

Music and the Word

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People often ask me, as a composer who has written many songs to my own lyrics, Which comes first: the words or the music? Putting aside the famous reply to this given by a well-known song-writing team ('the phone call') it's an interesting question which can actually lead into some fairly deep considerations.

Many of the songs I have written were designed to be part of courses teaching English as a Foreign Language. Here the fit between text and notes is quite crucial; half of the job is embedding the precise rhythm, stress and flow of words and phrases into the listener's mind for their later use in conversation. In my experience often the 'hook' comes early on in the process. This is the title phrase which, when it works, seems always to have been a partner of that melody, whether it be a cliché or newly- coined. Examples (from the Beatles) would be 'Do you want to know a secret?' and 'A hard day's night'. (In this regard it is amazing that 'Yesterday' lasted weeks as a melody with the working title of 'Scrambled eggs'.)

Following that comes the rest of the first verse, which in syllables and rhyme-scheme will act as the template for all verses. (Why, oh why do the countless amateur lyricists who send composers unsolicited lyrics by the dozen, not understand this? Don't they listen to songs? A lyric is not a free-form poem.) It follows from this that, by the second verse, one is inevitably fitting words to a pre-existing melody. This may be why most great song-writing teams work from the music first.

Even so, in very many cases a composer is setting pre-existing words - perhaps with the option of changing them, more often obliged simply to follow them. Here, no doubt, it was the lyricist who worked to his or her own template. In this case the composer must not only match the form of the lyric, but also read under the surface of the text to pick up and write music true to the emotional background of that text. And this is just as true when filling in the second verse of lyrics to a pre-set melody as it is when writing the music to a text; it is no good matching the syllables, stress and rhyme but changing what the song is saying.

So, whichever comes first in surface terms, words or music, something else is there in the background of a song which must be a fixed reference point for the finished piece. If you like – what the song is about, what it is saying.

To take this further, let's approach it from a different angle. We'll start with a letter allegedly written by Mozart. (It is now known not to be authentic but it is nonetheless persuasive in its argument and rings true of the compositional process.) After some description of working practice (which, incidentally, describes the first ideas which come 'whence and how... I know not' as melodies: 'I hum them to myself'), the writer says '....the whole, though it be long, stands almost complete and finished in my mind, so that I can survey it, like a fine picture or a beautiful statue, at a glance. Nor do I hear in my imagination the parts successively, but I hear them, as it were, all at once.'

Another question I am often asked, by people who know that letter, is whether this is my experience also. Now in fact, while I am in the middle of working, it sometimes is and it sometimes is not, but, as I like to reply, in fact it is a real experience for all of us. Let me explain. When I mention to you, for example, Bleak House, the whole book (or at least something of it which represents it) is brought to mind, not as successive action, nor as sets of characters and situations, but, as it were, all at once. (Schoenberg wrote that the composer experiences the work as a whole and writes it through time, the listener hears it through time and remembers it as a whole.)

Now how may we describe this essence of a work? For now let us call it the 'Idea' or 'Word' which stands behind the piece. This is often summed up in the title, but not always, and rarely, if ever, completely. The essence or primal seed of a created work is the 'Word' in the mind of the composer, which is most easily – though not most accurately – described in verbal language. Its full description is the work of art itself. Perhaps this is why every great creation myth that I know has the world

spoken into existence. And this is where one starts: Michael Tippett, following T.S. Eliot, once said in an interview that, for him, 'the notes come last'.

Let us pull away once more and work back from another signpost. We may recall that Michelangelo described discovering the statue in the block of marble – his job was to reveal it by discarding the 'non-statue'. It seems that something always guides an artist as to what is not part of the finished work. Often one doesn't know what is part of it, or even what it is, but the wrong is discarded in certainty. What, in fact, is this certain, if negative, knowledge? It must be the reference point of the 'Word' of that work.

One beautiful constructional method in music (as literature) even allows the First-time listener (or reader) something of this experience. A finely formed teleological work, such as Sibelius' 5th Symphony, allows one to hear clues throughout pointing to the fundamental idea. When it finally sounds in its musical expression, in the last movement, the effect is revelatory. Everything in the symphony has grown from it and yet one knows exactly why some of the material was to be passed through: it was just in order to come to this.

So what is the 'Word' in this particular case? This cannot really be explained or, at least, can only be hinted at with several different explanations. One technical answer might be: it is a great tune, yes, a potent source of melodic figurations and harmonic progressions, of course, but at heart a re-affirmation of the concept of a Perfect Cadence at a time, almost precisely coinciding with the first World War, when classical tonality was in crisis. And here's the trouble with technical answers: they imply that a composer is working in the world of ideas rather than sounds (actually, some composers do, to the detriment of the music, but that is another matter). Furthermore, as an answer it is not complete. One could as correctly respond in a different way: it is the emotional effect Sibelius experienced (and described in his diary) from the sudden sight and sound of several swans flying overhead. In any case only the composer will know, and even he or she may not. The 'Word' is before all expressions of it and includes them all.

Almost always now, when writing purely instrumental works with no sung words, I take a text or a philosophical idea as a focus point. Though the text may not be sounded and, indeed, not even made public, it is an invariable reference (and authority) for me in decisions of form, texture, melody, counterpoint, harmony, rhythm and all the many items which make up a composer's palette and canvas. This method, I have found, does not make for a dry and academic approach to composition, but it opens doors to a way of working which does not rely on the past – either by using it or rejecting it – and which ensures consistency and integrity. Above all, properly used, it allows the music to flow. By holding true to the 'Word' the composer may be free to use intuition as much as intellect with safety. The music is discovered as work proceeds; even the plan of the music is discovered this way. Analysis is only for when one loses the way. The present and immediate experience of the sound of the music is what is important: to the composer at work as much as to the performer and audience. The listener (i.e. composer, performer or audience) is thus led to an understanding, both emotional and intellectual, of something consistent yet varied, specific yet universal, and the listener is enriched by it.

An interesting question arises: to what extent are composers aware of this reference and in what way? It seems that some work this way by design, others unconsciously. Some (such as John Tavener) use the method as a safeguard against the outbreak of deliberate individualism. Again, in my own experience, another factor seems to come into the equation. Provided that I have in prior study and present working remained true to the chosen text and discarded the extraneous, often music comes ('whence and how...I know not') which, even though I cannot presently understand its relevance, I do know is not to be discarded. This is known somehow by pre-verbal reference to the basic idea, even if the notes don't seem yet quite right on the surface. And very often, years later, at a rehearsal or a performance, I suddenly discover the meaning of that passage and its relationship to the central 'Word', and thus my understanding of the basic text is enhanced.

Although I lay no claim to full understanding of the matter, I suspect that this is to do with the causal 'Idea' which certain philosophers see as the window offered by works of art into the substratum of our life and to what is, in fact, what we really are. This is the satisfaction of a work of art for us, a whisper of the music of the spheres in one of their many soundings. So 'in the real world' (for once, let us use

that phrase accurately and not in reference to business) neither lyrics nor music come first, they both follow the 'Word'.

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