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Describing Prosody in Debussy's Songs

ABSTRACT

Background

It seems that conventional methods of analysis might not always grasp all the important aspects of vocal music. Especially in 19th- and early 20th-century French song, the *mélodie*, where the relation between music and text is of particular importance, mere structural analysis may not always be sufficient.

Research on French art song has pointed out the importance of prosody, of accurate declamation in the setting of literary texts. In this regard, French poetry with its quantified metric imposes certain difficulties which were widely discussed at the time (Noske 1970, 41–68; Marschall 1988, 28–55). The literary movement of symbolism with its art of refinement influenced composers of the *mélodie*, and especially Debussy (Jarocinski 1976). French language education and poetic practices and declamation have been suggested as further possible contexts for debates about prosody in the *mélodie* (Bergeron 2010). Around 1900, French vocal music tended to approach spoken language, as can be seen in Debussy's opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* (Kunze 1984) or in the integration of text declamation in song cycles of Massenet (Marschall 1988, 57; Linke 2010, 14).

Although the importance of word-text-relation for French song has always been emphasized, it still seems to be difficult to come to a deeper analytical understanding of this aspect. I would therefore like to attempt a closer description of prosody in selected songs of Debussy.

Aims and repertoire studied

Debussy's songs, a sometimes neglected part of his oeuvre, are a particularly instructive example for the analysis of prosody due to their specific appearance: in some of them chant seems to be particularly close to speech, i. e., to the artificial declamation of poetic language. This is especially true for some of the later *mélodies*, for example the collections *Chansons de Bilitis* or *Fêtes galantes* (2e série). It may also be insightful to compare poems that Debussy set to music twice (En sourdine) or that other composers such as Gabriel Fauré (En sourdine) or Charles Bordes (Le son du cor) also set. Thus, a more precise description of their prosodic design, with a special focus on the vocal part, can be provided.

Methods

An analysis of prosody, more precisely of the shape and rhythm of the vocal part in relation to text, has to take into account aspects that are not always at the centre of attention. If it is true that French fin-de-siècle song tends to approach text declamation, one has to ask: what is the difference between (albeit artificial) 'speech' and 'singing', and how does the

impression occur that the latter might converge with the former? The effect is comparable to, though not exactly identical with Schönberg's more radical *Sprechgesang*, which is closely linked to the German language.

In Debussy's songs, the precise positioning of accents, passages with syllabic singing, tone repetitions or a certain rhythmic sophistication resulting from declamation can be observed. The range and position of the vocal line must be considered. Furthermore, I would like to take a look at the general 'shape' of selected songs, at their contours inside the vocal range, using graphical depictions in order to gain insights into the prosodic design of a given song. The results of this examination of prosody must of course be related to other analytical results, especially regarding the piano part or text semantics.

Implications

A closer look at prosody gives us the impression that Debussy's songs can be understood as a close musical 'translation' of text into music. This procedure can be interpreted as an attempt to realize some of the demands of the Symbolist movement: especially the ideals of nuance in artistic expression and of a fusion of the arts.

Keywords

form, melody, vocal music, musical perception, prosody

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