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Asking the Right Questions: A Draft Method for Analysing Musical Transformations

ABSTRACT

Background

The subjects of the investigation are art songs that exist both in a version for piano and voice and in a version for orchestra and voice. What happens if a composer creates an orchestra song on the basis of a piano song? Music history is not short on notable examples: Berlioz, Mahler, Wolf, Schönberg, Dallapiccola and many more have composed songs that exist in a piano version as well as in an orchestra or ensemble version. To this day, there is no standardised analytical tool existent that makes it possible to understand this work process. Previous research is either limited to the recognition that a composer's handling of the orchestral sound in itself is an essential part of compositional activity (Riehn 1996) or to very brief comparisons between piano version and orchestra version of an art songs (e.g. Danuser 1980). A structured and detailed analytical approach is missing so far.

Aims and repertoire studied

This paper designs a new method that allows the analyst to compare the piano version of a song with its orchestra version. The first step of the method is the division of the piano score into several layers. It will be discussed how a layer can be identified and separated from the other layers of the score; although this also depends on the specific repertoire under consideration, particularly a composer's use of the different registers of the piano is an important basis for the identification of the layers of the score.

The centrepiece of the method is a question catalogue that serves to build up a detailed material entry which shows the structural significances of the different layers of the score. Subsequently, the layers of the piano score shall be compared with their equivalents in the orchestra score, which will unfold various types of transformation. This step of the analysis uncovers important characteristics of the score which eventually leads to an overall analytical result. The paper will discuss the question if several question catalogues might be necessary in order to meet the different demands of a large repertoire.

The method will be applied to music of different styles – the working basis is a song repertoire that covers a time period between 100 and 150 years. Compositions under consideration will be Hector Berlioz' 'Nuits d'été', Gustav Mahler's orchestra songs ('Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen', 'Rückertlieder', 'Kindertotenlieder'), Arnold Schönberg's 'Gurre-Lieder' and possibly a composition from the last fifty years. However, the main emphasis will be on Mahler's 'Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen'.

Methods

The method is loosely connected to the approaches by Ertuğrul Sevsay, who defines elements in the foreground, middle ground and background of the orchestral texture and assigns them different roles, Matthias Hermann, who uses the idea of different layers in an analysis of Pierre Boulez' 'Notation III', and Hermann Danuser, who relates the orchestration of the first section of Franz Schreker's 'Whitman-Gesänge' to the meaning of the text.

The reversibility of the method (analysing the process orchestra song – piano song and not piano song – orchestra song) will be discussed.

Implications

The creation of a detailed, in-depth material entry makes it possible to reach efficient and well-founded conclusions concerning the 'sound ideal' of a specific composer. This could even be split furthermore, for instance, into the sound ideal of an earlier and a later creation period. In addition, the method bears a pedagogical value as it explores precisely the intermediary space between piano song and orchestra song, which provides insight into the 'craftsmanship' of composition and orchestration. These impressions can subsequently flow back into assignments of orchestration or composition, or they can nurture one's own compositional skills.

Keywords

Music Analysis and Musical Repertoires, Music Analysis and Music Theory, Music Analysis and Composition, Orchestration, Sound, Textures, Layers, Vocal Music, Advanced Tonality and Post-Tonal Music

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