Performance Communication: Skills and Insight for Classical Singers

This article describes a PhD project that aims to develop insight, knowledge and skills concerning performance communication for classical singers. Performance communication, in this project, is defined as the different variables one can choose to make use of in the preparation and presentation of Lieder. Through theoretical studies, data collection and the author’s own performances the field is approached from different angles. The article describes methodological issues concerning the moving back and forth between a subjective role as a singer and the more objective role as the researcher.

Introduction

Chamber music competes with the many and varied artistic expressions on offer in the public sphere, such as theatre, dance, art galleries, pop, jazz and various types of classical concerts. Where classical music once seemed to have a higher status compared with other musical expressions, the different genres now compete on more equal terms. In light of this situation, singers must develop their performance knowledge and skills, and an awareness concerning the communication of classical chamber music to a much greater extent than before. We cannot take for granted that there is an eager audience ready to attend our concerts. Singers must make sure that the concept of the recital is intentional, interestingly prepared and performed.

The focus of my PhD project is the development of performance communication skills for classical singers, and I am now at the midpoint of the project. My aim is to develop a theory of the different aspects of the performance communication of singers, both in terms of communicative insight and performance skills. The focus for my study is the repertoire of classical songs, which in Scandinavian languages are called romancer, in English Art songs and in German Lieder. I prefer to use the German word Lieder, as the repertoire with which I am primarily concerned for my project is German Lieder from the period of 1890-1940.

I define performance communication as the different variables one can choose to make use of in the preparation and presentation of, in my case, Lieder. These include verbal and nonverbal communication, such as words, posture, gestures, mime and the use of the eyes; and creative means of communication, such as programming, dramaturgy, the use of the concert hall and the stage, as well as the use of other artistic expressions in a concert.

In Scandinavia, we have the term musikkformidling. The word is quite similar to the German term Musikvermittlung, but up until today the German word has had a different and more limited content. There is no precise English translation for musikkformidling, which is why I will use the Scandinavian term for the purposes of this article. Musikvermittlung concerns music communication in the service of different concert performance concepts, and the term is often used where there is some kind of arrangement or adjustment employed in relation to a particular kind of audience. The concept of musikkformidling is, as my supervisor Elef Nesheim defines the term, that of finding ‘ways to adjust, adapt and prepare a performance of music in such a way that the listeners will achieve a rich experience of the music.’

Methodological issues
Musikkformidling has been a subject at the Norwegian Academy of Music for almost 30 years, and I have been occupied personally with the field for a long time, both as a teacher and as a singer. I have developed a competence base of knowledge, reflections, insights and skills, which I want to bring into play fully in my doctoral project. On the one hand my aim is to explore my own tacit knowledge and describe concert singers’ performance traditions, and on the other to explore new ideas and possibilities for improvement in the field of performance communication with regard to singers. I want to develop not only theoretical knowledge, but, by being active as a singer, also practical insight and skills.

To work on a practice-based research project that consists of both performance and theoretical studies is challenging. On the one hand, the researcher must identify and incorporate theoretical and methodological issues; on the other hand, she is expected to maintain a high performance standard, which demands a great deal of practice. My aim is the development of a research method that gives me the opportunity, both alone and with other performers, to study my own praxis as a singer. Through theoretical studies, data collection and my own performances I will approach the field from several different angles.

My methodological choices have led me to ‘action research’. Research projects that combine theoretical studies with practice have become more common in recent years. Where action research methods traditionally were used in pedagogy, psychology, sociology and research on organisations, ideas and methods from this tradition are now being used in new fields. The aim of action research is to create changes in praxis, improve existing theory and create new theory. Jarvis calls the researcher in these kinds of projects a practitioner-researcher. The practitioner-researcher will alternate between having an objective and a subjective approach towards her research material. In this way she brings into the project her praxis, her tacit and her articulated knowledge. She orients herself consciously and self-critically between experience and reflection through several cycles, in which ideas, praxis and knowledge are systematically explored, tested and improved. In this way the practitioner-researcher can provide empirical data different from that collected in other, more one-dimensional research projects.

Action research methods have given me a methodological base for working on performance communication issues from what I view as both internal and external researcher positions or points of view in relation to my topic. The external position in my project involves the use of a multistage focus group in addition to theoretical studies, whereas the internal position is the study of my own performing practice as a singer. My empirical data is derived from these three approaches. The experiences gained from my performances are continuously tested out in the focus group meetings and related to insights gained through theoretical study; these insights in turn inform both the focus group meetings and performances. Instead of generalizability, I look for a kind of stable flexibility, a dual consciousness of both my roles as a performer and a researcher, so that I can remain relatively stable in both by being reflexive, moving back and forth between perspectives and having them inform – and transform – each other. In this way, my work

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2 Polanyi 2000.
4 Hummelvoll 2003.
5 Focus groups usually meet once; a multistage focus group, however, has meetings over a period of time. The aim is to study a field thoroughly through a cycle consisting of activities like planning, action, reflection and new knowledge.
is an example of a hermeneutic research project, where the whole is studied through its parts and the parts influence the whole, in a hermeneutic circle.

My project is designed to enable me to trace the development of my performance communication skills with improvement in my knowledge and perception concerning musikkformidling. I started the project with a concert I called ‘Alma Mahler, muse, femme fatale and composer’, consisting of Lieder by Alma Mahler, Gustav Mahler, Berg, Schönberg, Zemlinsky, Webern and Pfitzner. At the midpoint of the project I will design and perform a cabaret concert, which will give me the opportunity to expand my work to different aspects of musikkformidling. I will conclude the project with a third concert, performing the same repertoire as in the first, though with a different performance concept. Further, I will analyse the design and performance process and the different outcomes of these three concerts. In the time between these concerts, I will expose myself to feedback from the singers in the focus group, and continue literature studies on different theories of performance communication and musikkformidling. I will be influenced by other concerts as well, and of course by all the different people involved in the projects, such as my supervisor, co-musicians, audience members and colleagues.

The Focus Group: singers as co-researchers
The focus group consists of six professional singers including myself. I chose to invite singers with different levels and types of experience: one recent graduate from an opera school, one singer with an extensive European career, and three other singers with much experience on the stage. The group consists of three men and three women, aged from 25 to 55 years. All singers were invited to participate in the group because of their interest in the subject and their ability to reflect and articulate. The group will meet a total of five times, and the discussions so far have concerned different aspects of the performance of Lieder. We have performed for each other, watched videos and listened to CDs by other singers. The aim of the focus group is to know more about my informants’ knowledge, both articulated and tacit, as well as their attitudes and insights concerning musikkformidling. Another intention is for the group, when I become too subjective as a researcher, to provide me with some opposition and a broader perspective.

Theory: the singer’s communication
The Latin word communicare means to give, to share or to do something together. In studying stage communication, one can either choose to focus on the interaction between the different participants or to study one of them. In this project I have chosen the singular performer’s perspective and her impact on the communication of music. Whereas there are many studies of both the performance interpretation of music and its perception by listeners, there are comparatively few studies that focus on the performer’s communication of a work.

A concert is a communicative situation in which music is performed for someone by someone. The interaction between the participants involved in this communication can be understood variously as a simple or as a more complex communication chain. A simple chain consists of a sender, a message and a receiver. The senders in this case are the musicians, but also the composer and – in a song – the poet; the message is the music, and the receiver is the audience.

In order to identify which elements or variables are significant in the communication of music, I must first build an overall perspective. I have chosen to transfer the Norwegian

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art historian Dag Solhjell’s description of the elements of the presentation of visual art.7 In an art exhibition, Solhjell says, we experience much more than the art itself. The pieces of art are placed strategically in the gallery, where there are catalogues, lighting, flowers and other installations. There are also people playing different roles, such as curators, gallery owners, journalists, the audience and so on. These persons, together with the different objects, influence the experience of the art, all in different ways.

If the art experience consists of more than the piece of art, then what is art, and what are the different elements influencing the art experience? One view is to look upon performance communication as the wrapping and ribbons around a present, whereas the present inside is the piece of art. Solhjell claims that the reading of art consists of three different layers: text, paratext and context. In this perspective, the piece of art itself is the text. The contexts are the frames of reference in which we experience the art. The contexts, Solhjell says, can be looked upon as a map of a social and intellectual landscape in terms of different perspectives that help us to experience the art. The paratexts, according to Solhjell, are the effects of persuasion, all the different means used in the presentation of the art. The paratexts point towards the art through symbols, signs, other texts and the use of physical or human tools. In my view, a singer’s paratexts can consist of rhetorical elements such as verbal and nonverbal communication, repertoire issues and dramaturgy, and of scenic elements such as the use of a stage or a room, lighting, scenography, stage props, outfits and costumes and so forth, while the contextual elements can consist of oral comments of different kinds and the use of other artistic expressions such as dance, theatre, film or multi-media in the concert.

Solhjell’s model, consisting of text, paratext and context, provides an interpretive tool, which allows me to separate the music from its performance. It is, however, not possible to transfer the model directly from visual art to music. A piece of art emerges when the painter stops painting, whereas a score of music is not music until it is being performed and heard. Some of the questions I deal with are whether interpretation is the text or a paratext, and whether some parts of the interpretation process belong to paratext, while other elements cannot be separated from the text. These are questions with which I will continue to work.

The singer as a rhetorician

I find that the concept of musikkformidling resonates with ideas from classical rhetoric, developed in ancient Greece. Rhetoric was concerned with persuasion performed as skillfully and eloquently as possible.8 Rhetoricians developed techniques and methods for composing and performing an effective speech. Rhetoric is no longer simply a discipline for written or oral presentations, but is used in many diverse areas concerned with communication, such as media, advertisements, popular music and in other sorts of communicative texts, such as art exhibitions, films or concerts.9

A rhetorician in antiquity used five working stages in his process towards a presentation; the phases were called inventio, dispositio, elucutio, memoria and actio. In inventio, he would find a topic, in dispositio he arranged his arguments into a good disposition, in elucutio he formed his language into an efficient and dynamic text, in memoria he used different techniques to practice and memorize his speech and in the actio phase he performed the speech with attention to vocal production and nonverbal communication. These stages are quite similar to a musician’s preparation for a concert, and in different ways they are all interesting approaches for my musikkformidling perspective – some of them, however, more so than others. The

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7 Solhjell 2001.
actio phase is of particular interest for my project, involving voice production, diction and pronunciation, movements, gestures, miming and the use of the eyes.

In order to communicate with an audience interested in also understanding the words being sung, the singer must work with diction, nuances, varied stresses, accentuations and flexibility in order to make the text as understandable as possible. In classical singing this is not always easy. A classical singer often has the dilemma of producing a rich, beautiful, even sound and a smooth legato on the one hand, and pronouncing the words as clearly as possible on the other.

In normal speech, speakers use nonverbal signs to accompany spoken words to a large extent. Birdwhistell\(^\text{10}\) claimed that as much as 65% of a message’s meaning is communicated through nonverbal cues. In a normal conversation the nonverbal cues\(^\text{11}\) are relayed automatically as we speak. In a performance, however, the singer must be aware of how the nonverbal body language can assist or detract from the textual and musical meaning.

Traditionally, concert singers use as few gestures and as little mime as possible, since these nonverbal cues are considered by many to disturb the performance. However, the poetic form in the Lieder recital is varied. Some songs are purely poetic, some narrative and some dramatic. Some songs would lose their intensity if the body language were too subdued; in other songs the use of gestures would disturb the audience’s experience. Vivid mime can emphasise the meaning of the words to offer the audience a better opportunity to understand what is being sung. By using the eyes and mime the singer can imply who the speaker is, what the positions are of the persons in the text, or what they are thinking. Schneider\(^\text{12}\) discusses kinesthetic aspects in song recitals, quoting the Danish singer Aksel Schiøtz:

‘Gestures may be used, but they are dangerous; movements on the podium should be kept to a minimum and used only in very dramatic passages or when they spring spontaneously from the singer’s emotion. More often than not they disturb and detract.’\(^\text{13}\)

While the use of movements and gestures in a recital is an issue, mime and the use of eyes is of indisputable importance. As Caruso and Tetrazzini point out in their book:

‘The singer’s expression must concern itself chiefly with the play of emotion around the eyes, eyebrows and forehead. You have no idea how much expression you can get out of your eyebrows.’\(^\text{14}\)

These singers belong to a previous generation of singers, and although the traditions in classical music are strong, it may well be time to adjust ways of performing to fit a more modern way of communicating. People today seem to be more visual than was the case previously. Therefore, a concert singer in, for example, the opera or in a theatre context could consider the use of more body language, such as gesture, different physical positions and attitudes, and even specific movements.

\(^{10}\) Birdwhistell 1970.
\(^{11}\) Øyslebø 1989, 8-10. There are many ways of communicating nonverbally, through body language, voice production, through clothes, outfits, jewellery, make-up, art, music or signs. In this context, nonverbal means voice production, diction, gestures, mime and the use of the eyes.
\(^{12}\) Schneider 1994.
\(^{13}\) Schiøtz 1970, 19-20.
\(^{14}\) Caruso and Tetrazzini 1975, 31-32.
The singer, the play and the roles

In my thesis, I will discuss the concert event: the different singers and their roles. Nowadays there is a major focus on famous musicians and singers. Record companies and concert agents launch and promote their stars, placing them front and centre of concert events. It may seem as if both the music and the concerts serve as tools in building careers.

In the communication chain however, one finds that the focal point can variously be on the performers, on the music, on the audience’s experience of the music or on the mutual sharing of the concert event. This leads me to Hans Georg Gadamer and his theory of the performance of art as a play or a game. Playing can be of the sort when children play together; it can be a game or sport, but it can also be a concert or a play in the theatre. The player brings with him the rules of the game he is playing, which can be adhered to strictly and seriously, or treated more freely in a relaxed manner. The focus of the activity is the play itself, not the players. In a children’s game there are no spectators. The play is not intended to be a performance. What makes art different from other games is, according to Gadamer, that art is a presentation; the artist, the musician or the actor addresses the audience in order to present the art to them. For Gadamer, it is this presentation that makes the score of music art. In the presentation of art, for example in a concert or theatre, the closed room expands in such a way that walls fall away, inviting the audience to participate in the play. The intention of this game, the art game, is to share the art experience. Thus, Gadamer says, the actors or the musicians do not play the leading part in the play. If we imagine the concert as a game, the music is in focus, attaching the audience and the performers in the sharing of a musical experience. This view can make the performer take a more modest position concerning his role in the concert.

According to the communication chain, there can be many senders in the making and performance of a song. Edward T. Cone writes:

‘There is consequently a great deal of discussion concerning just what music says and how, indeed, it can say anything. But in all this argument one question is seldom, if ever, asked: If music is a language, then who is speaking?’

The original senders are the poet who wrote the poem and the composer who decided the poem’s musical rhythm, tempo, stress, emphasis, accentuations, dynamics, melody and accompaniment. The singer and the pianist are also senders, responsible for the interpretation and the performance of the song. In the poem there can be different characters: protagonists, a narrator, or different distinct voices within one song. Cone singles out the different sender roles, calling them personas. Since a song is an overall product of poetry, incorporating both vocal and instrumental components, Cole calls the song the composer’s persona, stressing that it is not the persona of the composer but the persona of the composition itself. The singer is called the vocal persona. The accompaniment, Cone says, in some ways is like the stage directions in the theatre: it colors and comments upon the text, and he gives the pianist the role of musical persona. The characters in the song will have the roles of the poetic personas.

I find it important to try to draw lines between the composition as a piece of art and the singer’s art of interpretation. I want to look at the different senders and, as in Cone’s terminology, try to put into words what the different personas represent and how they

15 Gadamer 2003, 101-121.
16 Cone 1974, 1.
17 Ibid., 20-40.
contribute to a performance of a song. To be more aware of these issues, in my experience, makes the presentation of the song clearer and more trustworthy.

**Performance: the researcher as a singer**

My own performance activity in this project consists of three concert concepts that will result in the production of a DVD. I have chosen to work primarily with German Lieder from the period 1890-1940. I wish to perform Lieder that are less familiar than for instance Schubert’s and Schumann’s. In this way, the audience will have fewer prior references, giving me a greater challenge in presenting and performing the songs.

A performance of Lieder is situated at the intersection between the music theatre such as opera on the one hand, and the chamber music concert on the other. A Lied is a piece of music, certainly, but has another expression in addition to the music — that of the poem. Text and music create in the Lied a new unity, which becomes a consistent artistic expression. Looking upon a song recital as a mixture of a chamber concert and music theatre, I must consider to what extent and in what ways I will use different performance communication skills in my recitals. There are also different kinds of Lieder. In some of them, one can use many means of nonverbal communication, while for other songs one must aim for a subdued performance. To increase the experience of the latter, one can use different contextual means.

In my *Alma Mahler* concert, I focused particularly on the different contexts. I chose Alma Mahler’s life as a unifying theme. The songs in the concert were bound together by a text based on her autobiography, using an actress to play the part of Alma. The episodes from her life were arranged chronologically, and the songs were placed in the program to correspond with points in her life at which the composers had come in contact with her. I wanted the audience to come closer to the persons behind the music and the poems. To help achieve this, I collected 90 photos that were projected onto a wide screen, showing the faces behind the names. I produced a written program in which I gave the audience further references to literature, plays, films and music of the period. I tried to balance the use of texts and contexts, being more careful with the use of paratexts. By focusing on the contexts in which the composers lived, I gave the audience a framework through which they could experience the music.

The planned second concert consists of cabaret songs by Kurt Weill as well as German, French and American cabaret song composers. The texts are communicative and address the audience directly. Therefore, I will focus more on the paratexts such as nonverbal communication, repertoire issues, dramaturgy, and placements in the room, lighting and scenography. I will also have to adjust my classical singing technique to achieve a more linguistic, theatrical way of singing.

In the third concert, I will use the same repertoire as in the *Alma Mahler* concert. The emphasis will be on balancing the use of paratexts and contexts, and on experimenting with other performance communication skills than those featured in the previous two concerts. As my knowledge, insight and skills develop, I can work systematically with the different paratexts and contexts. By performing the same songs in two different concepts over a period of two years, I hope to be able to trace how my development has enabled me to perform the songs in different ways in terms of the paratexts, the contexts and probably also the interpretation of the texts.

Obviously, there are methodological problems involved in studying my own concert activity. I will address the issue of reflexivity by writing a log during the preparation, videotaping both the rehearsals and the concerts and making audio recordings of the concerts. It is both impossible and undesirable for me as researcher-performer to have
a totally objective perspective, and it will not be possible to baldly generalize from this material. Instead, I will construct a richly textured phenomenological description of my development as a communicator, based both on my performances and the parallel scholarly research. This rich description can then participate in the ongoing research conversation in our field.

**Final reflections**

I believe in the potential of the many unexplored ideas, tremendous possibilities and varied ways of performing this rich repertoire. I think it is important that singers develop a wider understanding of how, through the use of paratexts and contexts, one can influence the audience’s experiences of music. As in the theatre, where new ideas for setting up plays by, for example, Ibsen or Shakespeare are constantly developed, a singer who wants to perform Lieder should develop and improve her performance communication skills in order to gain greater insight into musikkformidling.

It is important for me to be creative and innovative, but at the same time make sure that the effects and means do not disturb the music. The music must always be in focus. The idea is to find ‘ways to adjust, adapt and prepare a performance of music in such a way that listeners will achieve a rich experience of the music.’

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**Literature**


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