are not.11 Youens hears something prosodically awkward in the word “nieder,” but to my ears it is the weight on “Heil’ge” that is especially strange, if wonderfully so.12

The opening phrase is notably three measures long, and the expansion results from the stretching of the first word, the dwelling on its [a] vowel. The melody hovers on this initial “ecstatic exhalation,” and on the exhalation that follows it, before continuing more rapidly through the remainder of the line, like the night and dreams that float down with a preternatural slowness.

This broadening of the “ecstatic” [a] is part of a larger process that unfolds over the opening section of the song, whereby the [a] vowels of the first four lines are emphasized and then allowed to recede as another vowel takes their place. Note that there are four stressed [a] vowels in lines 1 and 2 (“Heil’ge,” “Nacht,” “aus-len,” and “ausch”) but none in lines 3 and 4 (“Wie dein Mondlicht durch die Räume, / Durch der Menschen stille Brust”). Instead, another vowel emerges: the [ʊ] of “durch die Räume,” “Durch der Menschen,” and “stille Brust,” a vowel that does not appear in a stressed position in lines 1 and 2. Youens rightly notes the peculiarity of the downbeat accent on “Durch der Menschen” in m. 12 and suggests that Schubert may have had the last line of the poem in mind (“Holde Träume, kehret wieder”) when he wrote this melody, since the melody reappears verbatim toward the end of the song with these words.13 Regardless of the cause of the curious stress on “Durch,” the effect is to alert us to the fact that the fourth line begins and ends with the same vowel sound; the downbeat-accented “Durch” prepares us for the more emphatic utterance of an [ʊ] vowel at the end of the phrase, where the half note on “Brust” also falls on a downbeat (which it need not have done, since Schubert could have finished the phrase in the middle of m. 13 rather than at the beginning of m. 14, had he not repeated the word “stille”). “Brust” marks the strongly articulated cadential arrival, the long-awaited descent to 1, and the end of another three-measure phrase, which balances the equally expanded [a]-centered phrase of mm. 5–7.

The [ʊ] vowel of “Durch” and “Brust” is what dominates line 5, at least as Schubert reads it (“Die belauschen sie mit Lust”). The poem is structured such that the rhyming words “Brust” and “Lust” occur across a syntactic break. Schubert reinforces this break with the famous shift to G major and the full measure of rest before the singer re-enters, but he also allows the lines to remain fused together sonically by throwing the musical weight on the end of line 5, and its rhyming word “Lust,” rather than on the beginning.14 Plus, he repeats the line, giving even more emphasis to the word. The dotted half notes on “Lust” are the longest in the passage—three times as long as any other—and the first of them is the high point of the phrase, a note that seems to require a dynamic intensification, in part because it reaches suddenly above the stable platform of B, where the melodic gesture begins. These notes sound especially drawn-out due to the slow pace of the harmonic progression (forming, as Carl Schachter has noted, the end of a stretch of six measures of just one chord per measure);15 the accompaniment provides no harmonic energy, no real interest of its own, to buoy the long notes of the melody. For all of these reasons, the [ʊ] vowel of “Lust” becomes the focal point of this section, rather than the first stressed syllable of the line, “be-laus-schen,” a diphthong whose target sound is the very [a] vowel that dominated the first part of the song. By this point [a], in short, has given way to [ʊ], and the phonetic shift underlines the tonal shift.

The modulation back to B major, one of the most breathtaking in all of Schubert, would also not be nearly as affecting were it not for the vocal sounds associated with it. The line that coincides with the return to B major—“Kehre wieder, holde Nacht!”—returns to a variant of the opening words of the poem (“holde Nacht” rather than “Heil’ge Nacht”).16 Schubert capitalizes on the poetic device by using an analogous musical

11 The vowels are not identical—the stressed vowel in “sinkest” is short and open [i] and the vowel in “nieder” is long and closed [i]—but they are similar enough to be considered assonances.
12 Youens (2002, 87) does note that Schubert makes the adjectival word “Heil’ge” into “something extraordinary,” though she comments neither on the assonance in the opening line nor on Schubert’s musical treatment of it.
13 Ibid. (89).
14 If Schubert downplays the [a] of “belauschen” in favor of the [ʊ] of “Lust,” he downplays the [i] of “Die” even more. It is easy enough to imagine a setting in which “Die”—the stressed syllable in the poem’s trochaic meter, a pronoun that refers to the “Menschen” who experience the wonders of night—is emphasized more than the second syllable of “belauschen”: if “Die” were placed on the downbeat of m. 16 and the rest of the measure were syllabic rather than melismatic, “Lust” would still arrive on the downbeat of the next measure. Elsewhere Schubert does stress [i] and [i] vowels with downbeat placement (see mm. 7, 8, 10, 13, and 24), but to my ears [a] and [ʊ] vowels predominate, in part because they are given so much agogic emphasis.
16 Some editions of the score, as well as recordings of the song, have the penultimate line as “Kehre wieder, heil’ge Nacht,” but the Neues Schubert-Ausgabe has “holde Nacht,” and I have taken it as the authoritative version.
device, returning not just to the original key but also to the melody of mm. 8–9. Yet the full impact of this moment has as much to do with the preceding line, “Rufen, wenn der Tag erwacht.” Consider again the sounds of the words themselves, setting aside for the moment what they mean. The vowel sound of “Rufen” resonates with that of the previous word, “Lust,” a connection reinforced in Schubert’s setting by the fact that the singer returns to the same E that was heard on the first statement of “Lust,” in mm. 17. More important, the line charts a reverse course from [u] to [a]. Its four stressed syllables outline a progression from the closed vowel of “Rufen” through the semi-open vowel of “wenn” to the open vowels of “Tag” and “erwacht,” setting the stage for the most expensive [a] vowel since the opening measures, the dotted half note on “Nacht” in mm. 22.

As Abrams might put it, singing the line “Rufen, wenn der Tag erwacht” and experiencing its gradual expansion of vowel sounds involves a physical component, and the very act of performing the line, or imagining what it would feel like to do so, enhances its meaning. The text describes the waking of day and the poetic speaker’s plea for night to return, the verb “rufen” suggesting an outcry. Is it too fanciful to imagine the following [a] sounds (in “Tag,” “erwacht,” and “Nacht”) as something like cries themselves, exhalations of awe transformed into exclamations of pain? In any case, when taken together, lines 6 and 7 enact a purely sonorous process—the reassertion of the crucial sound from the song’s opening—that conjoints with a poetic one: the longed-for return of night and dreams.

“THE LITTLE OLD TABLE”

Thomas Hardy’s poem is about a table whose noises remind its owner of the woman who gave it to him long ago. We never learn who the woman is or what the nature of her relationship with the poetic speaker is; nor do we (or the speaker) discover what the woman meant when, upon delivering the table, she “looked at me with a thought / That I did not understand.” All we are told is that the table continues to creak, and that in doing so it reminds the speaker of the “history” that “hangs upon” it, causing him to meditate on the memories that attach to material objects.

Hardy structures his poem around the pivotal word, “creak,” which occurs twice in the first line of the poem and is paired with its rhyme, “speak,” in line 3. The poem appears in Example 2; again, I urge you to read it aloud, this time focusing on the consonants. Unlike “Heil’ge” and “Nacht,” whose sound, however expressive, bears no direct relation to their literal meaning, “creak” is plainly onomatopoeic—it sounds like what it represents. Britten emphasizes the imitative quality of the word by setting it (and its rhyming pair) to crisp, staccato eighth notes, reinforced by accented dyads in the left hand of the piano; Example 3 shows the opening strophe. Barbara Docherty has written that the word “creak” “releases a mimetic impulse” in Britten. That impulse, however, can be felt well beyond the opening stanza, for Britten treats other, less obviously depictive words in the same percussive, almost pointillist fashion: namely, “brought,” “looked,” “thought,” and even “it”—words, like “creak” and “speak,” that end with a [t] or [k] plosive, a consonant produced by completely closing the oral passage and then releasing a burst of air. The effect is even more noticeable because Britten repeats the plosive words more than any other words in the poem: “creak” appears three times in the poem but nine times in the song; “speak” and “brought” appear only once in the poem but three times in the song; and “looked” and “thought” appear once in the poem and twice in Britten’s setting. At the same time, he sets words with less percussive consonants to lyrical melodies (and does not repeat them), in order to dramatize the contrast between the plosive and non-plosive speech-sounds of the poem. The manner in which the poem’s consonants are articulated dictates the manner in which the song’s melodies are constructed.

The most fluid line of Hardy’s first stanza, for example, is the last one—“Of one who gave you to me”—a line characterized by consonant types that, unlike plosives, allow for a continuation of airflow: fricatives (the [v] sound at the end of “Of” and “gave,” the [h] sound at the beginning of “who”), glides (the [w] and [j] sounds at the beginning of “one” and “you”), and nasals (the [n] sound at the end of “one” and the [m] sound at the beginning of “me”). These consonants make the line

| Creak, little wood thing, creak, | You, little table, she brought— |
| When I touch you with elbow or knee; | Brought me with her own hand, |
| That is the way you speak | As she looked at me with a thought |
| Of one who gave you to me! | That I did not understand. |

| Whoever owns it anon, | Whoever owns it anon, |
| And hears it, will never know | And hears it, will never know |
| What a history hangs upon | What a history hangs upon |
| This creak from long ago. | This creak from long ago. |

Example 2. Hardy, “The Little Old Table.”
sound more mellifluous than the first line of the stanza, with its halting, stuttering quality, heightened by the commas within the line, which do not appear in the final line or in any other line of the opening stanza. The words “Of one who gave you to me” are easier to enunciate; they roll more naturally off the tongue. Britten capitalizes on this fact by setting the line to an unbroken stream of melody, culminating in a long melisma on the word “gave” (marked “warm” in the score), which diverges
sharply from the staccato opening. His handling of phrase rhythm enhances the effect, since the music seems to abandon the notated meter as it abandons the plosive sounds of “creak” and “speak,” with their downbeat-accented eighths. In m. 15 the word “speak” arrives in the middle of a measure, whereas up to this point it has fallen on downbeats. This subtle change triggers a moment of metric displacement dissonance, where the stressed syllables “one” and “give” in mm. 16 and 17 sound like downbeats even though they fall halfway through the measure. The bar line seems to shift precisely when the last line of the stanza appears, and in the middle of the melisma it effectively vanishes altogether: the melody now seems to soar above the bar line, freely issuing forth like the more continuous speech-sounds associated with it.

The piano accompaniment also highlights the phonetic change at the end of the stanza. At the very end of the melisma, the oscillating thirds in the right hand give way to a wave of rising thirds. In mm. 16 and 17 sound like downbeats even though they fall halfway through the measure. The bar line seems to shift precisely when the last line of the stanza appears, and in the middle of the melisma it effectively vanishes altogether: the melody now seems to soar above the bar line, freely issuing forth like the more continuous speech-sounds associated with it.

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Yet what strikes me above all is something much smaller. Wedged between “Whoever owns it anon” and “will never know,” breaking up what would otherwise be a perfectly sensible grammatical construction, are three words, set off by commas: “and hears it,” a phrase that ends with a plosive [t] and features a high [i] vowel. How should these words be read? You could very well gloss over them, ignoring the commas and pushing onward toward the verb “will.” Or you
could do the opposite—pause at the commas and set the words apart, speaking them intently, so they can really be heard. This is how Britten reads the line. The three words become three eighths, a rising third from B to D♯ (vaguely echoed by the B–C♯–D♯ in the left hand of the piano, a whiff of the canon from the previous strophes). In what amounts to
a perfect marriage of sound and sense, the music evokes the very creak that is referenced, grammatically and sonically, by the word “it.” Thanks to Britten, like the future owners of the little table, we also hear it.

CONCLUSION

As Abrams reminds us, lines like “Rufen, wenn der Tag erwacht” and “Will never know what a history hangs” have distinctive textures and sonorous profiles; they demand different physical actions, and those actions are meaningful to readers. I hope to have shown that they are also meaningful to composers and listeners. Composers have the power to highlight, amplify, or wholly transform these meanings when they direct a singer to enunciate the words of a poem in a particular way. Listeners have the capacity to pick up on them when they watch someone singing, sing along with a song, or even imagine what it would feel like to perform a vocal line.

Let me close by suggesting a few possible avenues for future research that might open up additional meanings:

1. I have focused on composers’ settings of pre-existing texts. What might be learned about the relation between musical and poetic sound by looking at collaborations between composers and poets/lyricists—say, Britten and W. H. Auden, or Hanns Eisler and Bertolt Brecht, or Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein? What about cases where composers write their own words? What about popular music?

2. Some poets are known for their inventive use of sound—Keats, for example, who happens to be one of Abrams’s favorites, or Gerard Manley Hopkins. What opportunities and challenges do poets like these pose to composers?

3. In both of these pieces, the sounds of the words and the meaning of the words seem to be of equal importance to the composer. But in other works the balance would seem to shift, such that sound predominates over sense. John Adams’s Nixon in China comes readily to mind, as does the first movement of Harmonium, “Negative Love,” which begins with seemingly meaningless phonemes—“no, no, no, ne, ne, ne…” and then “ne, ne, ne…”—that we only later realize are related to actual words in the poem: “no, no, no” prefigures the poem’s crucial line of negation that appears three quarters of the way through (“To all, which all love, I say no”), and “ne, ne, ne” merges seamlessly with the first line of the poem (“I never stooped so low”). Works like these might be ideal testing-grounds for an analytical approach that focuses on the enunciative component of language.

4. I mentioned the shift from high to low vowels in “The Little Old Table.” How does vowel pitch correlate with musical pitch in general? My sense is that the two often exist in an inverse relationship, with higher notes set to lower vowels (as with [a] vowels, which some singers find easier to negotiate in high registers than other vowels). A study of melodic high points (along the lines of what Kofi Agawu has done) that brings vowel pitch into the equation might yield fascinating insights into the common melodic/poetic patterns in the vocal music of certain repertoires, or certain composers, and the reasons why some high points seem particularly suited to the sonorousness of a line of text.

No matter our answers to these questions, we are wise to pursue them with a recognition that the words of a song are utterances, in the simplest sense of the term—material things as well as significant things, collections not just of signs but of sounds, which we perform, and which composers invite us to perform, in diverse and meaningful ways.

WORKS CITED


23 For an excellent study of alliteration in popular song (and the interaction of stressed alliterate syllables with musical meter), see Salley (2011).


