Natalie Jones

Lost in Translation

To what extent can sign language be used to translate the meaning of the text for hearing audiences in classical vocal music?

Written reflection within individual project.
The sounding part of the project consists of: NJones100619
Abstract

The purpose of this project is to examine the extent to which sign language can be used as a means of communicating the text for hearing audiences attending classical vocal recitals. The project discusses historical practices for providing text translation of classical repertoire sung in foreign languages and gives an account of the increasing popularity of sign language interpretation for hearing audiences within the contemporary, commercial music industry. A trial performance is undertaken in order to examine the effectiveness of the idea in the context of classical vocal music. Feedback is gathered from the audience and singer’s perspective during performance and through observations made by studying the video documenting the performance.

Keywords: sign language, art song, recital, classical voice, text translation, song interpretation
# Table of contents

- Introduction/Background .........................................................3
- Text Translation Methods ..........................................................3
- Inside the World of Sign Language Performance Art .................8
- Trial Performance ........................................................................10
- Trial Performance Findings: Singer’s perspective ....................13
- Trial Performance Findings: Audience perspective ...............17
- Discussion: Challenges and Inspiration ......................................19
- In Conclusion ............................................................................22
- REFERENCE LIST .......................................................................22
- APPENDICES ...............................................................................27
- Appendix 1 - Questionnaire .....................................................27
Introduction/Background

The essence of art song is the marriage, in equal partnership, of music and text. Exceptional poetry set to extraordinary music. Masterful creations in which the sum exceeds the value of the individual parts. One plus one equals three. In the vocal recital genre, where the text is such a crucial component of the artistic fabric, it would seem imperative that the audience engage fully with the meaning of the text, regardless of what language is being sung.

Historically, there have been many techniques employed in an attempt to increase the communication of the text within classical vocal repertoire. Everything from the traditional sheet of printed translations to supertitles sent to mobile phones in real time during performance. The extent to which these methods have proved successful has long been a hot topic for debate within the arts community.

Text Translation Methods

Performing arts companies, in particular opera companies have long tried to tackle the issue of providing text translations for performances performed in foreign languages.

In 1983, the Canadian Opera Company in Toronto introduced the first use of projected text above the stage during performances of Strauss’ Elektra. The sung German was translated simultaneously in English for the predominantly English-speaking audience. The experiment was a success and "supertitles," as they came to be known, were quickly embraced by opera houses around the world.

Jackie Vick, the executive director of Intermountain Opera in Montana, USA believes that supertitles are one reason some people drive up to 400 miles to see her company’s productions. "I think it's one of the best things that could have happened to opera because it opened the door to everyone," Vick says. "It broke down what people considered a language barrier. So people don't have to feel like they need to know it before they come. They can enjoy the show while it's happening." (Lunden, 2018)

On the other side of the debate, Fred Plotkin’s article “Have projected titles really been good for opera?” published by Operavore in 2015, argues that operagoers
have become fixated on reading the text during performances and are thus “remaining in the realm of the literal rather than the emotional...the music is heard rather than listened to and the emotional nuances are lost.” (Plotkin, 2015) He claims that the essence of what makes the genre great has been lost. “The narrative, the story and the feeling in opera come in the music. The words - in both their sound and meaning - were the primary springboard for the creativity of a composer, but it is the music that makes opera opera. It is not a play with music. It is a rich, complex story told in music which the words are an important component - but not the dominant one.” (Plotkin, 2015)

Critic David Hamilton claims that “They’re the right answer to the wrong question. The right question isn't 'what do the words mean?'...It's 'what is the character expressing?' And the only way you'll really experience that is by understanding the words as they come to you, together with the music, from the lips of the singer. Supertitles drive a wedge between words and music. You understand what you read, but what you're hearing is just sound.” (Gurewitsch, 2012)

There is also the problem that if you are to have supertitles, then they must be well-crafted. “Consider the case of the soprano Eva Marton at a dress rehearsal of Puccini’s Tosca at the Houston Grand Opera in 1984. In Act I, Tosca, the quintessential diva, directs her picture-painting lover to change the eyes of the Magdalen on his easel from blue (like his model's) to dark (like Tosca’s). Literal to a fault, the caption read, 'Give her black eyes.' The audience roared.” (Gurewitsch, 2002)

Thirty-six years later, these mistakes are few and far between but there are still regular technical problems such as titles appearing out of sync or dropping out altogether.

The vocal recital genre has a long-established tradition of providing the audience with text translations printed on a sheet of paper, a tradition that has also been brought under fire. Why do we need to provide a translation at all? Erick Neher writes that “The art of poetry is one of condensation and juxtaposition, of packing a multiplicity of meaning into as few words as possible...Art song and the traditional vocal recital devoted to its performance...invite close attention, contemplation, mediation. Lyrics and their translations are generally printed in the program, and the audience follows along. The experience becomes one of consciously noticing and appreciating the way the words and music intertwine.” (Neher, p326, 2011)

Jenna Simeonov however, observed that in his recital in May 2015 at the Four Seasons Centre, Owen McClausland sang some of Vaughan Williams’ The
In the same month, mezzo-soprano Stephanie Blythe and pianist Warren Jones gave a song recital at Carnegie Hall. At this recital, there were no printed translations provided for the audience. The singer and the pianist alternated reciting the English translations before they performed the songs. Blythe believes that “audiences who read with their heads down and their noses in the texts don’t actually hear the recital. They don’t take part in it...I would love to have the information they give me by their faces. Audiences do not recognize in large part what a contribution they make to whatever they are seeing. Whether they are happy about something or sad...it shows in their faces, it informs the performer and it changes the way we sing, it changes the way we communicate.” (Plotkin, 2015a) Fred Plotkin was present at Blythe’s performance and felt that “in hearing the texts we focused on the words, their meanings and- importantly- their ideas on their own. We listened attentively during these spoken passages and then, with texts fresh in our minds, we listened more actively to the music that both singer and pianist produced...we were looking at her and she at us.” (Plotkin, 2015a) By reciting the translations Blythe and Jones gave the audience more tools for engagement with the songs so that they could journey through the recital as active participants.

The audience should be able to rely on “singers who know a language so well that they are able to plumb the nuances of meaning and communicate them in musical terms so that we do not want to read while they are singing...I would add that our perception of words (whether we know a language or not) is conditioned by many factors that translation cannot tell us. So we must listen more actively to the music to find the meaning”. (Plotkin, 2015b) In response to Fred Plotkin’s review of the concert experience, others had these criticisms. Some felt “they could not retain (and sometimes not hear) all of the words recited from the stage and that this dragged down the pace of the concert.” (Plotkin, 2015b) In addition, speaking is not for everyone. “These days it is increasingly probable that a singer will address the audience between numbers. This creates an informal rapport but is strictly for performers with an effortless stage manner. Sharing something personal about a composition, if done well, can enhance the audience’s receptivity. Ultimately, though, the song is the message and a well-chosen programme should not need much elucidation.” (Camilleri, 2016)

In 2002, supertitles were introduced in the context of the song recital by the Marilyn Horne Foundation at their annual master classes despite the fact that Ms.
Horne herself had had mixed feelings in the past regarding their use in the operatic genre. She had long been an advocate for reviving the genre of the song recital and hadn’t ruled out the possibility of supertitles assisting a renaissance. “I wanted the audience's attention to be riveted on me,...What prima donna wouldn’t? I hate to say it, but supertitles give audiences a chance to be a little lazier. Still, they’ve been a huge boost to opera. The technology today allows us to work with titles much more easily and fluently than ever before. If they can give a shot in the arm to our recitals, that's something we have to experiment with. We have to see where this will take us.” (Gurewitsch, 2002)

There are also individual artists who have experimented with the use of projected titles for song recitals. Widespread use, however, has been largely ruled out by financial constraints. Song recitals are usually low budget, relatively cheap endeavours to stage which means ticket prices can be kept low. As soon as supertitles are added, the budget quickly blows out. In 2012, baritone Nicholas Meyer launched a public campaign in an attempt to raise money for supertitles to accompany his solo recital of German and French repertoire in Oregon, USA. Meyer wanted to “bring supertitles to the intimate setting of an art song recital. Every time I sing a phrase in German or French, the translation of that phrase will appear at the same time, allowing the audience member to fully understand what is happening at that exact moment in the song.” (Meyer, 2012)

In order to keep abreast with changes in technology and the expectations of today’s audiences, there are also companies who have embraced the new world and created mobile phone apps that can be used to access titles on personal devices in real time during performances. The Latvian National Opera for example, encourages their patrons to “Read the subtitles of each performance online while watching an opera or concert...The subtitles are seen in real time from any place having Internet.” (Latvian National Opera Homepage, n.d.) The app can be downloaded free to your smartphone and users are able to select either Latvian or English titles.

This recent trend has proven problematic though, as it presumes that audience members will respect those around them and will restrict mobile phone use to the app itself. Allowing mobile phone use in attendance at a live performance provides the opportunity for filming, photography, social media scrolling and other internet activity without restriction.

At a recital given by baritone Christian Gerhaher and pianist Gerold Huber in the Wigmore Hall in 2014, Phillip Sommerich recalls that he “tapped the shoulder of the man in front … and asked him to switch off his mobile phone. ‘I was looking at the song translations’ he muttered” this seemed doubtful to Sommerich who
had also been disturbed by the fact that “his companion had spent much of the first half of the programme texting and reading emails on her mobile phone” (Sommerich, 2014) On the other hand, he pondered, “Was his screen-scanning any more distracting to artists or some audience members than the legions with heads buried in the printed programme, providing a rustling accompaniment to the music whenever following the song text involved turning a page?” He concedes that although surtitles may improve the situation at the opera, especially “when producers’ intentions seem to stray ever further from those of the composer…song recitals seem to be another matter. As many artists proclaim, an essential part of the art of delivering song is to convey often deep and complex meaning without the aid of scenery, props or costume. That art may be lost on those whose heads are bowed in prayerful text reading,” (Sommerich, 2014) regardless of whether the text appears on a screen above the stage, on the back of the chair in front of them, on a mobile phone, tablet or a piece of paper.

There are many who have employed the use of other theatrical tools to try to enhance the communication of the text within the song recital format.

Themed recitals and careful structuring of the program to give an overall coherence and through-line to the program, beyond simple groupings of lieder by the same composer, have become a modern adaptation of the traditional fare.

Soprano, Anna Prohaska, presented a successful recital in Amsterdam 2015 that centred around the character of Shakespeare’s Ophelia. “her engrossing recital was her own portrayal of the character in high relief, as well as a gallery of Ophelias from different eras. In short, 19th century composers underscore Ophelia’s sadness, while their more recent counterparts bring out her madness.” (Camerelli, 2015)

Other artists have experimented with using multimedia and projected pictures to communicate an interpretation of the text. In his study entitled “Liminal Observation in Multi-disciplinary performance: MTV meets Franz Schubert”, Bill J. Adams explores the presentation of solo vocal music and the question of enhanced audience understanding through the addition of visual images. He presented repertoire in three ways to an audience and then surveyed their response. “The three presentational formats included, 1) the traditional voice recital format with translations printed in a program and no video, 2) a simultaneous performance of the art song with the video displaying a pictorial translation, and 3) a simultaneous performance of the art song with the video displaying a pictorial translation plus printed translations within the frame of each scene in the video” (Adams, p610, 2017)
Adams’ results were inconclusive due to the limitations of his project, however the wide range of responses from the audience members is interesting. “Projected translation help[ful] but needs to be easier to read. My imagination allows greater enjoyment and enhances the music. All this was distracting from the music and the words. More senses created more feelings.” (Adams, p611, 2017)

In a recital of Hugo Wolf’s *Italienisches Liederbuch* songs, baritone and Cleveland Institute of Music professor, Dean Southern also chose to perform with multimedia intertwined throughout the narrative of the program. Devising a program “in the context of [Wolf’s] 19-year affair with Melanie Köchert…We’ll present these songs as if this were the kind of life they wanted to have together.” Projections of song translations, photographs and translations of Wolf’s surviving letters to Köchert will be woven into the program.” (Hathaway, 2013)

Due to the wide range of opinion regarding the effectiveness of these text translation methods, I decided to seek an alternative approach. I wanted to find a new presentation format; not bound by the constraints of the traditional song recital or the literal translation of the poetry. One that would succeed in enhancing the experience of the audience on a deeper level.

At my daughter’s school choir concert, I was fascinated by the performance of “Can you hear me?” by Bob Chilcott in which the children sang whilst signing the text in ASL (American Sign Language). The piece was performed by hearing children as part of a program intended for hearing audiences. The signing added another layer of expression to the text which moved me deeply. This experience prompted me to look into using sign language as a complimentary tool for text interpretation in classical song recitals.

**Inside the World of Sign Language Performance Art**

Sign Language Interpreters are fast becoming commonplace at music theatre performances and at major contemporary, commercial music festivals. They have essentially been engaged to make these events more accessible to fans with hearing loss but have gained the attention and fascination of hearing audiences as well.

Sign Language Interpretation has developed into an artform in itself and successful Sign Language Performance Artists are highly sought-after arts professionals. Sign Language Performance Art, as it has become known, blurs the edges between a literal translation of the text and the signer’s own interpretation of the song. This interpretation includes physicalising instrumental breaks that have no
text; continuing the narrative throughout the song in its entirety so as to communicate the ‘feel’ or essence of the piece.

Popular American ASL interpreter, Lindsay Rothschild-Cross works regularly with rock musicians such as Slayer. “An interpreter is not just signing the words coming out of a singer’s mouth; there are instruments, pitches and noises to convey as well. Rothschild-Cross can sign for instrumental breaks or even beat-boxing. She’ll sometimes add qualifiers- descriptive adjectives or adverbs - while miming an air guitar or flute solo to express the full breadth of the music. She indicates higher pitch with a scrunched-up tight face and a lower pitch with puffed-out cheeks” (Axelrod and Ahmed, 2018)

(Passionate Sign Language Interpreter at Rock Gig, 2018)

Live televised performances such as Sweden’s Melodifestivalen have been providing sign language interpretation of the competitors performances since 2010.

According to Sign Language Artist, Kristoffer Kold Erlandsen, “The response we’ve received after our broadcasts has been fantastic! Many viewers have even said that they’d rather watch our broadcast than the standard one. Even those who don’t understand sign language and they think it’s really great.” (translated from the original Swedish, Wahlgren, 2018) The performance of one of SVT’s (Swedish Television) signing team in 2015 was so loved by hearing impaired and hearing audiences alike, that it went viral. (Möt mig i Gamla Stan, Tecken-språksgestaltad, 2015) “Tommy Krångh’s exuberant rendition of one of the entries has been viewed more than 5m times on Facebook and YouTube. Social media exploded with demands to “Send Tommy to Vienna!” for the Eurovision finals.” (Crouch, 2015)

Some singers have themselves become fascinated with the signed interpretations of their own songs, on occasion spontaneously inviting the sign language interpreter into the spotlight during a performance. Anthony Kiedis of Red Hot Chili Peppers did just that at Lollapalooza 2016 to the delight of the audience, whilst performing his smash hit “Under the Bridge” with ASL Interpreter, Amber Galloway Gallego (Under the Bridge American Sign Language ASL, 2016, 00:02:10)

Amber Galloway Gallego is somewhat of a superstar in the ASL world and has gained attention for her incredible speed in realising rap translations, throwing up challenges and friendly competition between herself and the rap artists themselves. Galloway Gallego’s performance alongside the world’s fastest rapper,
Twista in August, 2019 in Charlotte, NC made her into a hip-hop sensation. “Twista was declared the ‘fastest rapper of all time’ back in the day when he clocked in at 280 words per minute but…Twitter is blowing up over a viral clip of Gallaway Gallego more than keeping pace.” (Bailey-Millado, 2019) “At one point in the performance, Twista turned toward Gallaway Gallego and the audience went wild for her interpretation.” (Kessler and Schwartz, 2019) (Twista Sign Language Interpreter going crazy! 2019, 00:00:10)

As a result of looking into the rise of this new art form in the contemporary, commercial music genre, I became fascinated by the performances of professional sign language interpreters. I was inspired by their abilities to communicate beyond the literal, and curious as to what this could look like for classical vocal performance.

**Trial Performance**

In order to explore the idea of using a sign language interpreter for text translation and interpretation in live classical vocal music, I decided to test the concept in a trial performance.

The trial performance would serve to explore the effectiveness of the method predominantly from the perspective of the singer as well as the audience.

Finding a suitable Sign Language Interpreter proved to be a challenging task. I contacted several who were either not interested in small scale projects or were simply text translators, not sign language performance artists. I then found Helena Wästborn of Wästborn Productions who proved to be a perfect fit. Helena has worked as a Sign Language Interpreter for over 15 years. She has brothers who are deaf, and she learned to sign in order to communicate with them. Her love of the arts, combined with her signing abilities, led to a synergy of skills she refers to as “Teckenspråksång” (Sign Language Song). She describes herself as “A real all-rounder who has always loved to dance, write and act. In conjunction with completing my education as a Sign Language Interpreter, I discovered the joy of singing in sign language, and it became obvious to me that I could combine dance, acting and sign language singing to develop it into a single art form - choreographed sign language song.” (translated from the original Swedish, Wästborn Productions, n.d.) In an interview regarding her work on Melodifestivalen in 2015, Helena explained that she and her colleagues wanted “the deaf and hearing-impaired audience to feel the same experience as everyone else, and we can only
accomplish that if we give them the whole package - the emotion, the message of
the songs, the beat, the feeling of being present.” (Kyriazis, 2015)
During our initial discussions, two crucial factors immediately became clear.
1) The preparation of sign language interpretations is a very time-consuming
task.
Helena estimated that it would take her between 12-15 hours of work in order to
prepare her part of the performance for each individual song in the program.
Each song running for an average of 3.00 minutes.
Any repertoire to be performed in foreign languages needed first to be translated
into Swedish or English, (languages Helena understood) so that she could then
translate them into Swedish Sign Language.
The original text, as well as the translation, needed to be memorised. She then
had to analyse the text in order to create her own choreographed translation on
top of the literal signed translation.
Helena’s note reading abilities were limited, so it was also necessary for her to
memorise the musical content by ear.
2) This protracted preparation time for each song meant that every individual
piece was costly. Procuring interpretations of songs for a full-length concert
would be very expensive.
As a result, I decided to restrict the trial performance to a short 30-minute pro-
gram. I included pieces that were signed, as well as those that were not, in order
to both fill the program, and for comparative purposes.
Helena and I had several planning conversations over the phone, and constant
contact via email during the preparation phase. I explained to her that I felt it
would be interesting for us to come to the trial performance without having pre-re-
hearsed our individual interpretations. My idea was for her to provide another
layer of expression. I didn’t want her to feel constrained by the need to conform
to boundaries set by my interpretation. I thought it would be interesting to see
what kind of performance experience that would create.
The selection of appropriate repertoire for the trial workshop was of vital im-
portance to the project. The first question to trial was whether Helena’s inter-
pretation added or detracted from the effect of the vocal performance. In order to
test this, I included some pieces that were not signed in order to facilitate easier
comparison with those that were. I decided that it would be important to trial not
only whether the interpretation by Helena added or detracted from the effect of
the performance, but also which types of vocal music were best/worst suited to
this kind of interpretation. I included a sample of different languages (German, Italian, French), and different classical vocal genres (opera aria, art song).

Diversity of the type of text was also important: arias that capture a moment in time, the narrative on pause, expressing the nuance and full scope of emotion. Songs that are settings of text which narrate a story, poems that are dramatic or descriptive/atmospheric in nature. I sent through a list of proposed repertoire to Helena and she provided feedback. I had wanted to include Rachmaninov’s Vocalise Op. 34/14 in order to explore a piece without text. I thought we could assign a narrative ourselves that could serve to inform our interpretations. Helena felt this would be too difficult to achieve in the timeframe, so I withdrew it with a view to exploring it at a later date. She also had reservations about performing “Funeral Blues” by Benjamin Britten as she felt the narrative was so strong that it would be difficult to convey with the right feeling. “Signing too hard mostly comes across as anger/aggression, but here it is strong sorrow that should be conveyed, and sorrow is often conveyed as soft or desperate in sign language” (translated from the original Swedish in email correspondence)

Once the repertoire was set, I provided her with my own literal English translations of the pieces and also sourced some in Swedish for her to work from.

Trial Performance Repertoire:

Franz Schubert - “Gretchen am Spinnrade”, Op. 2, D118 (1814) (with Helena) lied, Dramatic ballad; German

Franz Schubert - “Die Forelle”, D550 (1817) (with Helena) lied, Light, narrative style; German

Richard Strauss - “Allerseelen”, Op. 10, No 8 (1885) (without Helena) Dramatic ballad; German

Hector Berlioz - “La mort d’Ophélie,” Tristia - Op. 18 (1842) (with Helena) Narrative with long piano interludes; French

Jules Massenet - “Adieu notre petite table” Manon (1884) (without Helena) operatic aria; French

Giacomo Puccini - “Tu che di gel sei cinta” Turandot (1926) (with Helena) operatic aria; Italian

The pianist (Albert Dahllöf) and I, met to discuss the details and aim of the project weeks before the performance.
At the first rehearsal, we worked slowly and in detail through each piece. This rehearsal was recorded for reflective purposes and to send to Helena.

During the second rehearsal, we ran through the entire concert with repeats of any problem pieces. This rehearsal was also recorded and sent to Helena.

The third and final rehearsal took place at the venue and was conducted with Helena present. This included the sound and video check. We ‘top and tailed’ the repertoire in the hall; checking the balance between singer and pianist, as well as physical positioning for the singer, piano and signer.

I compiled a questionnaire for the audience to complete at the end of the performance using www.survio.com

Two versions of the questionnaire were available, one in English, the other in Swedish. Audience members could either complete the questionnaire on the spot following the performance or use the QR codes printed on the program to complete the questionnaire online.

The questions were devised to gather feedback on the core elements of the research question. The audience were asked whether, in their opinion, the sign language performance added or detracted from the overall performance. Which types of repertoire rendered it most effective and what other observations/ impressions could they share from the experience. (See Appendix 1)

The performance was given at 18.00 on the 10th June, 2019 in the Nathan Milsteinsalen at Kungliga Musikhögskolan in Stockholm. This hall is fitted with permanent microphones that are suspended from the ceiling and the system was programmed to record the concert automatically.

I arranged for a high-quality video coupled with audio to be filmed from a static point at the back of the hall.

---

**Trial Performance Findings: Singer’s perspective**

The trial performance experience provided the opportunity for me (the singer) to make several observations, both during the performance, and later on watching the video recording.

These can best be documented in answer to the following questions:

1) In what way do you believe Helena’s interpretation added to your performance of the repertoire?
I could feel her energy and her presence on stage. This added a heightened sense of the drama which charged my own commitment with greater intensity. At times I felt I was able to retreat more into the music; allowing the audience to come to me, rather than working hard to seek their attention. Strangely this split in the audience attention gave me more freedom dramatically than I had expected. I had been worried that I would have to compete for their focus.

I felt that the moments when our gestures and movements happened to physically correspond, created a synergy of energy that I was aware of during the performance.

Clip #4 Berlioz – Ophélie @ 2:00 Ophelia adorning the Willow tree with her picked flowers.

2) In what way do you believe Helena’s interpretation detracted from your performance of the repertoire?

At the beginning of the performance, I found her presence slightly unsettling, but this feeling improved as we progressed through the program. I felt slightly restricted by her presence. Normally when I share the stage with another singer, for example, I would improvise and engage with them freely in a spontaneous exchange. With Helena, I felt I couldn’t do this, in case I disrupted her work or interfered physically in some way that would affect her performance.

For the first few pieces, I felt she was standing too far away from me. This meant that the audience found it hard to look at both of us simultaneously; diffusing the strength of communication.

By the end of the concert, she had crept back into a more central position which was much more effective. It would have been advisable to mark the floor after the soundcheck, to ensure we returned to the same places for the beginning of the concert.

Clip #1 Schubert - Gretchen @ 0:00

Clip #6 Puccini - @ 0.00

I also found it distracting when her gestures made audible, percussive sounds. For example, a slapping together of hands. This was loud enough to be audible
on the recording, and although it may not have disturbed the audience, I was keenly aware of it.

Clip #1 Schubert- Gretchen @ 1:45

3) What other observations did you make during the performance and on studying the recordings made of the concert?

I felt a definite shift in my approach as I began the pieces on the program that were performed without Helena.

I felt myself relax into owning the space more and I felt that the dynamic of the audience/performer relationship was more condensed.

Clip #5 Massenet - Manon @ 0.00

It was interesting to perform alongside Helena with little prior knowledge of what she would come with. Just before the concert she wanted to show me what she planned to do with “Gretchen am Spinnrade” and I noticed immediately that her interpretation was different, at certain points, to my own. In the following clip, for example, Helena’s interpretation is a small, almost platonic kiss. My interpretation was a more passionate, ‘too painful to think about’ kiss.

Clip #1 Gretchen @ 1:46 “sein Kuss” (his kiss)

I am aware that had I not seen a sample of Helena’s interpretation just prior to the performance, my expression at this point would have differed even more. I automatically watered down my performance at this point in order to bring my interpretation closer in line with Helena’s. The result is that my performance at that moment is weak and unconvincing. I had begun to question my own reading of the text which is not advisable one hour before a concert! In hindsight, it would have been better to stick to my original plan of coming to the stage with two completely independent interpretations.

Upon watching the performance video footage, I noticed that at times, Helena’s interpretation was very easy to understand, regardless of whether I understood Swedish Sign Language or not. There were some specific gestures that were absolutely in sync with specific words as I sang them.

Clip # 1 Schubert - Gretchen @ 0:08 “min Herz” (my heart)

Gretchen @ 0:30 “die ganze Welt” (the whole world)
Gretchen @ 1:15 “schau ’ich zum Fenster”

(I look through the window)

At other times, there appeared to be less emphasis on literal translation and more focus on conveying the essence of the phrase through choreographed gesture.

Clip #4 Berlioz - Ophélie @ 4:22 The text describes Ophelia singing snippets of an old ballad over and over again as she floats down the river, gradually sinking to her death.

There are moments where Helena’s movement physicalises the vocal line; even when there is no sung text, just vocal colour.

Clip #4 Berlioz - Ophélie @ 1:00 Helena acts as Ophelia smelling the flowers. This mirrors the vocal painting of the sung line, which has no text, but is simply sung on ‘Ah’.

Clip #6 Puccini @ 0:50 Here Helena expresses the vocal line with an almost balletic gesture.

Clip #6 Puccini @ 0:45 Here Helena’s movement seems to physicalise the expression in the piano part.

I think that the Puccini presented challenges for Helena that were difficult to address. I understand what she was trying to convey, but perhaps the long, stretched out, dramatic lines of this aria made it difficult for her to maintain dramatic intensity. The result, for me, is that her interpretation detracts a little from the effect of the music itself.

Clip #6 Puccini @ “io chiudo stanca gli occhi” (I, weary, will close my eyes) I feel that her gestures here are too large for the quietness of the music and inference of the text.

Repetition of text, which is common in both art song and operatic arias, were treated differently in different pieces.

Sometimes, Helena simply repeated the gesture when the text was repeated.

Clip #1 Schubert - Gretchen @ 2:50 “und küssen ihn, so wie ich wolle”, an seinen Küssen vergehen sollt” (and kiss him, as much as I desire, from his kisses I would perish)
On other occasions, she chose not to sign a literal repeat of the text. Instead, she developed the phrase with a new intention in the same way a singer develops repeated sung text.

Clip #6 Puccini @ 00:40 “l’amerai anche tu!” (you too will love him!) Helena chooses to physicalise the musical phrase, not repeat the signs for the text; increasing the intensity of the emotion.

**Trial Performance Findings: Audience perspective**

According to the results of the feedback provided by the audience through the questionnaire, 100% of the audience members believed that the interpretation added to the effect of the sung performance. One went further to say that “I was more attentive to the whole performance and even listened - watched the pianist more closely.” (translated from the original Swedish)

The piece that ranked highest in effectiveness was Schubert’s - Die Forelle (light narrative style text). I think this piece was so effective because it offered the opportunity for Helena and me to take on different roles in order to convey the narrative. I took on the role of narrator, observing the events. Helena was at times, the narrator; at times, the fisherman; at other times, the fish itself.

Clip #2 Schubert - Die Forelle @ 0:20 Helena as the fish, whilst I narrate.

The narrative style of the text made the storytelling aspect very clear and the pace of the narrative was fast enough to enable Helena to have a dynamic, fast moving approach to the interpretation, which was compelling to watch.

The second most popular piece was the Berlioz - La mort d’Ophélie (Narrative with longer piano interludes). This piece is a setting of a French text translation taken from Act IV of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. The Queen describes the scene of Ophelia’s drowning. Once again, we were provided the opportunity to take on complimentary roles in performance. I sang the text as the Queen observing and narrating the story, whilst Helena took on the role of Ophelia herself; enacting the scene described.

Clip #4 Berlioz - Ophélie @ 3:45 Ophelia being carried downstream, floating on her outstretched robes.
Clip#4 Berlioz - Ophélie @ 2:50 The branch of the Willow tree breaking and Ophelia falling into the water.

One member of the audience wrote, “I found the signing during La mort d’Ophélie most expressive, in particular because it continued during the solo piano parts”.

Clip #4 Berlioz - Ophélie @ 3:20 An example of Helena’s interpretation during a piano interlude.

Further comments from the audience included:

“The signing enhanced my experience of the music. The experience was strengthened the few times that your physical movements coincided with each other - heads bowed at the same time, upward glances.”

Clip #4 Berlioz - Ophélie @ 1:35 Ophelia glancing up to see the branches of the Willow.

Clip #6 Puccini @ 0:10 After withstanding hours of torture, Liu’s head is bowed before the mighty Princess.

Written comments from the audience indicate that the differences in our interpretations were experienced as a positive effect by some and as negative by others.

“Exciting to see three different interpretations of the music at the same time. I’m curious as to how you related to the language, translations and grammar. Exciting to see that you seemed to interpret the text differently at times!” (translated from the original Swedish)

“At one point, it felt as if your physical representations of the music differed slightly, which I felt distracted from the music. Other than that, the sign language interpretation absolutely added to the effect!”

There were times in the Gretchen when Helena’s translation was out of sync with the text I was singing. This created a lag in the physicalisation of the text.

Clip #1 Schubert - Gretchen from 1:30 and Schubert - Gretchen @ 2:43

The experience of this audience member may also have been an effect of Helena and I taking on different roles in Die Forelle, for example.

Clip #2 Schubert - Die Forelle @ 1:05 Helena is playing the role of the fisherman at this point and I am playing the role of the narrator so that our physical representations are vastly different.
It may have been interesting to also gather feedback from Helena and Albert regarding their experience of the experiment. This was outside the parameters of the contractual agreement for the project however, and I decided it was not essential in order to answer the project question.

I focused instead on:

- Insights gained from my experience during the performance
- Insights gained on watching the video of the performance
- Insights gained from my experience as project manager
- Feedback collected from the Audience Survey

As a result of informal discussions with Helena, I was able to learn that she felt a new project would benefit from three things.

1) We should have more time for combined rehearsal and a common approach to the interpretation of the pieces.

2) Instead of just providing the translations of the texts, I should provide her with further detail regarding the context of the song or aria if it was taken from a larger work.

3) In addition to sending her audio recordings of my rehearsals, I should video myself performing the song or aria and send it to her to look at so that she could gain an idea of all aspects of my interpretation.

Discussion: Challenges and Inspiration

The experience, feedback and knowledge gained during the preparation and performance of the trial workshop, highlighted for me the challenges associated with the concept, as well as points of inspiration for development.

Choosing the right repertoire:

Does the piece have a lot of repeated text, dramatic/intense phrases that are long drawn-out expressions of emotion? Does there need to be a continuation of the narrative through extended instrumental/piano breaks?
How do we deal with the perspective of the text? Is it in first person? Is it a narration? Is it a conversation with someone in the room/someone who is not present? Is it a monologue out to the universe? The treatment of the text perspective provides the opportunity for either the singer or the sign language interpreter to take on different roles in performance.

Repertoire which allows for more narrative and storytelling is likely to be more effective.

Larger, extended pieces, that provide the opportunity for a more dramatic through line, are more suitable than a mixed program of styles and genre. A single cohesive piece, song cycle, collection of songs, dramatic work or scene from an opera would lend themselves well to this type of performance.

Taking a single aria out of the context of the scene can make adding Sign Language to the performance more problematic and less effective. The traditional dramatic structure of an opera consists of recitative which propels the dramatic action forward, and arias which interrupt the dramatic action, in order for the character to reflect on a particular emotion, mood or state.

“While the story of an opera was advanced through recitative (dialogue sung in quick, speech-like rhythms), the arias, by contrast, were dramatically static, allowing individual characters to reflect upon the immediately preceding action, after which they perhaps left the stage.” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2015)

It would be advisable to use a larger section of the work in order to counteract this. Using a whole scene or even presenting a one act opera, in its entirety, would produce an interesting result.

This would also offer the opportunity to introduce multiple singers and Sign Language Interpreters respectively. Due to financial considerations and the physical space available on smaller stages, a piece for one or two characters would be most suitable.

The chamber performance aspect of this type of performance is essential. The audience needs to be able to see everything that is expressed in the interpretation of the Sign Language Performance Artist. Facial expressions are a crucial element of the language and larger concert venues are, therefore, not appropriate.

**Language difficulties:**

If your program involves foreign languages, the text will first need to be translated into a common spoken language (for example, English) before being translated into the sign language spoken by your signer. Unfortunately, sign language is not a universal language. There are currently 135 different sign languages in use.
around the world. Even countries that share a spoken language do not share the same sign language. (Matheson, n.d.)

As the trial performance was intended for a hearing audience, it was not relevant whether the interpreter was performing in Teckenspråk (Swedish Sign Language), ASL (American Sign Language), AUSLAN (Australian Sign Language) BSL (British Sign Language) etc. The language used when performing for hearing audiences is only dictated by the interpreter themselves.

If the concert was altered to include a full program of signed repertoire and was aimed towards a mixed audience of hearing and hearing-impaired attendees, then it would be restricted to the country of origin. If the concert was intended for performance internationally as well as locally, the need for additional interpreters would need to arise. In addition to new rehearsal periods, all of the translations would need to be re-worked.

The process would be simplified if the repertoire to be performed was in the vernacular, and this language was the mother tongue of both the singer and the Sign Language Performing Artist. For example, if the program consisted of a song cycle in English to be performed in the United Kingdom by a singer and Sign Language Performing Artist whose first language is English, the only stage required in translation would be from English to BSL.

**Synchronising a joint approach:**

A joint approach to the interpretation would appear to be advisable for optimum effect. Essentially, once the interpreter becomes an integral part of the performance and not simply a translator, all of the techniques usually employed when synchronising a performance of individuals into a whole, are appropriate.

1. Extensive rehearsal.
2. Synchronised acting of intention, choreography and interaction between the performers would all heighten the effect of the individual performances. It would be advisable to have the performance directed by a third party.
3. Physical positioning on stage is important. The interpreter and singer should be placed close enough together to avoid the feeling that the audience is at a tennis match; moving as a single entity or as individual parts within a whole.
Financial constraints:

The trial workshop was produced on a shoestring budget. Many of the recommendations above demand a significantly greater financial commitment.

Extended rehearsal time, a third-party director and or choreographer, as well as a longer program of larger scale works that need to be translated and prepared by the signer, all add considerably to the production budget.

In Conclusion

Regardless of whether an audience member understands sign language as a literal translation of the text, it can be used to add a layer of heightened expression to the sung text. Sign language interpretation can free up the audience member from the traditional focus on the written word on the page or screen in front of them, allowing them to read between the lines and experience the piece as a whole.

The interpreter is able to take on a specific role which can then be used to supplement the sung expression of the text.

In addition to this, a sign language interpreter is a living, breathing translator. As such, his/her interpretation is able to take on a dynamic life of its own in the realm of performance. In much the same way as another singer or actor on stage would.

Future development for the concept presents several challenges, but most can be overcome with adequate time and finances. The creative opportunities are boundless, as are the possibilities, not only for providing an enhanced experience for hearing audiences, but also increasing access to classical vocal music for the hearing-impaired community.

REFERENCE LIST


Matheson, G. (n.d.) “Sign language alphabets from around the world” Available at: https://blog.ai-media.tv/blog/sign-language-alphabets-from-around-the-world#:~:text=There%20are%20over%20135%20different,share%20the%20same%20sign%20language.
Accessed: 8/06/2020


Wästborn Productions, (n.d.) [online] Available at: https://www.wast-born.se/tj%C3%A4nster-16288215 Accessed: 26/09/2019


Under the Bridge American Sign Language ASL (2016) YouTube video, added by kremund [online]. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MGRWe-Keh9NE&list=RDMGRWeKeh9NE&index=1 Accessed: 12/02/2020


APPENDICES

Appendix 1 - Questionnaire

1. How would you rate your experience of the individual pieces this evening?
   - Schubert - Gretchen am Spinnrade
   - Schubert - Die Forelle
   - Strauss - Allerseelen
   - Berlioz - La mort d'Ophélie
   - Massenet - Manon - Adieu, notre petite table
   - Puccini - Turandot - Tu che di gel sei cinta

2. How would you describe your experience of the pieces which included Sign Language Interpretation?
   - The interpretation added to the effect of the sung performance
   - The interpretation detracted from the effect of the sung performance
   - The interpretation neither added nor detracted from the effect of the sung performance
   - Further thoughts?

3. In which piece did you feel the Sign Language Interpretation was most/least effective?
   Change the order according to your preference (1. - most effective, last - least effective)
   - Schubert - Gretchen am Spinnrade
   - Schubert - Die Forelle
- Berlioz - La mort d'Ophélie
- Puccini - Turandot - Tu che di gel sei cinta

4. How would you best describe yourself?

- I am a musician
- I am a non-musician
- I can understand Swedish Sign Language

5. Based on your experience this evening, would you attend a vocal recital performed with Sign Language Interpretation?

- Yes
- No

6. Based on your experience this evening, would you prefer to attend a vocal recital performed with or without Sign Language Interpretation?

- With
- Without
- Combination

7. Do you have any further thoughts/feedback you would like to share?