

Art Song and Pedalling

I love art song, and I've recently returned to practising art song accompaniment on the piano. It's been good for me; this way I get to restore some of my atrophied keyboard skills, and I get to practise music I like without the usual piano exercises or repertoire. Moreover, I get to rethink, reconsider, reaffirm my philosophy regarding piano playing — especially as it pertains to the accompaniment of song. I may not get to perform with a singer again in the near future, if at all; but, at least I have the satisfaction of playing this music in a manner which, although may contradict much of what is accepted piano playing philosophy, is, nonetheless, how I feel the way this music should be played.

Currently, songs on which I've been working are:

1. Franz Schubert: Erlkönig, Gretchen am Spinnrade, Die Forelle (tricky stuff), Stänchen, Das Wandern
2. Gabriel Fauré: Notre Amour, Clair de Lune, Aurore, Les Berceaux (haunting), Nell (also tricky), and the cycle Mirages, Op. 113 (rarely performed)
3. Malcolm Williamson: (from the cycle "A Child's Garden") The Flowers, My Bed Is a Boat, A Good Boy
4. Roger Quilter: Fair House of Joy, Love's Philosophy (pewh!)
5. Ralph Fisher: Somewhere i have never travelled, is there a flower, if i have made, my lady, a clown's smirk (hard)
6. Ralph Vaughan Williams: Whither Must I Wander, The Vagabond

Then there are those wonderful women composers (predominately American, mostly with three names) of the early part of the 20th Century:

1. Mildred Lund Tyson: Sea Moods (tricky in one place), The Lilacs Are in Bloom
2. Mary Turner Salter: The Cry of Rachel (Did someone say melodrama?)
3. Elinor Remick Warren: Snow Towards Evening
4. Teresa del Riego (British): Homing (guaranteed not do leave a dry eye in the house — when sung correctly, of course)
5. Clara Edwards: Into the Night

The thing that I have tried to achieve with these songs, as I practise them, is to articulate the notes and phrasing as indicated by the composer; that frequently requires abstention from use of the sustain, or damper, pedal to a large extent. This is especially true in the Schubert and Fauré songs, but is also true in many of the others.

Keyboard musicians are notorious for ignoring phrasing. Organists just get so

wrapped up in their legato-obsession that they simply can't resist slithering around the instrument without a single phrase break in an entire piece whether it's indicated or (as in Bach) not. Pianists are just as guilty with their neurotic use of the damper pedal, often resulting in the piece being one continual blurry wad of sound. In short, keyboard musicians don't breath. Unlike singers and wind players, they aren't physically compelled to do so, so they don't. Since most organists are also trained pianists (as opposed to the converse), and are often called upon to accompany at the piano, and, since I'm focusing on song accompaniment, we'll stick to the piano.

Let's choose a Schubert song; say, "Gretchen am Spinnrade." The first four measures tell us a lot:

The image shows a musical score for Schubert's "Gretchen am Spinnrade". It consists of two staves: a vocal line (Singstimme) and a piano accompaniment (Pianoforte). The tempo is marked "Nicht zu geschwind. ♩ = 72." and the date "19. October 1814." is noted in the top right. The piano part features "sempre legato" in the right hand and "sempre staccato" in the left hand. The lyrics "Mei-ne Ruh' ist hin, mein" are written below the piano part.

First of all, the composer gives us no pedalling indications. This is not unusual since the sustain pedal (or lever) on the pianos in Schubert's and Beethoven's time were still quite rudimentary. Its use was limited primarily to special effects or to aid in achieving some semblance of legato for large stretches or other awkward sections. As a result of this lack of pedal markings we are at the mercy of the pianist's musical intelligence and, dare I say, good taste. At the onset, the pianist sees the terms *sempre legato* in the right hand and *sempre staccato* left hand.

Typically, a pianist will more than likely focus on achieving the legato in the right hand, since that's the faster moving part and symbolises the motion of the wheel itself. Therefore, a discreet but steady use of the sustain pedal will invariably ensue. Moreover, since there aren't any of those pesky slurs, the pianist doesn't have worry too much about phrase articulation. I used the word discreet, since, even though I'm referring to pedal use, a good pianist won't just sit on it, but will at least try to give some kind of illusion of a detached left hand. But wait a minute! The left hand is in essentially two parts, an upper part consisting of one or more detached quavers and a slow moving, almost organ-like, single note dotted minim bass line. Also, Schubert's *sempre staccato* indication appears below the staff. Does that mean ALL the voices in the left hand are to be played staccato? One would hope not. Only a literalistic fool would think that. Obviously the upper part is to be played staccato, as indicated, and the bottom

voice legato. Consequently, this totally negates use of the damper pedal (Again, I'm implying here that the pianist is a relatively intelligent, if not exceptionally intuitive, musician. Perhaps I'm assuming a bit too much; but, for the sake of argument let's go with that premise.). One could nearly achieve, perhaps, the desired affect of staccato and legato in the same hand with employment of the sustenuto pedal. But, why would anyone want to do that since there aren't any particularly difficult stretches in the left hand which would require its singular benefit? The sustenuto pedal is a handy-dandy device, and I love using it; but, it's unnecessary here.

Of course, this does not preclude the sustain pedal altogether; rather, its discriminating application can often be very effective. For instance, in the same song, Schubert briefly changes the mood to an almost dreamlike feeling when Gretchen begins to describe the man she loves ("Sein höher Gang, sein' edge Gestalt").

Ped. _____

* (pedal marking mine)

Here the composer has shifted to F Major, the piano becomes much softer (*pp*); and while the right hand continues to keep the wheel spinning, the left hand has become static, as if she has lost track of her work completely and has begun to fantasise about him. At this point the pianist can virtually sit on the damper pedal, reinforcing the trancelike state into which she has wandered. The effect can be quite startling in contrast to the very clear, almost contrapuntal preceding section.

However, the atmosphere soon changes:

Mun - - - des Lächeln, sei - ner

cresc. poco a poco

This musical system shows the first two measures of the song. The vocal line is in a treble clef with a key signature of one flat. The piano accompaniment is in a grand staff with a key signature of one flat. The lyrics are 'Mun - - - des Lächeln, sei - ner'. The piano part features a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The dynamic marking 'cresc. poco a poco' is written below the piano part.

Au - - - gen Ge - walt, und sei - - - ner Re - - d

This musical system shows the next two measures. The vocal line continues with the lyrics 'Au - - - gen Ge - walt, und sei - - - ner Re - - d'. The piano accompaniment continues with the same eighth-note pattern. The key signature remains one flat.

The harmonic rhythm quickens, the dynamics increase, the tempo accelerates as she becomes more and more fervent in her fantasy, climaxing to the point of a passionate kiss. Contrary to normal practise, the gradual *lessening* of damper pedal application actually increases the tension, creating a tautness and starkness to her fevered delusion.

This also holds true for the second half of the song. After she gets back to work she again goes into an emotional fervour ("Mein Busen drängt sich nach ihm hin."):

Mein Bu - - - sen drängt sich nach

p cresc. poco a poco

This musical system shows the first two measures of the second half. The vocal line begins with the lyrics 'Mein Bu - - - sen drängt sich nach'. The piano accompaniment continues with the eighth-note pattern. The dynamic marking 'p cresc. poco a poco' is written below the piano part.

This time she yearns for her lover in even greater despair of his absence. Using the same techniques as before Schubert builds to a desperate, one might say erotic, climax; after which Gretchen virtually collapses, or simply gives up (depending on how far you want to take this), as the spinning wheel gradually comes to a stop. Again, I highly recommend eschewing application of the damper pedal. A held note with only its one damper raised (i. e., without the pedal) has a shorter sustain than if it's struck with the pedal down and the whole row of dampers raised. The result is that the *sforzati* in the left hand

at the peak of both climaxes becomes much more pronounced and effective. Therefore, greater drama is achieved.

Okay, so we know about the shortcomings of Schubert's piano and that his songs require less pedalling than most pianists want to consider. What about Schumann, Brahms, Löwe, Wolf, etc.? Even with these later composers, although there are possibly more occasions for pedal usage, coupled with their often imprecise pedal markings, it is still quite evident that damper pedal usage can and should be reduced drastically — even avoided — provided that the pianist actually learns to play legato.

And what about the French? Surely, French art song with its luxuriant harmonic language and elegant textures lends itself to a more liberal approach to the sustain pedal. *Au contraire, mon ami*. This is a grave misunderstanding of the nature of French music, perpetrated by a what I consider to be a general misreading of those composers who are commonly referred to as the Impressionist school, of whom

Debussy and Ravel are supposed to be its chief exponents. With all the swooshing around with the sustain pedal, especially with those two composers, one very crucial aspect of the music — and the French musical sensibility in general — is overlooked or ignored: the love of clarity first and foremost. There is probably no greater exponent of this approach to composition than Fauré. Fauré epitomises all those qualities we admire in French song: transparency of textures, economy of means, elegant flowing melodies, eminently singable vocal lines, and perfect balance between the voice and the piano. Of course the tendency for pianists to treat Fauré's *melodies* (as well as most French song) as "Impressionistic" (i. e., with lots of pedal) in an attempt to achieve a sort of gauzy, atmospheric quality is very shortsighted. The one thing I've noticed about Fauré's accompaniments is that he is very specific as to where the pedal is to be used; and that when it is to be employed — if at all — it's to be done so sparingly.

Let's look at "Clair de Lune," for example. This song is unique because the piano not only sets the mood, but is the actual focus of interest because of its melodic and harmonic consistency; whereas the voice, in an almost through composed style, merely comments on this enchanting phenomenon portrayed by the piano; this almost giving the impression of a piano solo with vocal accompaniment. For the first seventeen measures there is not one pedalling indication. Now, does that mean the sustain pedal is not to be used at all during those measures? In a word, yes. During this first part the right and left hands are phrased separately and, therefore, should be articulated accordingly. The left hand is made of small three-note semiquaver groups separated by a semiquaver rest at the beginning of each beat, each group with its own slur:

Clair de lune (Menuet)

Andantino quasi Allegretto. ♩ = 78.

CHANT.

PIANO.

The notes within these groupings are, of course, to be played legato. The right

hand consists of a separate flowing melody of one and two measure phrases which are to be articulated distinctly from the left hand. The problem here is that most pianists (if not all) simply refuse to acknowledge *any* phrasing; and their insistent use of the damper pedal simply exacerbates the problem. When good, fluid, legato technique is used there is no need to employ the sustain pedal in those first seventeen measures. My only caveat would be at mm.5 and 13 (and duplicate passages) where the slightest tap of the pedal may be used to achieve legato between the repeated F's; no more:

This musical score snippet shows a piano accompaniment in a key with three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The right hand has a melodic line with a slur over two measures. The left hand has a rhythmic accompaniment. The marking *sempre dolce* is written below the right hand. Two red annotations, *Ped.**, are placed below the left hand in the second and fourth measures, indicating a light pedal tap.

This would be a legitimate function of the sustain pedal; even then I'm not fully convinced of the necessity. Nevertheless, at m18 ("Jouant du luth et dansant") we finally see actual pedalling indications from the composer:

This musical score snippet shows a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line has the lyrics "nas - ques" and "Jou - ant du". The piano accompaniment is marked *sempre cantabile*. The right hand has a melodic line with a slur. The left hand has a rhythmic accompaniment. Pedalling symbols (pedals with asterisks) are placed below the left hand in the second and fourth measures, indicating specific pedal use.

luth et dan - sant, et qua - si

Here they occur on the off beats and only long enough to cover the value of the quavers in the left hand. Then at ms24 & 25 only the little arpeggios in the left hand are pedalled. The return to the opening melody in the piano at m26 ("Tout en chantant, sur le mode mineur") signals a return to the absence of pedalling. Then at m38 ("au calme clair de lune, triste et beau") Fauré transports us into a dreamlike world for four measures shifting to a major tonality and full measure arpeggios lifting the pedal only when the harmony changes.

espressivo e dolce

pp

ped.

cal - - me clair de lu - - - ne,

He does this again for two more measures at m44. The next pedalling occurs at m51 ("Les grands jets d'eau svelte pram the marbres!") when he reprises the off-beat quaver-length pedalling of earlier; this time across three measures of a repeated seven note pattern under one phrase slur:

Les grands jets d'eau svel - - tes par .

sempre

One last set of pedal indications occur four measures from the end (ms58 & 59) on the Ab Major and c minor triads with no pedalling in the final two measures.

As we see Fauré is very specific as to where the damper pedal is to be applied. The result is when the pedal *is* employed the unique effect it has on the mood of the song is greatly enhanced. This effect would be lost if the pedal was used regularly throughout, even if applied carefully.

One factor which many people overlook is that many French composers of Fauré's generation and earlier were organists — including Fauré himself. So, legato touch *sans pedale* on the piano is not a foreign idea for French music. Even composers who were not necessarily organists (*e. g.*, Debussy and Ravel) were either influenced by their predecessors and contemporaries who were organists, or simply preferred the clarity and subtle nuance that can be achieved by not using, or minimising the use, of the damper pedal.

Improvements over the years in damper pedal technology have made it easy for pianists to abandon true legato playing almost completely. Consequently, I am presenting the pianist with two noisome problems: the first is actually learn to play legato. That means facing up to the task of literally learning to connect the notes unaided by a mechanical contraption; *i. e.*, having to hold down the note for its full value, and to learn the art of substitution. It is, in simple fact, technically much more challenging to play this way; making that what might have been a modest technical matter become a rather formidable task. I suppose that explains a lot.

The other nuisance I present, as part of this "pedal-less" approach, is indeed, for the pianist *to respect the phrase!* Composers don't put those slurs in their scores just to clutter up the page, although I'm sure a lot of keyboard musicians think so. The idea is that at the end of one those curvy lines you're supposed to breath. Just ask any wind player or singer. The fact that the piano's phrases may be longer or don't directly coincide with the singer is part of the whole idea! You have these two or more individual conceits, each with its own integrity, so to speak, coming together producing an integrated whole. That doesn't really happen if the piano is only in the background merely supplying "mood" for the song. I chose these two songs partially at random because: a) I just happen to really like these songs, and b) partially because they are vastly different songs stylistically and chronologically, and yet, require very similar approaches to accompaniment. Most of what I have discussed here can and should be applied to many, if not most other, art songs. The problem arises in having the good judgment, and (God forbid!) the good taste, to decide where and when discriminating use of the damper can be exercised. That's a whoole nuther subject.

So, what's to be gained from all of this non-pedal way of accompanying art song?

Well, first is clarity of line; instead of a vocal part with just some kind of pleasant or mood setting in the background, the listener gets to hear, when all of these various ideas come together, that the song is truly greater than the sum of its parts. Second, instead of making the music sound "dry" it actually becomes more expressive since the pianist must now seriously consider the phrase and the interrelationships of the parts, *provided* that the pianist has, in fact, learnt the art of genuine legato playing. Third, the result (and this is the really scary part) the composer's intentions may remarkably be realised!

That is, of course, if the pianist is truly interested in fulfilling the composer's intentions.