

A Foreign Affair: The Marriage of Music and Poetry in Grieg's *Haugtussa*, Op. 67

For the non-native speaker, mastery and confident execution of the Norwegian language can seem a daunting task. This presentation will highlight portions of Grieg's *Haugtussa* in regard to text painting, efficient pronunciation, and recommendations on how to bring to life the immortal character. The recommendations and considerations presented in this paper barely scratch the surface of the care that is warranted in this dramatic cycle. However, perhaps the few tweaks suggested will awaken a sense of the nuance possible with clever diction and articulation, both vocal and pianistic.

The inherent color of a language is found in the resonance of the vowels, and true interpretive command of dramatic poetry is revealed in the strength and economy of the consonants. However, the most exciting and intuitive performers -- singers and pianists alike -- maximize the synergistic relationship between text articulation and the musical phrase.

The International Phonetic Alphabet is the starting point for both native and foreign language study. Both Bokmål and Nynorsk have only three vowels that are truly foreign to the native English speaker, and these are easily acquired with slight modifications from the more often-studied language of German. The consonants, for all intents and purposes, are essentially the same repertoire of sounds in the English language and are subject to similar doubling rules.

Singers spend years of their pre-professional training perfecting vowels. “Vocalizing” and “vocalises” for warm-up and vocal training involve choosing and refining vowels that maximize the beauty of the individual instrument alongside multi-lingual articulation and interpretation. Vowels are bright or dark, and coloring a vowel in a certain direction so as to heighten the mood or intensity of the moment without sacrificing intelligibility is an art. The concept of long and short vowels is of utmost importance in Germanic languages. The beauty of the long or short vowel in

singing has less to do with the quality or color of the vowel itself and more to do with the amount of time allotted for clever articulation of the consonants that follow.

When analyzing a text for interpretation, the basic act of diagramming a sentence is a requirement. Even if knowledge of the standard notation for a formal diagram is lacking, singers and pianists alike should be able to separate a phrase or clause into its grammatical elements. For Germanic languages, the strength of a thought is in the nouns, verbs, and modifiers, in that order. However, the performer must not stop here. The second and even more important layer of interpretation involves a hierarchy of thought. If there has been repetition of a noun, verb, or modifier, it is quite possible that these parts of speech need not be highlighted a second time. The heart of the text must be extracted. What is the poet saying, and how is the composer either supporting or hindering this statement?

There are words that must be highlighted for romantic sensibilities, regardless of their meaning in the immediate context. The word “Ro,” or “rest/peace” must always be long and deep. Personal pronouns in a loving context, like “du” and “deg,” particularly in the context of “å du som bur meg I Hjarta inne,” (“oh you who bears me in your heart”) and “det berre kviskrar um deg” (“it only whispers of you”), both from *Elsk*, need an extra tender articulation. Young singers often think this means a more pressed tongue in the dental position; however, a gentler approach often yields a more enticing vocal effect.

The first consideration for an important word in a singing text is the strength of the consonant that precedes the accented syllable. It would be a mistake to simply assume that the initial consonant of the important word must be lengthened or emphasized. It is the initial consonant or glottal stop of the **accented** syllable that should be highlighted. Whenever consonants or glottal stops are strengthened or lengthened to highlight the accented syllable of an important word, pitch should be carefully considered. Singers often employ a scooping mechanism to bring attention to a syllable, but this can so easily become a habit that loses meaning

with each instance, and it ultimately can become a technical or artistic distraction lacking taste and nuance.

The first song of *Haugtussa, Det syng*, is very declamatory and benefits from a confident approach from both singer and pianist. Again, as in the discussion of doubling and emphasizing consonants, this confidence should not come from harsh or pushed tone. A freedom of physical movement, a deep, expansive breath, and efficient articulation of both text and keyboard trill go a long way to set the scene for the *Haugtussa* journey. Some of the dotted rhythms should be “snapped” for a crisp lilt, as in cases where the dotted rhythm is used to highlight a short vowel. This seems counterintuitive, but it forces the singer to linger on the consonant(s) following the short vowel. Examples of the dotted short vowel are “hildrande” (m. 14), “linnare” (m. 30), “voggar” (m. 35). Several dotted figures are transitional into more lyrical passages. These transitional dotted rhythms can usher in a more legato articulation, as in “Sylvrokk snu” (m. 17, 20, etc.) and “Sæle-Tid” (m. 38, 41).

In the second song, *Veslemøy*, the legato should be elegant and calculated. Many of the words indicating the darker side of the character or the situation is highlighted with a *mesa di voce*. These moments should be executed with subtlety and with solemnity. These gestures can seem overdone and sometimes comical to post-modern sensibilities, but sincerity is a requirement for bringing *Veslemøy* to life. Norwegian folklore is full of fanciful images and superstitions, all of which are treated with authenticity and respect.

After all of these considerations on lengthening and strengthening important words, it is very effective to find a passage in the cycle that can be performed with complete stoicism, devoid of character and inflection. This technique, particularly when it arises out of a carefully articulated and inflected performance, screams intensity in a way that will shock even the most casual listener. In the final song, the minimalist setting warrants this treatment.

The Oxford Dictionary describes *onomatopoeia* as “the formation of a word from a sound associated with what is named.”¹ It is a concept older than language itself: the art of naming something by imitating the sound of it. The nature themes in *Haugtussa* call for an understanding of onomatopoeia and its execution in performance. Some favorite consonants that can be used to bring out the sounds of nature are [s], [k], [r], and [f].

An example of onomatopoeia is in *Blåbær-li*, the word “kryra,” or “burst-out.” Singers should explode the stop-plosive [k] and roll the [r]. *Killingdans* has a clever play on words, some of which are likely invented for just this very poem. Every [h] and [p] should virtually pop out of the texture. To give a little more power to the [h] sound in the first phrase, the singer can exaggerate by pronouncing “hipp” as [ç I p] and “hoppe” as [X ɔ p : p ə]. Using the German *ich-laut* before a forward vowel and the *ach-laut* before a back vowel brings out the character of an otherwise mild consonant. In a similar manner, a very aspirate [t] and super doubled [p], [d], and [n] round out this first phrase. Singers should roll the [r] when time allows. After all of these short vowels and emphasized consonants, the final “I slikt eit Lag” is a relief of long, fully sung syllables.

In addition to the above recommended treatment of the onomatopoeia in *Ved Gjøttelbekken*, the consonants in this final song of the cycle should be treated with the utmost care. In order to support a long, tender vocal line, it is important to gauge the weight of the unvoiced consonants, such as the [s] in “surlande Bekk” and “og sullar so god tog mullar so smått.” Voiced consonants such as [m], [n], and [l] must be pitched, as a rule on the note that to which the vowel will open, and the volume may need to be adjusted in order to keep the legato and intensity of the musical phrase. Singers often feel that the voiced consonants must be produced louder than the vowels. This is due to the reality that consonants involve an obstruction, however mild, to the vocal tract. For an [m] to match the volume and intensity of the [ʊ] in the word “mullar,” the singer must approach the [m] with a louder production than the [ʊ]. Otherwise, the effect is one

¹ “Onomatopoeia,” <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/onomatopoeia> (April 01, 2015).

of “sausage-link” legato, where every syllable employs a *messa di voce*. How elegant clever, well-balanced articulation of consonant-to-vowel can be!

Playing the piano “in Norwegian” sounds like a humorous expression, but it should be every Romance collaborator’s noblest wish and most attainable goal. Besides the pianist being fully versed in the diction suggestions stated thus far, there is a tonal concept for playing Grieg. The pianists of Grieg’s time studied in Berlin or Leipzig, in the studios of Theodor Kullak (1818-1882) of the pedagogical lineage of Carl Czerny (1791-1857), the so-called father of modern piano technique.² Careful, efficient fingering is of number one concern, and voicing is a close second. Grieg’s compositional hallmarks include a predilection for left-hand octaves, and right-hand fifths. Sometimes these fifths are “open,” with the third being introduced in a secondary fashion, opening the door to modal mixture and parallel major/minor variations. The doubling of the root, often twice over, emphasizes the need for a singing tone in the upper pitch, and then a ringing emphasis on the third when it does appear. This is significant voicing for a piano, because it monopolizes on the natural overtones of the chord. By using the outer-voice ringing tone technique, the full resonance of the piano is heard, without the harshness that would result from equal voicing throughout the chord. The fourth song, *Møte*, contains a unique opportunity to voice the bottom and the top. If the correct voicing and pedaling is accomplished in the opening piano motive, the repeated note in the right hand becomes a special moment - reminiscent of the ringing of the church bell. With this care, the note is relevant, expressive, and inviting.

Pianists who specialize in the art of accompanying are often taught to obey every marking in the score with the utmost commitment and pedantry. However, there are many important moments in *Haugtussa* that are lacking in specificity. Some of the gestures are distinctly Romantic, folk-like, or Norwegian, and some interpretive skill is required. The very opening of the cycle is a

² Jaroslaw de Zielinski, “Carl Czerny,” *Etude Magazine* (June 1909), <http://etudemagazine.com/etude/1909/06/carl-czerny.html>.

perfect example. There is a dearth of instruction beyond the general dynamic, pervasive pedaling, and *dolce*. The unspoken directions include:

1. Engage the pedal **before** pressing down a single key for a completely pedaled sound on each note. In general, this is an extremely important decision to be made by all pianists in all repertoire: whether to press the pedal down before or after striking a first note or chord.
2. Insert an enlivening, organic *crescendo* in the first trill, and a momentum-gaining *crescendo* in the second trill that leads into the scale flourish.
3. Consider the resonance of the piano and the room, and make a decision concerning the pedal in the rests leading to the singer's entrance. Some pianos and rooms will allow for a complete lift. If the piano lacks resonance and the room is dry, a slow, gentle release of the pedal will give the impression of fullness and epic flourish.

Likewise, the score lacks instruction on the pedal changes between the firm chords of measures 4-7. This is not because the pianist is supposed to pedal through all of these with the same pedal used in bar 1. The pedaling style of this late-romantic style is one of slight overlap (again, considering the dryness or resonance of the concert conditions) followed by a full change. The trill technique employed must be one of the brightest, lightest touch. Fast and brilliant with care to voice the supporting chord to the bottom. If the chord is too-equally voiced, it will create a heaviness that undermines the youth and delicate nature of our heroine.

A final suggestion of vital importance to artists performing this cycle involves the decision of how much time to allow between songs. While the tradition of clapping between songs is ever changing and this discussion is dependent on performing Haugtussa as a set, it is nonetheless an important topic to consider. Grieg is the consummate late romantic composer, of the sort that aimed to achieve the ever elusive, highly sought-after *Gesamtkunstwerk*. It is no surprise that it took Grieg years to finalize the publication of these songs. He considered something more epic - a solo, choral, orchestral, dramatic experience, of a similar ilk as to what he envisioned in sketches for Peer Gynt. Performers have only the piano-vocal score from which to sing and play, but it is in

the silence between the pieces that the true gravity of the work settles. It is too simplistic to say, “Take more time between the songs.” The decision of how much time and the physical-visual details of the pause is not to be taken lightly. Pianist and singer must together consider that the longer songs may need more processing time. It is highly recommended that the time correspond to dramatic considerations of both the preceding and following songs.

Arne Garborg (1851-1925), writer, critic, journalist, and leader of the Landsmål movement, published the cycle of 71 poems titled *Haugtussa* on May 1, 1895. The language is said to be innately musical, and the poems themselves suggested motives, sounds, and colors that informed Grieg’s composition. Many, including Grieg, complain of the difficulty of translating and interpreting the poems. However elusive the words, language, and sentiment may be, awareness of the cycle is ever increasing in the United States. In my own academic and professional work to date, I have performed or assisted in the preparation of five performances of *Haugtussa*.

While Grieg dedicated *Haugtussa* to the great singing actor Dagmar Möller, the first performance of the complete cycle of songs was in November of 1899 in Christiania. Mezzosoprano Eva Sars Nansen (1858-1907) was famous for her interpretation of the Romance literature. She was also an expert on the ski slopes, pioneering the sport for women. Fighting for recognition in a male dominated field, Eva was a perfect match for the first Veslemøy. Known for her home concerts, intellectual gatherings of family and friends, *Haugtussa* would have been just the cycle that would spark lively discussion. The inimitable writer and critic George Bernard Shaw hailed Agathe Backer Grøndahl as the greatest pianist of all time. His love for her was unequalled. Her stunning premiere of the Grieg Piano Concerto, very well could have secured the concerto’s place in the history of great piano literature. Between the athlete-pioneer and the flawless virtuoso, the cycle’s first performance would have been jaw-dropping.⁴ Their style of preparation has been passed down through generations of committed students and performers. Marked by raw

³ Beryl Foster, *The Songs of Edvard Grieg* (England: Scholar Press, 1990), 219.

⁴ Finn Benestad and Dag Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg: The Man and the Artist*, trans. William H. Halverson and Leland B. Sateren (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 340-41.

communication, flawless execution, and integrity, may all future interpreters be equally committed to excellence.

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