

## POETRY AND MUSIC

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H. C. COLLES, in a useful and informative book bearing the slightly grating title of *Voice and Verse* (no pun intended), quotes two passages of Bach recitative, one from *Phoebus and Pan*, the other from the *Christmas Oratorio*. He points out that whereas one text is frivolous and secular and the other solemn and sacred, the melodic material is strikingly similar, and draws the conclusion that Bach did not always take this branch of composition as seriously as might be supposed. Judging from the two passages quoted, neither of which represents Bach at his most inspired, this conclusion seems reasonable enough. At the same time, Mr. Colles indirectly raises, without answering, the question whether a musical phrase suitable to one kind of situation or sentiment cannot appropriately be applied to another. Strophic songs, for instance, may vary in mood from stanza to stanza, and the same melodic phrases reflect various shifts in hue. One must beware of the fallacy of imputing to music greater precision of meaning than it in fact commands. Music is language in a kind of semantic twilight. There are broad and not too clearly defined zones of meaning; but in that ill-lit continent the flora and fauna are impossible to classify. Trees may easily be mistaken for people and hills look like houses.

Hence it is that certain composers with legal rather than philosophical minds, irritated by all this shadowy ambiguity, conclude that light so faint is worse than none at all. They would rather be totally blind than the likely dupes of such imperfect vision, and so elect to guide themselves through the world of music with the help of other, more dependable, if less apperceptive senses.

The main difficulty of pretending blindness is in keeping it up. The composer who adopts this pose is bound sooner or later to peek. His music, professing absolute purity, will cast a wanton eye upon a word. Even Stravinsky seems to have done a good deal of peeking in *Perséphone*. The "beautiful strong syllables" frequently melt into beautiful tender words, most tenderly sung.

If music, by conveying meanings of a sort, however hazy and "emotional," evinces traits of language, so language, and especially poetry, murmurs a kind of embryonic music. The poet's medium consists as much of letters and syllables as of words. Metre is measured in long and short syllables, syllabic accents, syllabic groupings; rhymes are paired syllables; alliteration, internal rhyme, assonance, all the external "music" of verse, in short, is a carefully wrought mosaic of sound in which words and their meanings sometimes play only an incidental part. The process of ordering all these elements must be in some way analogous to musical composition, since the characteristic sound of different letters and syllables, considered apart from the words in which they occur, is to some extent comparable to the character of different musical tones. Rhythm, too, in speech as in music, derives from the twin sources of accent and quantity. Both rhythm and what might be defined as *the inalienable character of individual sounds* attain, in music, to borrow Paul Rosenfeld's expression, "a capacity for intensification entirely beyond the rivalry of speech." The bricks with which the musician builds are, acoustically, far cleaner, more homogeneous and precise.

The union of poetry and music in song should result, then, in a heightening of both. Each supposedly complements the other by contributing, in a fully matured form, what the other possesses only in embryo. Unfortunately, there are a great many things that can, and generally do, go wrong.

The least important, because the least clearly formulated, of all the acoustical elements involved in making poetry (which, like music, is meant for the ear), is pitch.\* Indeed, a poem loses surprisingly little by being whispered; and nothing is more unsatisfactory than poetic recitation in a too mellifluous and throbbing baritone. And yet, just as Eve was made from a rib that Adam could easily spare, so it is from pitch that springs the whole efflorescence of song. By the same token, elements essential to poetry are very apt to be transformed, violated or even destroyed by being stretched to a melodic frame. The subtlety of poetic metre, for example, often depends upon the way the spoken rhythm of a line lies as it were athwart the ground beat of the verse, without wholly losing contact with it, as a vine will remain attached to its trellis and yet display freedom of growth and movement. In order to set verse of this kind to music, the composer must follow one or other of these counterpointed rhythms – he cannot follow them both. If he is careful always to emphasize the scansion

\*The manner of reciting poetry that was traditional with the ancient Greeks may have involved some specified pitch. But the fact that their poetry has survived independently of this tradition, about which we know almost nothing, seems to prove that pitch was not essential to it.

(or "trellis") the result will be stiff or obvious. If, on the other hand, he is guided by the speech rhythm (the most satisfactory method), the ground beat will be drowned out, and the poem might as well be prose.

Again, the pattern of long and short vowels, which is so much a part of poetic design, is apt to be over-ridden even by the best-intentioned composer. Take the last lines of Blake's *Sunflower*, for example:

Where the Youth pined away with desire,  
And the pale Virgin shrouded in snow,  
Arise from their graves, and aspire  
Where my Sun-flower wishes to go.

Following the long-drawn-out vowels in the words "shrouded," "snow," "graves," and others, the short "i" in "wishes" has the effect of holding together a rhythm that otherwise would sprawl. Yet a composer could assign the first syllable of "wishes" to a long note without breaking any acknowledged rule of prosody. For neither the English lutenists, nor Purcell, nor any English composers of past or present, ever hesitate to lengthen short vowels as their melodic fancy may dictate. In fact, if you would hear English vowels sung with their proper time values, turn on the radio and hear, perhaps, a vocal ensemble harmonize on the slogan, "Use Fitch" – N.B. not "Fi-i-itch" – "shampoo;" or a popular song of a few years ago with words beginning, "You're slightly terrific" – not "terri-i-ific," as even Sir Arthur Sullivan, who had a keener sense of English quantities than most, might have written.

The beauty of good verse depends, too, as much on the pattern of consonants as of vowels. This labor of the poet's likewise often goes for nothing, since prolongation of vowels (not necessarily short ones) is essential to singing, and consonants by being thus more widely spaced, lose much of the force of their inter-relationships.

It is an ironic fact that writings apt to suggest music to the composer do so by virtue of certain delicate features which he then proceeds to efface. He can at most only provide musical equivalents for the nuances thus destroyed. It is therefore advisable for the composer to avoid poetry that is already rich in its own "music," for the difficulty of compensating for what he is bound to destroy is then tremendous, often insurmountable, as in the case of certain Shakespeare sonnets, for example.

There can be no successful marriage of convenience between poetry and music. Humility and sincerity sum up the indispensable virtues. The composer must not regard his text as a pretext. If he seeks in it a certain *poverty*, this is not so that he may despise it.