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Music and Poetry

Confessions of a Rhyming Musicologist

by Jean Kreiling

When the composer Samuel Barber claimed that “a song can say what nothing else can,” he acknowledged the expressive powers of both music and poetry, and, more broadly, the crucial eloquence of art. A musicologist typically finds endless fascination in this eloquence and explores it by analyzing musical scores, studying historical documents, and pursuing fresh perspectives on both well-known and obscure music. The results of these efforts generally include scholarly essays and thoughtful classroom presentations—but nothing quite so compelling, or communicative, as a song. My own experiences in musicology have given me intellectual satisfaction, artistic insights, and cultural awareness—all of which have, I hope, informed my teaching and my performing.

But both in the classroom and at the piano, I frequently hear music “say” things that musicological methods can neither anticipate nor explicate—elusive, exquisite things that deserve a different kind of attention. And in response to the ensuing wonder and frustration, my professional life has intersected with my secret life as a poet. After years as a closet poet, I have recently seen my work published, in small journals including *The Comstock Review*, *The Edge City Review*, *Ekphrasis*, *The Formalist*, and *The Lyric*. While my poems address many different themes, several represent especially personal, non-scholarly approaches to music. Paradoxically, the metaphorical and suggestive qualities of poetry seem more precisely expressive than the exacting rigors of musicological scrutiny. That is, a poem, like a song, can say what nothing else can.

Like most of my poems, the ones below are sonnets—fourteen lines of rhyming iambic pentameter. The sonnet form, like many time-honored musical forms, neatly accommodates both contrast and unity, both order and flexibility, both logic and passion. Today’s poets exploit such traditional forms relatively rarely—just as today’s composers often choose newer and freer forms. But the words of the Romantic poet William Wordsworth still seem apt: he wrote (in a sonnet) that “Nuns fret not at their convent’s narrow room” and he asserted that such a self-imposed “prison” is no prison at all—instead, it offers solace, for poet and reader, from “the weight of too much liberty.”

—Jean Kreiling is Professor of Music.
Her poems appear on the following pages.

The Audition

*I began writing
"The Audition"
during a Saturday morning
spent in Room R026b
of the Campus Center
with other music faculty,
listening to the auditions
of prospective music majors.
I felt enormous empathy for
these nervous but promising
young musicians.*

How dare they sit in judgment, this cold row
of suits and guarded smiles? She isn't fooled
by courtesy; she knows this court won't show
a candid countenance until they've ruled.
She knows they see her trembling hand, a wing
weak as a fledgling's, and her shaking knees,
unsteady as the feeble fluttering
within her breast and throat—but no one sees
that she can soar, can make the air her own.
So now she masters it again: inhales,
and breathes out beauty, hymns to heavens flown
and sought. They nod, and ask her to sing scales—
but their judicial poise can't hide the sight
of suits turned into feathers by her flight.

The Piano Lesson

—(for Robert)

*A very young musician
inspired
"The Piano Lesson."
My three-year-old nephew
was fascinated
with my piano—
but not for very long!*

The photograph portrays a patient pair:
a loving mentor seated at the keys,
a small boy, smiling, balanced on her knees,
his fingers choosing black and white with care.
Devoted to their shared pursuit of art,
he's held by learning's focused fascination—
and also by her arms, for cultivation
of harmonies heard only in the heart.
But she remembers when this shot was taken,
and knows the child's lesson did not last
beyond the camera's flash; the moment passed—
and those inferring patience are mistaken.
Intrigued by building blocks, he left her lap,
soon begged for lunch, and finally took a nap.

2. Intermezzo

Andante tenero **Intermezzo**

—(Brahms' op. 118, no. 2)

"Intermezzo," appeared last year in *Ekphrasis*, a journal devoted to poetry about other works of art—including paintings, sculptures, and music. Such a focus carries certain risks: art about art might ideally intensify or clarify a connection to the original aesthetic experience, but it could instead remove us further from it. Both **"Intermezzo"** and **"Albumblatt"** were attempts to hold onto the inevitably fleeting emotional and artistic satisfaction that these pieces give me when I play them at the piano.

"Intermezzo" hints at the wealth of possibility in Brahms' music, while **"Albumblatt"** suggests the fruitfulness of a second encounter with a deceptively simple piece.

The subject might be love, or aging dreams,
or only music—just a major key
stalked by the minor, only pliancy
of tempo, phrases arched by slurs and beams,
immense arpeggios that slide away
from ordinary chords, the weave of three
beats into two, and supple melody
that one hand lets the other lead astray.
Hear hints of wistful romance if you will,
loss in the middle, anger briefly sprung,
then resignation as first themes return—
but plumb the depths that only notes can fill,
upon which narratives need not be hung
to know there's more than just the notes to learn.

Albumblatt

—(Robert Schumann's op. 99, no. 4,
on which both Clara Wieck Schumann and Johannes Brahms composed Variations)

I noticed first that it was very brief.
I played it and heard only momentary
prettiness; thin as an "album leaf,"
it whispered something gray and fragmentary.
The second time I played it, I heard more
within the same vibrations; some unknown
yet half-remembered history now bore
a heartbeat on a breath of overtone.
Like photographs without a date or name,
the music intimately reminisced
in echoes undefined but dear—the same
as those that neither wife nor friend had missed:
as long-pressed flowers prompt new meditations,
these slender sounds inspired their variations.