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WORDS AND MUSIC

A LECTURE DELIVERED BY

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LOUIS CHARLES ELSON was born on April 17, 1848, and died on February 14, 1920. He was educated in Boston, his native city, and Germany. As a teacher at the New England Conservatory of Music, as music editor for Boston newspapers, he exerted a great influence for music in this country over a period of many years. He also served as musical correspondent for several European and South American papers, and enjoyed distinction as a lecturer to the public as well as in the classroom. As author, composer and editor, he had a career of great significance in America's musical development.

In 1945 the Library of Congress received a bequest from the late Mrs. Bertha L. Elson, widow of Louis Charles Elson, to provide lectures on music and musical literature in memory of her husband. Professor Davison's lecture was one of the series made possible by Mrs. Elson's generous bequest, which also supplied funds for this publication.



## WORDS AND MUSIC

**T**HE MOST direct conveyance of the meaning and the sentiment contained in words is through speech delivered with appropriate inflection; but when words are imaginatively propulsive—and only then is it likely that save in exceptional cases they will prove incitements to the composer—the step from speech to song is a relatively short one. A text will supply meanings and a physical framework for the support of the music. Music, in its turn, will transfigure plain meanings and clothe the verbal substance with a kind of incandescence that words by themselves cannot achieve. These two appear to have been destined for one another from the beginning and their generally happy union is sanctified by long usage. If fancifully viewed this collaboration may, indeed, be compared with almost any human partnership; the basic difference between life and art in this case being that in the former, freedom of choice prevails, while in the world of art the composer selects the partners, writes the contract, and dictates the nature of the relationship.

Inasmuch as it is the composer who decrees the union, it will be his responsibility to deal equitably with both members, determining the relative amount of emphasis to be laid on words or music as the situation may require. There will be occasions when it will be advisable to relegate the text to a subordinate position, while at other times the words, because of their significance, will demand precedence over the music. Although his interest will, naturally, be focused on his own contribution, the composer must not, as so many appear to do, regard the text merely as a convenient clotheshorse, a display rack over which he may effectively drape his music; the text must be for him the animating source of his whole creation and he must be constantly intent on mirroring every shade of meaning and emotion resident in the words. Devotees of the clotheshorse

theory of text treatment have been numerous among Italian composers; the French, on the other hand, have traditionally been considerate of the rights of words. Although in its highest manifestations the joining of words with music represents a union so complete that one is hardly conscious of the partners as separate entities, each is, notwithstanding, autonomous, endowed with its own powers of expression, and possessing its own prerogatives. What I shall be calling "the rights of words" and "the rights of music" are important issues, and not a little of the excellence of any vocal work depends upon the extent to which those rights, in due proportion, are regarded.

Not all poets, certainly, have trusted the composer where the rights of words are concerned. Alfred Housman strongly objected to the setting of his poems by any composer, and that attitude is understandable because an author may justifiably wish to avoid the pain of seeing his work committed to what seems to him to be unsympathetic musical hands. But Vaughan Williams put music to verses from "A Shropshire Lad" in a song cycle which makes us grateful that Housman did not realize his ambition. That setting, incidentally, represents one case in which the music even adds stature to the poetry.

It would be reassuring to believe that Housman's unwillingness to confide his poetry to musical interpretation arose not so much from a high respect for his own verse as from the realization that to join words and music under any circumstances is to bring together two elements so different in nature that a perfect union may prove all but impossible. If, as is so often said, a marked dissimilarity in character tends to draw two individuals into a harmonious relationship, then that may account in part for the general accord which exists between words and music when combined to serve a single purpose. Combarieu<sup>1</sup> goes so far as to declare that the natural difference between poetry and music is the chief reason

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<sup>1</sup> Jules Combarieu, *Les Rapports de la musique et de la poésie considérées au point de vue de l'expression* (Paris: Ancienne Librairie Germer Baillièrre et cie, 1894), p. 284.

for their union. Whether or not this is true, words and music certainly are fundamentally unlike in their natures, and without embarking on a lengthy excursion into the field of aesthetics, or of falling Laocoön-like into the clutches of the serpents of semantics, I want to refer briefly to those particular differences which have significance for this lecture. After that we may proceed to discover how these differences have sometimes been reconciled in the interests of artistic concord and to consider some of the sacrifices which each partner has been called upon to make.

To begin with, we have two quite separate types of ideas and meanings, those of music springing from the imagination; and those of words originating in the intellect; under no circumstances may these two types be considered to be identical in nature. The most familiar misunderstanding of this principle occurs in the field of church music when the worshiper, palpitating emotionally after the performance of some anthem, will assert that music such as this could not fail to make him a better man. He is most conscious of the music because the music, belonging primarily to the senses, will have had a much more immediate effect on him than the words whose impact will be slower because they must be acted on by the intellect. Actually, it is only the words—provided they embody some dynamic ethical idea—that may be counted on to be spiritually beneficial, to make him, perhaps, a better man. The music, to be sure, may not be destructive of the religious mood, but it may just as possibly project within the worshiper those vague emotional stirrings which have no direct connection with what is called “religious feeling.” The confusion is as understandable as it is common. Because both words and music are presented simultaneously, and because the meanings of the text are precise while those of the music are elusive, it is easy to conceive of the musical idea as absorbed in that of the words with a resulting identity of meaning.

I think we would agree that a large proportion of the ideas expressed in words logically combined are intelligible to those familiar with the particular language employed. The ideas expressed in music, on the other hand, are quite indefinite and have as many

meanings as there are ears to hear them, and these will be the meanings ascribed to them by the listener; but the composer's meaning may, and probably will be, entirely different. If the composition is what we call "abstract" or "pure" music, as distinct from "program" music, we may assume that the idea presented is beauty, and that alone. In program music, however, the composer's task is to illuminate the ideas set forth in a picture or a story, and those ideas will not be subject to such a variety of interpretations as in the case of abstract music. The vocal composer is, in one sense, a "program" composer inasmuch as the primary source of his music is a text whose ideas are not his own. But beyond the idea lies the expression of it. Feeble ideas communicated either through words or music are never to be respected, but they may, nonetheless, be persuasively set forth.

Take the case of words, for instance. The composer in selecting his text may display a fine literary sense or he may be susceptible to stimulation by language not distinguished for its beauty of expression, and although we consider the ideal relationship to represent a parity of excellence, as it did in the Elizabethan age, the practical truth is—much as we might wish it otherwise—that literary quality is not the first requirement of a good text but rather its adaptability to a musical setting and its appeal to the composer. A number of the texts selected by Monteverdi, Bach, Mozart, Rameau, and Schubert are no match in quality for the music that accompanies them. We are familiar, on the other hand, with examples of fine literature subjected to an unimaginative musical treatment that is sometimes little more than commonplace. In the partnership of words and music it is the latter which must be of unexceptionable quality, for great music may make us forget literary inadequacy and can even appear occasionally to transfigure a text of indifferent literary worth; but poor music either ruins a good text or further debases a bad one.

We take it for granted that the composer finds some strong appeal to his imagination in the text he chooses, but on the basis of his selection we are sometimes prompted to wonder just what it was that set his imagination going. What was the force that stirred up

a creative ferment within him? Why do some composers deal primarily with the products of their own imagination while others, including composers of vocal music, place their reliance on second-hand ideas, preferring to seek inspiration in a world outside themselves? And what of those schizoid imaginations which operate freely in either field? These are questions which, I believe, have not been fully answered and they may, indeed, be quite unanswerable.

When I inquire concerning a composer's response to a text, I am not thinking first of the text so poetic in nature that it could hardly fail to invite the collaboration of music; I have in mind, rather, the text that is so factual and so prosaic in character that it would seem to defy the musical imagination to lift it out of its sphere of literalness; words before which we can visualize music standing with vacant countenance:

Eli Sykes, in the town of Batley  
Killed his sweetheart, Hannah Brooke.

or

The brown girl had a knife in her hand  
It was both keen and sharp  
And twixt the long ribs and the short  
She pricked fair Eleanor's heart.

These are folksong verses and folksong is, of course, a law unto itself, its texts being often no more than an excuse for making music; strings of proper names or sanguinary verses like the ones just read. Most composers, certainly, would blanch before the prospect of devising music to fit these words, but even in the field of art music one comes on examples of seemingly unproductive texts. There is Handel with "And great was the company of the preachers" and "Whatever is is right," and those incomparable examples from the literature of the English anthem: "Behold, two blind men sitting," "How dreadful is this place," and "Arise and sit down, O Jerusalem." If texts like these seem aggressively unfriendly to musical ideas, there are some which lie quite at the other extreme; texts which have

undoubtedly stimulated the imaginations of many composers but which, in spite of that, have had comparatively few settings. Because these texts are so completely self-sufficient or so superb as literature, conscientious composers have generally drawn back from them, feeling that no music, however exalted, could fittingly partner them. The words "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" did not deter Brahms and he, probably as much as any composer could, dealt imaginatively with them; but even Brahms added nothing to what was already there.

There are many composers whose music impresses us as standing in close relationship to the text and whose handling of voices is skillful. There are others, however, to whose musical ideas one would seldom take exception but whose way with voices leaves something to be desired. The ideas with which Beethoven clothed his texts were generally unexceptionable and it certainly was not a deficiency in either ideas or imagination that was Beethoven's undoing as a choral writer. On the contrary, it would seem that his imagination soared so high that it prevented him from making his ideas fully articulate within the narrow limits of human voices. But if the lofty flight of Beethoven's imagination sometimes led him to write music that is vocally impractical, that, surely, is to be preferred to the exercise of little or no imagination even when buttressed by a highly developed technique in choral scoring. The Victorians admirably fulfill this prescription. They were endowed with great expertness in chorestration—if I may be allowed to invent a word; they wrote reams of music to all sorts of texts, many of them of fine literary quality; but the total aesthetic horsepower was quite insufficient to move the sheer bulk of the output.

The routine treatment of words to which the Victorians were so much addicted is generally ascribed to a lack of imagination, and while that may be true of the Victorians it does not apply to all cases in which words fail to receive their due. An apparent absence of eloquence may result from a composer's too frequent contact with the same text, and the Mass is a luminous example of this. We can only assume that sixteenth-century composers approached the com-

position of the Mass with the intention of providing music representative of their highest capacity. Yet how often, even in the work of the greatest, do these ambitions seem to be unfulfilled. We feel, chiefly, that the composer has not written music consistently expressive of the full meaning and spirit of the text.

But just as the definition of a radical depends on who does the defining, so the characterization of some music of an earlier day as "inexpressive" depends on one's point of view. Now there is a period when words and music unite but seem to progress separately; to walk side by side, but to remain strangers nonetheless. The Compostela style of the twelfth century, the organum of the thirteenth, and not a little of the complex music of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries might be so described. Especially do many of the isorhythmic pieces of the late Middle Ages appear to us to be utterly inexpressive and without the slightest artistic interest. Was the composer mainly concerned with the necessarily elaborate contrivance of music or with an eloquent setting of the text? Could an isorhythmic motet possibly have made any impact as beauty on the listeners of an earlier day? I can see no reason to believe that medieval composers, writing in what appears to us to be a restricted musical language but which to them must have represented at least a communicable medium, should not have found the music expressive of the texts they were setting. Furthermore, that language was an art language familiar to the listener of that day, and it is hardly credible that he would have patiently endured a long composition which invoked his admiration only because it was skillfully devised. His ear, accustomed to what sounds to us like the labyrinthian complications of pure technique, may well have found this music as lucid and communicating as is to us a Bach cantata or a Schubert Mass.

I take it that music first attained expressiveness, as we understand that word, in the period of the *musica reservata*. Out of the numerous and diverse definitions of that term we may, at least, draw the inference that it had to do in some way with a sympathetic music rendering of the words. In the music of Josquin, for

instance, there are many examples of a close parallelism between words and music; the word "high" will be characterized by music higher in pitch than that which has just preceded it, and the word "low" will be treated accordingly. This naïve procedure finds its normal continuance in numerous examples of descriptive writing: Jannequin with his imitations of birds or a group of ladies engaged in animated conversation; Cesti, Purcell, Lully, and Jeremiah Clarke with their "trembling" or "shivering" choruses; Handel with his dwarf menagerie in *Israel in Egypt*; Haydn with his hum of the bagpipe's drone in the *Seasons*; and any number of other instances. Particularly stimulating in Josquin are those places where only the implications of the text are suggested in the music: the resort to familiar style to emphasize a phrase of deep religious significance such as "tu redemisti nos"; or, in the "Ave Maria," where, to mark the contrast between the Virgin and the lowly suppliant, a soaring passage on "Mater Dei" is followed by a simple chordal phrase with the soprano descending at the words "memento mei."

A striking example also occurs in the motet "Ave Christe" where at the words "spes infirmorum" the static and repetitive substance of the music is depressingly suggestive of the invalid immobilized in his wheel chair. By his genius for transferring to music what has been called "the inner nerve of the text," Josquin, more than any other composer, opened the door to expressiveness in our modern sense, and all perceptive joiners of words and music since his day have capitalized on his achievement. One has only to recall Byrd's "Justorum Animae," Gombert's "Super Flumina Babylonis," Morales' "Emendemus in melius," Gesualdo's "Io pur respiro," Morley's "Fire, Fire, My Heart," or Vaughan Williams' "O Vos Omnes," to trace a direct line of descent from Josquin. Works like these display the extent to which an imaginative treatment of words may result in music of great expressiveness, and it is more than a coincidence that all the pieces I have named are in unaccompanied style.

Ideal as is the *a cappella* style, it nonetheless has its limitations. Any attempt to extend an unaccompanied work to major proportions

is beset by three obstacles: first, the fallibility of the human voice which, if overtried, will eventually weary and depart from the path of tonal rectitude; second, the inescapably monochrome character of voices however skillfully combined; and third, the absence from choral writing of those resources which are the exclusive property of the instrumental ensemble. Among these difficulties none is more persistent than singleness of color, and choral music bears constant witness to the composer's artfulness in attempting to alleviate this condition. "The Seal-woman's Croon" by Granville Bantock represents a particularly ingenious effort in this direction. In this piece, which is wordless except for the solo part, the composer has subdivided his chorus into several groups approximating the orchestral families such as woodwind and strings, sometimes even imitating the technique of those instruments. However, a hearing of even so short a piece as this one demonstrates how brief is the novelty offered by such a procedure.

But what may be said of unaccompanied vocal music that employs no text? Plato, who believed that music without words represented a thoroughly low-caste form of art, would certainly have disapproved of it, and Zarlino, in his definition of music, ignores it altogether. "Music," he says, "is a compound of words, harmony and rhythm,"<sup>2</sup> and this is confirmed by his seventh rule which states that "with any note whatever that is put for the beginning of the music, or after any pause whatever, the utterance of a syllable is absolutely necessary."<sup>3</sup>

Textless vocal music has its freedoms, to be sure, but its rewards may be briefly listed. As in the case of abstract instrumental writing, the composer of wordless music is at liberty to exploit his own ideas without reference to any secondhand source, and he has at his disposal the resource of vocal color just for its own sake. The singer, too, is relieved of the burden of enunciation and may concentrate, as so many singers love to do, on the beauty of the sounds he makes. But textless vocal music is disembodied music without essential mean-

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<sup>2</sup> See the translation from Gioseffo Zarlino's *Tutte le Opere* (Vienna: 1589) by H. E. Wooldridge in his article "The Treatment of Words in Polyphonic Music," *Musical Antiquary* (January, 1910), p. 89.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

ing and if long continued is generally wisely supported by a highly varied orchestral accompaniment, as is the case with Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloë* and with Vaughan Williams' *Flos Campi*.

In these days there is little to commend the writing of an instrumental background that does little more than double the singers' notes. Such a device is not an accompaniment, it is insurance taken out where none should be necessary. The only valid reason, it seems to me, for uniting instruments with voices is to furnish where desirable those features which voices cannot supply: variety of color, dynamic extremes, wide range, percussive effects, agility in execution, and dramatic strokes; any and all of them to be used not as purely musical adjuncts but as reinforcements of the text. Instrumental preludes, postludes, and interludes, and especially the longer instrumental commentary are strong unifying elements. In the writing of these Wagner was particularly gifted, for often in the purely instrumental sections of his music dramas we feel that although no text is there, words lie just beyond our hearing.

Do the elaborate instrumental overlays furnished for their Masses by Haydn, Mozart, Liszt, and Rossini emphasize the significance of the words "sanctus" or "incarnatus" more strongly than do the purely choral settings of these same words by Byrd, Palestrina, or Lassus? It would not seem so. The Mass accompaniments of Haydn, for example, add an exterior musical interest that often stands in remote relationship to the text, and if we did not have Haydn's word for it we could feel that he dealt rather cavalierly with holy words like these. If Palestrina seems to us to be nearer the truth than Haydn, it may be because in a *cappella* style there is only the word and its immediate conveyance, the voice. Haydn, on the other hand, was capable of diluting the impact of the holy word by interposing between it and the listener a deal of musical beguilement, and not the least potent of his weapons was the orchestra.

Before taking up the more detailed aspects of the composer's treatment of words and voices I should like to touch on the matter of form in vocal music. The problem of form does not enter with anything like the same degree into the composition of a piece of

abstract music as it does in the writing of a vocal composition. In a symphony or string quartet, the composer's ideas may be counted on to follow one another in a natural sequence, and this logical continuity leads normally to structural coherence; the primary ideas with which the vocal composer must deal are presented in the text and they will often be numerous, of contrasting natures, and will occur in close order. The words may maintain one idea throughout, in which case the music may preserve uninterruptedly a single mood; but when there are several ideas involving emotional changes and varied situations, the composer must faithfully incorporate these by suggestion in his music. In the end, his piece must have form of some kind and this is as true of the brief *cappella* composition as of the more extended one with accompaniment. A complete agreement between text and music is of course assumed, but this, essential as it is, may simply result in a formless patchwork.

The true test of formal completeness in any vocal piece, long or short, consists in an examination of the music apart from the words. If, from the first note to the last, the music seems to have a destiny of its own, it will, from the point of view of structure, be satisfying. This means more than the setting of music *to* words, it is the setting of music *and* words, and one suspects that for the really vocally minded composer the form grows as naturally out of the music as the music develops from the words. Any form depends for its coherence on a certain amount of repetition. Brahms, for example, could invest even a long vocal work with a feeling of unity by returning, at the end, to material borrowed from the beginning, and the apotheosis of this principle is perhaps *Tristan and Isolde* in which Wagner, at the close, finally resolves the dissonance with which the prelude ends.

The larger categorical forms are generally unsuited to vocal music because the text with its variety of moods and ideas would make any strictness of form inappropriate. As might be supposed, however, Mendelssohn was quick to apply classical form to his choruses. In "He Watching Over Israel" from *Elijah* he has cast the movement in clear sonata form and justifies the choice, usually

so inapt for vocal music, by writing a chorus which not only produces a sense of formal completeness that is quite unstrained but which also represents the ideal association between text and music, in that the latter exists only as an expositor of the words.

In the strophic setting the problem of form is immensely simplified, but the composer who chooses it must be sure, first, that the emotion which characterizes the text remains at a fairly steady level and then that his music is so persuasive that it will, in the case of a long poem, stand repetition without risk of monotony. Tovey thought well of the strophic setting for he writes: "No modern musical criterion is shallower than that which regards as lazy and primitive the setting of different stanzas of a poem to the same melody. Brahms regarded such strophic melody as a far higher achievement than *durchcomponirtes* declamation."<sup>4</sup>

There are, however, a goodly number of strophic settings which seem to me to deal unjustly with the text. Let us take Goethe's poem "Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt," familiar to us as "None but the lonely heart," and try to discover how well the chosen form adapts itself to the meaning and emotion expressed in the words as they are interpreted by four composers. Although the basic idea of the poem remains unchanged, there is a crescendo of feeling, and even if there were not, loneliness is something that is not likely to remain static; it grows by what it feeds on; so that any composer who had ever experienced loneliness might be counted on to increase the musical tension.

The first two settings I have in mind are Zelter's and Beethoven's. Both are strophic arrangements, and each composer has retained his original music throughout; both settings are quite objective; one lives on an unchanging plane of loneliness. Beethoven, to be sure, injects a faint note of optimism by casting his music in triple meter, giving it somewhat the effect of a minuet in a mild state of depression. With respect to Schubert, however, there is an evident and a salutary emotional tightening after the first statement.

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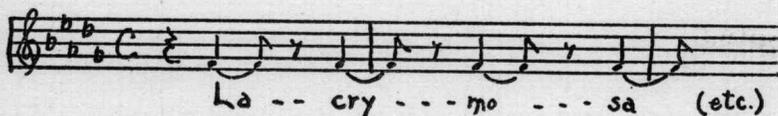
<sup>4</sup> Donald F. Tovey, *The Main Stream of Music and Other Essays, Collected, with an Introduction, by Hubert Foss* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 212.

But it remained for Tschaiikowsky to provide what is, in terms of music, practically a clinical survey of loneliness at successive stages of its development. No objective dissertation, this; the composer seizes the lapels of your coat, fixes you with his eye, and in the last measure persuades you that there is only one thoroughly lonely heart in the world, and that is his.

Form in vocal music, then, does not mean a scheme with clear divisions which may be graphically reproduced, though that is sometimes the case. The text will live in the music, but the text itself will play only a minor role in determining the form. It is the province of the music to give, quite by itself, an impression of orderliness and logic.

Up to this point I have been speaking of some of the broader issues which affect the union of words and music, and I have tried to emphasize the fact that I regard the partners primarily as two quite separate entities which the composer's magic may transform into one. Each is, nonetheless, absolute, and regardless of the standing of either as literature or as music, there is a limit to the liberties which may properly be taken with them. Both, as I have said before, will occasionally be called on to make concessions; sacrifices which are demanded by the general artistic interest. It is no light matter to distort either words or music out of its true nature, and the composer who does so should have good reason for his action. We forgive him, provided—and only provided—that in the end he produces a work of art. He has caused both words and music to suffer in their pride, but words have been the more abused.

Let us take an obvious case first: the literal dismemberment of a word, the wrenching of it apart syllable by syllable. In Verdi you find this:



and in Pergolesi, for the word “complaceam,” this:



The Italians are noted for such ruthless behavior, but composers of other nations, who fell under the Italian influence, were also addicted to this device. In Graun’s *Der Tod Jesu*, for instance, you have:



As one might suppose, parody is not far behind, and the Lord Chancellor in *Iolanthe* very neatly supplies it with:

I took her for the proprietor  
Of a la—dies’ se—mi—na—ry!

Another kind of word distortion consists in the spreading of a multiplicity of notes over a single vowel. In the St. Martial style of the twelfth century one finds as many as thirty or forty notes of florid writing to a single syllable. But what may be viewed as evidence of the presence of growing pains in the music of the Middle Ages must have adult meaning if it is to be valued in fully developed art music. In the Renaissance, Roman Catholic composers from Dufay on cultivated the melismatic style in varying degree in their church music, but they were generally unwilling to lessen the impact of secular words by dwelling too long on them. Most aspects of worldly love, for example, do not seem hospitable to decorative musical treatment. A declaration of passion if swathed in vocal ornamentation may turn out to be musically impressive, but it certainly represents most inefficient love-making.

The instinct to beautify by decoration, however, has doubtless always existed in mankind, and it was bound eventually to be adopted by all types of music. Italian composers, in particular, turned their gift for melody writing in the direction of the *bel canto* aria, whose lyric properties depended materially on the resources of sheer vocalization, and to the virtuoso aria, in which words were callously slaughtered to make a vocal holiday. The text is generally devoid of any rational association with the music and lies submerged beneath a relentless tide of coloratura. A single instance is the passage in Rossini's *Semiramis* where the composer separates the words "doit" and "être," whose sense obviously depends on their connected delivery, by forty-one notes of melodic tracery. But the voice, like the violin, is most itself in moments of lyric expression, and in *bel canto* the singer can find what a singer always covets, the opportunity to give his voice its head free of the checkrein of enunciation. The humble choral singer, too, gratefully experiences the same sense of spaciousness and relaxation as with full voice and concerned with only a single vowel he delivers some resounding Handelian roulade.

The exact reverse of the process of word extension is the overlapping or telescoping of phrases, a practice common in contrapuntal choral writing. A few words may have to be omitted from a part in order to preserve the sense of the text in all the voices simultaneously; or a part may withdraw briefly from the texture. When this latter situation arises it must be met by the construction of a terminal phrase which in melody, rhythm, and words will be natural, complete, and seemingly uncontrived. Here, if ever, the rights of words are paramount and should be fully respected. In its persistent disregard of these rights I know of no composition to compare with Lassus' setting of the psalm "By the Waters of Babylon," cast in the form of an old-fashioned spelling lesson: S. U. su P. E. R. per super F. L. U. flu per flu su—per flu, etc.

Whatever idea lay behind this curious piece—and it has provoked much speculation—the result is certainly not one to invite a serious attitude toward a text that is so poignant. Crowding a contrapuntal page with words or syllables many times repeated results,

as in this case, in a feverish, half-intelligible chattering, out of which the sense of the text is grasped with difficulty.

But if the meaning is severely taxed under these circumstances it suffers even more when several texts are used at the same time, as in the thirteenth-century motet. When applied to more fully developed music the jungle of words becomes impenetrable, and good sense has long since done away with this practice. One of the most interesting throwbacks to polytextual use is Haydn's employment not of four different texts, but of four sections of the same text sung simultaneously in the Credo of his *Missa Brevis*. This results in gratifying brevity on the one hand, and in verbal chaos on the other.

Separation, extension, and telescoping are usages whose influence may be said to be mainly local. They do not necessarily affect the setting of an entire text as rhyme and meter do. Rhyme is not an integral part of poetry; it is a device calculated to enhance the effect of poetry, and the virtues of rhyming are much more likely to appeal to the poet than to the musician who sets his verses. It would be going too far to say that rhyming puts the composer at a disadvantage, yet it is quite likely that the impressiveness and the sense of naturalness which obtain in the great musical settings of prose result in some measure from the absence of rhyme. Rhyme adds nothing to the ideas set forth in the words and it often shackles the composer severely in the matter of rhythm.

The sixteenth-century composer (and poet) Thomas Campion decried what he termed "the vulgar and unartificial custom of riming"<sup>5</sup> in English poetry, and long after his day another English poet, Robert Bridges, expressed his opinion on this matter as follows: "Rime has had a long reign, and still flourishes, and it is in English one of the chief metrical factors. Like a low-born upstart it has even sought to establish its kinship with the ancient family of rhythm by incorporating the aristocratic *h* and *y* into its name. As it distinguishes verses that have no other distinction, its disposition

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Warlock, *The English Ayre* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), p. 100.

determines stanza forms, &c.; and for this reason it usurps a prominence for which it is ill-suited.”<sup>6</sup>

Bridges' reference to rhyme as one of the chief metrical factors in English may be illustrated by these lines from Christopher Marlowe:

Come live with me and be my love,  
And we will all the pleasures prove  
That valleys, groves, hills, and fields,  
Woods, or steepy mountain yields.<sup>7</sup>

The persistent meter of this poetry if pursued over a reasonably long period—and especially in a homorhythmic setting—is likely to result in a monotony which strongly belies the exciting variety promised by the lover in Marlowe's lines. The first severe discipline imposed on words by meter in music was the intractably ternary system of the thirteenth century, known as modal rhythm; a scheme that is so artificial, so rigid, and so insensitive to correct text accentuation that its interpretation has been persistently questioned by modern scholars. If transcriptions of this music into our notation truthfully represent the intentions of medieval musicians, then it must be said that at no other point in music history have such drastic sacrifices been demanded of words.

With the passing of modal rhythm the problem became one of mensuration. Each line was, in a sense, a solo voice, having notes of a length appropriate to the natural accentual flow of the text, and, what is more important, a flow that was undisturbed by the presence of bar lines. In the Renaissance, rhymed verse set with evenly spaced pulses was often felt to be so categorical in its effect that a reaction against it was inevitable, and this was manifested in the work of the *Académie de Poésie et de Musique* founded in 1570. *Musique mesurée à l'antique* rejected the narrower concept of meter in favor of scansion in long and short feet according to the classical idea, and the familiar patterns were added to by ingenious combina-

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Bridges, "A Letter to a Musician on English Prosody," *Musical Antiquary* (October, 1909), p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Marlowe, "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love."

tions resulting in highly original rhythms. The composer Le Jeune was a leader in this movement, and after his death there appeared in the publication *Le Printemps* the statement that "the wonderful effects produced by ancient music, as described in the fables of Orpheus and Amphion, had been lost by the modern masters of harmony," adding that Le Jeune was "the first to see that the absence of rhythm accounted for this loss; that he had unearthed this poor rhythm, and by uniting it to harmony, had given the soul to the body."<sup>8</sup>

Composition according to the principles of *musique mesurée à l'antique* is characterized by great rhythmic flexibility and vitality, and it is easy to lament the brevity of a period which brought forth such a wealth of delightful pieces in which words and music unite so naturally. The seventeenth century, however, was primarily an instrumental age, and instrumental music was subject to rhythms in which barring had its place. In spite of the obstacle to correct accentuation which regular barring presents, some composers, by the exercise of conscientious care in adjusting their music to the words, have succeeded in overcoming what has been called the "tyranny of the bar line." It is this, we may suppose, that Milton had in mind in his sonnet in praise of Henry Lawes when he spoke of that composer's ability to "span words and music with just note and accent."

Rossini—a composer whom I still love in spite of his offenses against words—was no relative of Henry Lawes. In his "Stabat Mater" he gives to each of the three words "ut te cum" four deliberate quarter notes; a manifest inequity inasmuch as two of these words are much less important than the third. Care in the avoidance of ineptitudes like this contributes not a little to the realization of a kind of music which William Byrd once described as "framed to the life of the words."

Modern composers and editors have tried many avenues of escape from the tyranny of the bar line, but only Bernard van Dieren, I

<sup>8</sup> See the article on Le Jeune in *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 5, 1906 ed.

think, has gone so far as to dispense with all bar lines in his music. Sometimes employed as a more workable substitute is the polymetric system of scoring which calls for a variety of meters in each voice. How comparatively recent is this usage may be shown by a brief quotation belonging to the early years of this century: "No musical composer would think of writing a piece of music with one or two bars in 3/8 time, the next in 4/4 time, and another in 12/8, and so on, because this would result in musical chaos."<sup>9</sup> The polymetric system is the only one which insures accentual agreement between words and music under all circumstances, and it is a heartening witness to our respect for the rights of words.

The sin committed against the text by misaccentuation is greatly surpassed in both extent and degree by text repetition, the most persistent of all the destroyers of textual integrity. The repeating of words and phrases is a long established practice in vocal music, and it may be pointed out that in a vast majority of cases initiative springs not from the needs of the text but from those of music; words are repeated simply as an excuse for spinning out the musical substance. Extensive text repetition is usually tolerable only when it is accompanied by constantly changing music which in variety and significance fully compensates for the monotony induced by hearing the same words reiterated again and again.

To this dictum folksong and other popular types are exceptions, for in them there may be not only text repetition but musical repetition as well, the reiterated words or syllables invariably set to the same music. Fa-la-la, hey-nony-no, lanky-down-dilly—these make no pretense at meaning but they are fun to sing and are an irresistible provocation to go on singing. Often, to be sure, the words do make sense, as in the cumulative or house-that-Jack-built type of folksong in which the text of each verse is reviewed a number of times, each time with a new feature added. Thus, in the "Twelve Days of Christmas" the growing list of the lover's benefactions is recapitulated in reverse in each stanza until with the twelfth appearance of

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<sup>9</sup> J. P. Dabney, *The Musical Basis of Verse* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1901), p. 53.

the partridge in his pear tree there has been enough music, presumably, and the gentleman has run out of money.

In the "Twelve Days of Christmas" the words are, at least, clearly heard, but in forms like the round and the catch the sense of the text is quickly lost in the complexities of imitation. Particularly shameless is the catch in which the words may be so ingeniously manipulated as to distort them into something that would make any decorous noun or verb blush in deepest embarrassment. The danger of monotony when a phrase is several times set to identical music is especially great in fugal writing where with each recurrence of the subject we are likely to hear the same bit of text, with the result that the impact of the words is progressively weakened. This is not serious if the words are, for example, "Jehovah's praise forever shall endure," but the continued recurrence of a phrase such as "Our children's children shall rehearse thy deeds in never-dying verse" eventually fills us with a positive loathing for the whole idea of filial devotion.

Now almost all the practices of which I have been speaking, although they may be justified under certain circumstances, do, notwithstanding, conflict with the rights of words, and many writers have protested the injustice done not only to words but to common sense as well by a treatment that reduces the text to a position of marked inferiority. Yet when we think of the harmonic part song or the pedestrian hymn we may justifiably ask ourselves whether some playing fast and loose with the text is not, after all, commendable. In some cases, certainly, this tampering does minister to artistic completeness. Word extension, for example, is thoroughly convincing when the resulting musical elaboration seems to grow naturally out of the text rather than to be merely superimposed on it. Mozart was a great master of this detail. In somewhat the same way in which Bach, in his instrumental music, could write a decorative passage that is not abstract ornamentation but the apparently inevitable consequence of the long-held note which just precedes it, so Mozart could overlay a single word with a vocal luxuriance that is the word itself become music. The Benedictus from the C minor

Mass and the *terzettino* "Soave sia il vento" from *Così Fan Tutti* are first-rate examples of this.

In vocal style it is the function of music to enhance the significance of words, and this is practically always accomplished without loss to music itself; but on occasion music will step out of character. Never, probably, is music at so great a disadvantage or the parity between words and their accompaniment more drastically upset than in the field of humorous vocal literature. Here, if ever, words are quite enough; their purpose is to amuse, perhaps even to cause laughter, and in this distracted world one is tempted not to decry their presence too forcefully. But music, when allied to comic words, generally loses its self-respect. Everyone will laugh at the text but recognition of the music will be confined to an awareness of its appropriate behavior; separated from the text it will be in most cases of no artistic importance whatever. Such a statement applies, of course, only to music set to words which are comical rather than humorous in any subtle way; poems which ask the singer to imitate the more provocative sounds of nature; the barnyard repertory, the too realistic drinking song, the verse about the brass band. Included, as well, are such poems as parody advertisements of patent medicines and all other writings that appeal to one's sense of humor in its most childlike phase.

There are, naturally, stages which separate the better from the worse. Not all compositions which demand outright imitation in the music are without claim to recognition. Take, for example, those pieces which concern themselves with the cuckoo, a bird which bobs in and out of music literature with the regularity of his mechanical counterpart lurking behind the little doors of his clock, and who can assume enough dignity even to warrant his incorporation into the cantus of a Mass. Such a bird, surely, cannot be shrugged off as no more than the stuff of humor. But in many cases it is his music which is the really amusing feature. At best, any piece of humorous vocal music is aesthetically suspect. It may, on occasions, have its place; but if it is intended to be outright funny its music is bound to be no more than a servile

companion to the words, and this is demeaning to music as an art. Fancy is not to be confused with humor. It may be said that one happy function of music is to make us smile occasionally, but I doubt whether it can ever make us laugh without sacrificing its true nature.

The composer alone is to be blamed for any injustice done to music by his fitting to it words of a humorous character. There are, however, circumstances under which he must be viewed as the plain victim of a lack of taste and even of decency exhibited by others who arbitrarily attach words to music which the composer did not intend to be vocal. Regardless of whether a melody is susceptible of being set to words, it is fair to assume that had the composer wished to accompany it with text he would so have ordered. But this is an opportunity not to be lost by the avid educator who hopes, by the addition of words, to fix an instrumental melody in the memory of youthful listeners. In the preface of a recent volume of these atrocities a noted conductor declares that once the music has been fixed in memory the "easy little jingles" will be forgotten. Unfortunately and even tragically, it is not the melody but the silly patter that invariably comes to mind. This is unavoidable because words mean something—though in these cases little enough, God knows—whereas instrumental music is only beauty without a convenient handle.

It is a melancholy experience to glance around a concert hall during the performance of a certain familiar orchestral work and to see numbers of persons soundlessly and resentfully moving their lips to that lethal bit of doggerel, "This is the symphony that Schubert wrote and never finished." The tendency, as in church, is to hear music and text as one, to invest music with the too easily understood meanings of words, and in the case of these so-called educational offerings to reduce the music to the sorry level of the text. Great music needs no crutch at any time. To debase the classics into commonness and cheapness by wedding them to literary trivia is a sin against art; and to poison at its source the natural stream of musical enjoyment by the use of these grotesque mon-

strosities is, among the many destructive obliquities of so-called music education, undoubtedly the most unforgivable.

If I am wrong about this, if the jingle method is really valid, then it immediately suggests the adoption of the device in reverse. Sunday schools should, perhaps, teach great moral precepts by means of jazzy reminders: "Blessed are the pure in heart" or "Thou shalt not steal" if presented in this way would never be forgotten once the music had evaporated, and a sterling contribution to the probity of future generations might thus be made.

Considering the limitations which beset the vocal, and particularly the choral, composer, how often must he envy the relative freedom of his instrumental colleague. The ideas with which the latter is concerned are entirely his own, he has at his disposal resources much more extensive, and he is not charged with the care of that varied wealth of detail, that prodigious amount of calculation, that falls on the writer of vocal and especially of choral music. The advantages of this freedom are, I think, generally recognized and they have occasionally been pointed out.

Thomas Morley expressed his respect for instrumental music when, in speaking of the composition of fantasies, he wrote: "In this may more art be showne than in any other musicke, because the composer is tied to nothing but that he may adde, diminish, and alter at his pleasure."<sup>10</sup> Michael Praetorius was of the same mind: "A capriccio or extemporized Fantasia results when one sets about elaborating a Fuga according to his own pleasure and fancy, yet does not linger on it for long but soon lights on another Fuga which may come into his mind. For just as in a regular Fuga no text may be underlaid, so here also one is not bound to words, may make much or little, may digress, add, subtract, turn and twist as he will."<sup>11</sup> And Christopher Simpson, referring to fancies for viols, mentions the presence

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Morley, *A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke* [Imprinted at London by Humfrey Lownes, dwelling on Bredstreet hill at the signe of the Star], 1608, p. 181.

<sup>11</sup> M. Praetorius, *Syntagma Musicum* (Wolfenbüttel, 1619; ed. E. Bernouilli, Leipzig: C. F. Kahnt Nachf., 1916), III, 33. (The passage quoted in the text was translated by Lloyd Hibberd.)

of words as a distracting factor in composition: "In this sort of Musick the Composer (being not limited to words) doth imploy all his Art and Invention solely about the bringing in and carrying on of these Fuges, according to the Order and Method formerly shewed."<sup>12</sup>

But both Morley and Praetorius wrote quantities of music that is without hint of strained relations between the text and its setting. Of the three, Christopher Simpson seems to have been the most firmly convinced of the superiority of instrumental writing, for as far as I know he entered the field of vocal composition only once, and that briefly, to compose a single catch.

Words, then, supply a rational basis, a vehicle for voices, and a rhythmic underlay. Music in its turn capitalizes on these and adds its own particular grace, carrying the emotional and imaginative content of the text to a height to which words, by themselves, cannot attain. It may be that not an overwhelming number of these alliances were contracted in heaven, but, on the other hand, there are, surely, very few cases which could make us wish that words and music had never met.

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<sup>12</sup> Christopher Simpson, *A Compendium of Practical Musick* (London: Printed by William Godbid for Henry Brome in Little Britain, 1667), pp. 141, 142.



