

In the making

Stages of Rehearsing Lieder

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ABSTRACT

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In the making, Stages of Rehearsing Lieder

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The purpose of this study was to gather information on rehearsing Lieder, present some of the most essential aspects of it and discover how to make rehearsing more effective. In this project, I examined my rehearsals with my singer and in order to view the rehearsing process from outside as an objective viewer, the rehearsals were videotaped. This thesis is written about the central issues concerning the rehearsing process and playing Lieder in general.

This project showed that rehearsing Lieder is a demanding process for both the singer and the pianist. Lieder are chamber music and therefore playing them well demands that both the singer and the pianist have the qualities of a good chamber musician. Lieder are all about poetry and thereby it is essential that both the singer and the pianist have the same level of understanding the poetry. The issues emerged in the rehearsing process were the importance of planning, goal setting, preparation, focusing, strengthening the musical connection between the singer and the pianist as well as experimenting.

Every rehearsing process is individual and different depending on the repertoire, musicians and their experience and level of professionalism. In addition to these issues represented in this project there are numerous other things to consider when improving rehearsing. However, the main benefit from this project was that categorizing the different stages and aspects of rehearsing made me more conscious about the rehearsing process as a whole. I believe that in future I can benefit from the knowledge gained from this project.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Playing Lieder with singers has been a part of my studies for the last 6 years. Already from the beginning I found the combination of music and poetry fascinating, and having a text behind the tones has inspired me a lot as a pianist. However, I have experienced that the rehearsing processes are often not as effective as they could be, nor am I aware of all the different aspects of rehearsing. Therefore, my goal with this project is to investigate the process of rehearsing Lieder with a singer mainly from a pianist's perspective, to present some of the most essential aspects of it and to discover how to make rehearsing more effective.

As one of the goals of this project is to develop myself as a lied pianist, I chose to examine my own rehearsals with my singer. In order to view the process from outside as an objective viewer, I decided to videotape some of the rehearsals. After having each rehearsal, I looked at the recording and wrote down my observations. In addition, I showed the tapes for teacher and the singer and wrote down their remarks also. As the repertoire for this project I use a few songs from Schubert's *Winterreise* Op.89. These songs are "*Gute Nacht*", "*Gefrorne Tränen*" and "*Der Lindenbaum*".

Based on all the observations, I will write about the central issues concerning the rehearsing process and playing Lieder in general. Lieder are chamber music, and thereby the pianist and the singer are equals in a lied duo and they have equally big roles in interpreting the music and the text. As in other ensembles, both members of a lied duo must have the qualities of a chamber musician – they must be able to listen to each other in addition to themselves, react to impulses and be sensitive among many other qualities. When discussing the rehearsing process, the emphasis is on planning and goal setting, preparing, focusing on the musical communication and thereby strengthening the musical connection and experimenting.

In addition to having the recordings as a source of information and inspiration, I use four different kind of sources. A big inspiration for me is a book called "*The Unashamed Accompanist*" by Gerald Moore, one of the greatest lied pianists. Based on his wide experience as an accompanist, he writes about preparation, practicing and rehearsing among other important issues. Furthermore, I use a Finnish violinist Viola Räisänen's Master's Thesis about a string quartet's rehearsing as well as a Finnish pianist Annika Mikkola's Bachelor's thesis called "*Challenges of Lied Pianist*" as sources

of information. On the Sibelius Academy's website "*From Potential to Performance*", I found a lot of information on practical strategies for musicians, such as tips for planning, goal setting and focusing.

2. CHAMBER MUSICIANSHIP AND LIEDER

Schubert was a composer who made the genre of Lied popular at his time by composing over 600 Lieder for voice and piano. He expanded the potential of the genre and the equality of the singer and the pianist in his Lieder is unquestionable. They are equal interpreters of a poem that a composer has set into the music. Thereby Lied gained a strong chamber music character, and the piano part became as strong an interpreter of the text as the voice. Along the voice, the piano part expresses the texts' hidden ideas and feelings that do not appear in the vocal line. These qualities make a difference between Lieder and other piano accompanied songs. (Mikkola, 2012)

A Finnish violinist Viola Räisänen wrote her Master's thesis about a string quartet's rehearsing, and she writes that playing chamber music demands a lot from the musician, sometimes even more than solo playing. In addition to the technical and interpretational aspects, a chamber musician must take care of all the things happening around him, be sensitive, live in the moment and always be ready to react. She also mentions that it cannot be taken for granted that any professional musician is good at playing with others. Being a good chamber musician demands a special talent, knowledge, the ability to listen to others and react to impulses. A good chamber musician is diplomatic, has good organizational skills and is motivated to work with others. In a string quartet, everything from forming the sound to interpreting a piece of music logically is made together. That demands verbal communication and the ability to talk about abstract musical thoughts which can be very challenging and lead to misunderstandings. A good chamber musician can both give and receive criticism. Patience, understanding and empathy are good qualities for a chamber musician. (Räisänen 2011, 7-8)

Räisänen explains well how multifaceted knowledge, training and aptitude chamber musicianship demands. (Räisänen 2011, 7-8) What she said also applies to playing Lieder – both the singer and the pianist must have the qualities of a chamber musician. In addition, they must share the same understanding of the music and the text in order to express them with their own instruments so that it all becomes a fusion of music and poetry. Like in a string quartet, one of the challenges in playing Lieder is that despite the difference between the instruments, the singer and the pianist must find a mutual tone while still being individuals and letting their own personality to be heard through the music.

3. LIEDER ARE BASED ON POETRY

Gerald Moore (1969), one of the greatest accompanists of all time, underlines the importance of understanding the text when playing Lieder.

“The first thing an accompanist should study when he has to play a new song is the words. It is stupid to pretend to play a song with any understanding if he does not know what it is all about. - - The accompaniment to every good song paints a picture or evokes a mood which is inspired by the words. The composer did not write the vocal line first and then fill in the piano part afterwards; they were both born in his brain at the same time. Therefore the accompanist and the singer, the one no less than the other, owe all to the words and depend on the words to guide them.” (Moore 1969, 19-20)

He emphasizes that both the singer and the pianist must have the same level of understanding the text. I have encountered this issue many times during my studies and I remember that when I first started to play with singers, I did not quite understand how important it was to understand the texts. The more Lieder I have played, the better I have understood the connection between the text and the music – they are inseparable. Knowing the text is crucial for understanding the music.

On the other hand, Ilkka Paananen, a Finnish Lied pianist, has said in an interview that even though the poems are the basis of the songs, he sometimes likes to play with the idea of not having a text at all and to think, the song as an instrumental piece. That way he hears the composer’s voice better, and the composer’s comments sometimes turn out to be rather surprising. A happy text is not always colored with happy chords. He compares this approach to translating the poems; they are similarly processed without the music, and he suggests applying the same method on the piano part. (Mikkola 2012, 17)

Schubert’s *Winterreise* (Winter Journey) Op. 89 is a cycle of 24 songs for voice and piano set to poems by Wilhelm Müllerin. It was composed in two parts, the first in February 1827 and the second in October 1827. *Winterreise* is a monodrama from the point of view of a wandering protagonist. The cycle begins with a love story coming to an end, but the plot of the cycle is somewhat ambiguous. Most of all, *Winterreise* is a story about the wanderer becoming abandoned. During the cycle, the

wanderer wanders through wintry landscapes with ice, snow, draught and storm. A cold winter represents the wanderer's own desperate soul and, as the cycle goes on, the desperation of the wanderer is descending into madness. The winter never turns into spring and the exhausting journey ends with an enigmatic song which hints towards a liberating death. (Talvinen matka yksinäisyyden maisemiin, 2016)

4. ON THE ESSENCE OF REHEARSING

In this section I will discuss the background information as well as the results of the analysis.

4.1 Background information

I started to play with singers around 6 years ago. Over these years, I have worked with several singers, with some for a longer period of time and with others only during one concert preparation and performance. Playing with each singer has taught me a lot, in one way or another. I have been lucky to get to play with singers with whom the collaboration has been extremely fertile. I feel that in those cases, we have somehow matched both personally and musically, which has been a huge advantage for further collaboration, Lied being such a sensitive music genre. These have been particularly delightful experiences for me and, thanks to them, I have grown fond of playing Lieder. I find playing Lieder one of the most interesting things as a pianist.

For this project, I was lucky to find a singer, Mikkel, who was very pleasant and productive to work with. We got socially along very well already from the beginning, which was a good starting point for our co-operation as a lied duo. I suppose that the experience we both have on playing and singing Lieder also had a positive impact on our co-operation. We both had quite a lot of knowledge about Lied as a music genre and we therefore had relatively good conditions for establishing a lied duo.

Lately, one of the main interests for me in my studies within solo piano has been enhancing the effectiveness of my practice. Having a lot of music to prepare at the same time has taught me to routinize my own practice. On the other hand, being busy has forced me to develop ways for faster learning. Inspired by being able to develop my own practice, I wanted to have a closer look at a rehearsing process with a singer as a pianist. I have experienced that rehearsals are not always as effective as they could be and that we lack tools for solving the problems that emerged. With this project, I wanted to inspect the different aspects of rehearsing, and to discover how to make rehearsing more effective.

In this project, I wanted to work on Lieder that are central repertoire and challenge both the singer and the pianist. Thereby I decided to work on a few songs from Schubert's *Winterreise*. Together

with Mikkel we decided to work on songs “*Gute Nacht*” (“Good night”), “*Gefrorne Tränen*” (“Frozen tears”) and “*Der Lindenbaum*” (“The linden tree”).

We had around 7 rehearsals within three months, and the rehearsals were filmed. After having each rehearsal, I watched the tape and wrote down my observations. I tried to look at the tapes from as many perspectives as possible and simply asked myself the question: “What do I see?” I also showed the tapes to my teacher and the singer as well as wrote down their observations. Based on all these remarks, I classified different aspects of rehearsing Lieder and tried to discover how to develop the process of learning and make rehearsing more effective. It is clear that the following is written from a pianist’s and a student’s perspective.

4.2 Scheduling and goal setting

Here I will discuss the most important aspects of scheduling and goal setting.

4.2.1 Planning the rehearsals

The importance of planning emerged clearly in our rehearsing process. We had an overview of all the songs that were to be rehearsed, we always decided on the program for the next rehearsal and we knew from the beginning when the concert, our deadline, was going to be. Therefore, we knew how much time we had for the whole process, but we still lacked a proper long-term plan. We only decided the date and time for the next rehearsal, but we did not schedule them further ahead, as we should have. Finding time for each rehearsal was a bit difficult, which made the process more stressful. That might also explain why we eventually did not rehearse very often.

In the future rehearsing processes I want to make sure that there is a long-term schedule for the rehearsals in order to reduce the stress as well as ensure that everyone is available when needed. Having a schedule further ahead would make people more committed to the project. It could perhaps make rehearsing more effective. I think that when making a plan, the following questions should be answered: How much time is there to use in general? How many songs are there to learn? How often can we rehearse? How much time do we have for each rehearsal? What is the difficulty level of the songs?

Of course, everything cannot be planned beforehand, nor should it be. In the end, it is not possible to know in advance exactly how much time learning each song takes and how easy or difficult the songs are. Therefore, the plan must be flexible and there should be room for improvisation and changes.

Besides having a long-term plan, it would be good to have a sketch for each rehearsal, as in which songs to rehearse and how much time to spend on each, for example. A rather basic but still a good guideline for rehearsing is to play through a piece once and then start working on it in parts so that all the dissatisfying things get corrected. A rehearsal consisting only of playthroughs cannot be very effective, but playthroughs are still needed in order to form a picture of the whole. Playthroughs help to see a piece of music in a bigger picture, whereas working on smaller sections is vital for learning all the details in the music.

4.2.2 Goal setting

When a duo wants to make their rehearsing more effective and professional, goal setting is inevitable. A goal for a duo could be for example going to a competition or playing well in an exam, or just improving based on the last performance. A duo can set short- or long-term goals. A long-term goal could be an exam, a concert or a competition whereas a short-term goal could be made for each rehearsal. (From Potential to Performance)

The Sibelius Academy has collaborated with music lectures and performers from The Netherlands, Ireland and Australia who have, by sharing and discussing their knowledge about teaching and research work, created a webpage called "*From Potential to Performance*". They have written the following about goal setting mainly for solo playing, but it also applies for professional ensemble playing.

CARS: To improve performance, goals need to be

- *Challenging - Encourages improvement*
- *Attainable - Achievable given the conditions (Level, time...)*
- *Realistic - Based on prior performances*
- *Specific - Measurable*

(From Potential to Performance)

A well set goal fulfills all the aspects mentioned above. If the goal is not challenging enough, it is not motivating work on. On the other hand, if the goals are too ambitious and unattainable given the conditions, they are most likely not going to be reached. In addition, it is important to remember to put the goals into perspective based on the previous performances and be as specific as possible when setting a goal.

4.3 Preparing

I decided to write this chapter just from a pianist's perspective because I have personal experience only on that. Gerald Moore (1969) underlines the importance of preparation for a pianist. From a pianist's point of view, preparing a song throughout includes many aspects. He states that a pianist should study the songs very carefully before the first rehearsal with the singer. According to him, the first thing a pianist should study are the words since they have been the source of inspiration for the composer who has written the music. When it comes to actual piano playing, a pianist should take care of the following: tone quality, legato playing, tone quantity, composer's markings, rhythm, dexterity and the independence of eye and hand.

As Moore writes, tone quality and a pianist's ability to listen to himself are tightly connected. When a pianist has mastered the training of the ear and the touch, he can start experimenting with the tone colors, and become better at coloring his playing according to the words. When talking about legato playing, he underlines the vitality of skillful pedal use. By tone quantity he means that a pianist must have a standard of tone values and be aware of the difference between the pianissimo, the piano, the mezzo piano, the mezzo forte and the forte. Concerning composer's markings, Moore suggests that the pianist obeys implicitly the instruction on the music, especially if the work is by a great composer. He also emphasizes the importance of the pianist's sense of rhythm because the singer must be able to lean on it. The dexterity of a pianist is not an issue only in significantly difficult songs such as "*Erl King*", but also in songs that must sound carefree and easy can have great difficulties to overcome. About songs that do not seem technically difficult, he says "*the simpler the accompaniment, the more food of thought it will give to the sensitive pianist*". (Moore 1969)

According to Moore, after mastering all these things there is one thing to learn before the pianist is ready for the rehearsal. One must now forget the fingers and let the eyes dwell on the singer's line. It

would be the best for him to learn to sing it – that will show if the chosen tempo is correct, help with understanding the singer’s phrases and show where the singer is likely to breath. Hence practicing Lieder should be done as carefully as practicing solo pieces. A pianist must not underestimate the difficulty of them. Even if the score does not seem technically so demanding, the difficulty often lies somewhere else than in the technical part. (Moore, 1969)

Moore’s “check points” for practicing Lieder are very good; taking care of all the aspects will produce a fine result. However, there is not a correct answer for the question of how much practicing a pianist’s needs before the first rehearsal. It all depends on the situation, the pianist’s level of professionalism, experience and the repertoire. The more one does it, the faster the process gets.

4.4 Focus and musical connection

In the next chapters I will discuss the concept and importance of focus when playing with others, as well as feeling of connection between the pianist and the singer. I will also specify the pianist’s tasks when playing with singers.

4.4.1 Focus

We once had a quick 20 minutes’ rehearsal with the singer. In this rehearsal, we rehearsed “*Gefrorne Tränen*”. We played the song through twice, first at the beginning and then at the end of the rehearsal. There was a significant difference between them; the latter was much better than the first. I do not think that we just played and sung it better, but the musical connection between us got stronger. Having a better feeling of connection was due to a better focus and, in particular, the focus on the right issues.

“Focusing on something could be described as submerging oneself in what one is doing. This means that the outside world disappears from one’s conscious mind and the focus turns more and more towards the actual task.” (From Potential to Performance)

Depending on the situation, musicians need different types of focus. When playing with others, one must focus on being aware of what the others are doing in addition to listening to his own playing. Also, focus can be on a conscious level, which means focusing on actual playing, such as fingerings, or on musical communication. Focusing on a conscious level is needed when

practicing, whereas when performing, the focus should be on musical communication. A common problem among students is to start playing a piece without mental preparation – that is what also happened in our case. Not being mentally prepared before starting a piece causes a lower result than intended. (From Potential to Performance)

“Preparation focus means we deliberately activate a specific task focus, so we activate our neural networks necessary for our instrumental playing. In the moment, this takes time. According to practitioners it takes a few seconds. A good starting rule can be to prepare focus points on four elements: being aware of the concert hall or practice room around us, looking for body awareness, feeling the pulse of the music and mentally inner singing the music. In addition to this, any task focus can be added.” (From Potential to Performance)

Like described earlier, we had the tendency to start rehearsing just by playing through a song “neutral”, without proper mental preparation or further commenting before the playthrough. From the recordings, I could hear that the first playthroughs tended to be played and sung a little note-by-note and the feeling of connection between us was not particularly strong. We were not focusing on the music, nor were we present in the moment. In addition, we were possibly focusing on the conscious level instead of investing on the musical communication.

To improve the first playthroughs, we first decided to take 20 seconds to focus on the music that was going to be played. We used that time to focus on the text and the mood of the song, and as a pianist, I tried focusing on the singer’s phrasing as well as the dynamics of the song. After that playthrough, both the singer and I felt the difference compared to starting “neutral”. We were much more connected to each other; we could make music in the moment without having a tight plan. We were both focusing on the music instead of mere piano playing or singing the right notes and words. We were much more “zoomed in” already from the first playthrough.

4.4.2 The connection between singer and pianist

Focusing on the musical communication strengthens the feeling of connection in an ensemble. For me, it is a feeling of being able to make music together in the moment and adjust to changing circumstances quickly. It is a feeling of two individuals become a unit in which they interpret the

same story with their own instruments, supporting and commenting on each other but still having a consensus between each other all the time.

In addition to having focus on the musical communication, there are also other important issues to be considered when trying to strengthen the connection. Firstly, in order to feel connected while playing together, both the singer and the pianist must share the same level of understanding of the poem, its meaning and the music. Secondly, a strong tool for strengthening the feeling of connection is listening carefully to the other person as well as oneself. Building a strong feeling of connection between the parties requires practice, agreement on the musical ideas and trusting on each other.

Gerald Moore (1969) also says that “*Playing a song through once with the singer may tell him all he wants to know, but if this fails they will have to discuss it.*” As he says, the better and the stronger the musical interaction and the feeling of connection between the pianist and the singer is, the less need there is for solving problems by talking. It of course demands a high level of professionalism, but this may be a good goal to have in mind for students and newly formed duos who want to develop their rehearsing.

4.4.3 Pianist’s tasks

From a pianist’s point of view, there are some special issues to be focused on when playing with a singer. The results show that there are ways to improve rehearsing, and here, according to the analysis, I have created a list of aspects. Focusing on these issues is also a way to improve the feeling of connection.

1. Knowing the vocal line

Knowing the singer’s line is basically the starting point for everything. It would be ideal for the pianist to be able to sing it, because it is vital to know how the voice feels in the body in order to understand the singer. In some songs, the pianist’s goal can even be hearing the words in the piano part when playing it. A good example of a song where that is possible is “*Gute Nacht*” from *Winterreise*, where both members of the duo are playing on the same note value all the time.

Fremd bin ich einge - zo - gen, fremd zieh' ich wie - der aus. Der Mai war mir ge -
 Ich kann zu meiner Rei - sen nicht wäh - len mit der Zeit, muss selbst den Weg mir

(Schubert: Winterreise, nro 1. Gute Nacht)

2. Listening to the singer's phrasing, dynamics and overall balance

Listening to the singer's phrasing, dynamics and overall balance are probably the three most important issues for a pianist to focus on when playing with a singer. Gerald Moore (1969) writes that often the singer alters the length of his stride or quickens his pace. Therefore, it is not possible for the pianist to play metronomically. Instead he should play elastically, a little slower here and a little faster there. Also, the singer may not sing a certain phrase identically twice – the pianist needs to be able to adjust in the different ways of phrasing by listening to the singer. Same applies for the use of dynamical range.

3. Playing with the right dynamics and balance

When playing with a singer, it is good to have in mind that the order of importance of the components is 1) the vocal line, 2) the pianist's left and 3) the pianist's right hand. The base line coming from the piano is very important for the singer and for the balance, whereas the right hand in many cases is playing the same melody with the singer. Therefore, the right hand does not usually have such an important role in playing Lieder.

The pianist has a big responsibility in taking care of the balance between the piano part and the voice. The pianist must adjust his dynamical range to the singer's voice. In general, a soprano is very hard to cover whereas a bass singer can be easily drowned under the piano. Also, if the piano part is played too loud, there is a danger that the singer will feel pressed and therefore is not able to interpret the music freely. (Moore, 1969)

4. Being together with the singer's vowels

Focusing on playing together with the singer's vowels has helped me a lot with playing on time. Instead, if a pianist plays together with the singer's consonants, it sounds like he is ahead of the singer. Playing together with the vowel demands a lot of listening and of course knowing the text very well. Also, in order to be able to do this, the pianist has to know the piano part rather well to be able shift the focus from playing the right notes to the singer's line. The picture below shows how many consonants there can be.

The image shows a musical score for Schubert's 'Winterreise, nro 1. Gute Nacht'. It consists of two staves: a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line has the lyrics 'Schreib' im Vor-ü-ber-ge-hen au's Thor dir: gu-te Nacht, da-'. The piano part features a complex texture with many consonants.

(Schubert: Winterreise, nro 1. Gute Nacht)

5. Remembering that Lieder are chamber music

Lieder have a strong chamber music character, which separates them from other piano accompanied songs. In Lieder, the pianist is therefore playing a piano part, not only accompanying on the background. In Lieder, there is also a strong spiritual message which is equally expressed by both the singer and the pianist. (Mikkola, 2012) A very important role for the pianist is to paint the landscape for the singer in the overtures and interludes and throughout the song express the composer's comments hidden in the piano part. In addition, the pianist can get a lot of inspiration for his playing from the singer by trying to imitate it. Therefore, the pianist can make his playing richer and more colourful by using imagination.

4.5 Experimenting

One of the key words for effective rehearsing is experimenting, and another being aiming for big changes in different aspects of the music such as dynamics, articulation, tempo and rubato. Shaking things up a little can help in finding a good way to play together and making a fine interpretation.

After taking things to an extreme it is easy to take them back a little - it is like a pendulum swinging back and forth and finally finding rest in the middle.

In our rehearsals, we tended to be a bit too careful with staying “inside the frame” after having learnt the piece of music. We should have instead tried to “expand the frame” and play around with the music more. Therefore, we often changed things only a little bit, which did not really make a difference in the bigger picture. That is an issue we should work more with in the future since it is surely a way for faster learning, and besides, experimenting makes rehearsing much more fun and interesting. It is all about daring and being open for new ideas and suggestions.

In one of our accompaniment lessons with my teacher, we talked about experimenting from the pianist’s perspective. When playing Lieder, every note matters. The pianist can never just deliver the notes, no matter how simple the score looks. On the contrary, the pianist must always focus on playing with the sound and balance that suit and support the text. That way, the pianist can create moments of beauty together with the singer.

5. CONCLUSION

A performance is only a tip of an iceberg when thinking about all the preparation there is behind it. Every rehearsing process is individual and different depending on repertoire and musicians as well as their experience and level of professionalism. What they all still have in common is that the processes can be developed, evaluated and made more effective.

I am very happy that I did this project. Firstly, evaluating our rehearsing process and viewing the rehearsals from outside was already very eye-opening. Even though viewing the recordings and seeing my own flaws was a little unpleasant, it was worth it. Secondly, the writing part was a great way to organize my own thoughts about rehearsing. Even though I have experienced many rehearsing processes, I still had not deliberately thought about the different aspects of rehearsing before doing this project.

Making rehearsing more effective is a life-long journey, but for me, this project was a help on the way. Of course, there are numerous other issues to consider when talking about rehearsing and its effectiveness, but these were the issues that emerged in our process. With this project, I feel that I managed to make my own practicing and rehearsing a little more effective because I really had to organize my thoughts about it. Categorizing the different stages of rehearsing made me more conscious about the process as a whole, and I hope that I can benefit from this knowledge in future rehearsing processes. My tool box as a lied pianist is now a little bit larger.

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