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POETRY FOR SINGERS: A PEDAGOGICAL RESOURCE

SURVEYING MOVEMENTS IN POETRY & VOICE IN ENGLISH ART SONG

A Lecture-Recital Monograph

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction ............................................................................................................................1

II. In the Beginning Was the Word: Developing a Creative Relationship with Text…............3

III. The Most Important Literary Genre: An Introduction to Poetry .........................................5

IV. Ratiocination: Close Reading through Inductive Observations...........................................6

A. Read the Text Aloud before Annotating Anything

B. This Work Should Consist of a Two-sided Conversation.

C. Poetic Devices to Consider:

V. Text vs. Music: A Tug-of-War of Primacy?........................................................................12

VI. Applied Poetics in Song......................................................................................................13

A. Purcell & Shakespeare: Ye Gentle Spirits of the Air

B. Arne & Milton: By Dimpled Brook

C. Walton & Wordsworth: Glide Gently

D. Beach & Browning: Ah, love, but a day!

E. Dickinson & Laitman: Good Morning Midnight

VII. Conclusion........................................................................................................................37

APPENDIX..............................................................................................................................39

**I**. **Introduction**

For much of the modern, affluent world, poetry remains a niche and somewhat bourgeoisie interest. Despite its role as the most powerful literary genre prior to the rise of the novel in the 19th century, poetry has somehow become tainted in popular American culture, regarded as stuffy and marginalized largely to academia. It is the intent of this project to build bridges, advancing the idea that poetry’s enriching poignancy can be understood and celebrated by both modern voice students, pedagogues, and audiences.

Musical education in the 21st century does much to cross the divide between the modern common core initiative and classical educational standards of times past. Where it was once common for musicians to study composition, theory, languages, and literature at very young ages, those subjects and opportunities are now increasingly reserved for the highly affluent and considered by many as fundamentally extracurricular. Consequently, non-conservatory undergraduate degrees in music cover much material in four short academic years, aiming towards shoring up a foundation of musicianship, technique, and proficiency in multiple instruments in addition to common core subject requirements and other vocation-specific skills. Degree-seeking collegiate singers must perform songs across a period range of over 400 years and at least four language traditions without the aid of any required coursework in poetics.

Many applied voice and diction instructors encourage and, on differing levels, require students to give due diligence to their texts in various, engaging, and systematic ways. Yet, the pedagogical burden results, at best, with partial success in the task of helping singers interact with poetic texts on a deeply knowledgeable and personally-impassioned level. When poetic instruction falls to studio and diction teachers, poetic engagement needs often fall lower in priority than the primary skills of instrument and language development. The best outcome under the current model is for students to become inspired to continue self-study in this near-impossible task. Another consequence of the modern collegiate system is that the division of disciplines often, if unintentionally, prevent the likelihood of interaction and collaboration between colleges of Literature and Music. Few if any common core literature classes can prepare students to engage with the kinds of texts common in vocal art song.

Since systemic change cannot be demanded quickly of higher education, it is the intent of this project to add to the body of work aimed at bridging this gap within the vocal studio. Few practical handbooks exist that crosspollinate the skills of poetic interaction and art song. Most of those resources fall into the category of song cannon companions, many specific to one language or musical era. Still fewer fully translate the language of one field into the vernacular of the other. However, this author believes that voice students are capable of celebrating the enchanting world of words that once set aflame composers’ creativity. Therefore, this project represents the start of a singer’s handbook aiming at presenting practical information and equipping singers with some key linguistic tools. Though not all undergraduate sequences start students solely with English song, this project stays within its bounds; the reason is because singers must learn to interact with poetry in their heart language or else run the risk of all poetry feeling foreign regardless of the original language. For purposes of length and specificity, literary eras covered will stay pre-1900 even though musical examples will contain multiple eras within the pre-modern and modern period.

Analytical techniques have been used to glean and translate information on poetics specifically for the audiences of music pedagogues and singers. Poetics, the art of writing poetry and the various linguistic devices and techniques that comprise it, will prove foundational to close readings of texts set to music and the development of pedagogical resources. Historical and cultural research will support all stylistic analyses of textual and musical case studies. Minimal theory and/or formal analysis commentary will appear occasionally to expound upon musical examples of texts creatively set to music.

**II**. **In the Beginning Was the Word: Developing a Creative Relationship with Text**

Something special and necessary is lost when one’s study of the arts impedes the enjoyment of it. For collegiate students, the majority of their experiences with poetic text (and perhaps their only experiences) occurred in association with academic instruction; and though voice students interact with text, they are not required to cultivate a love for poetry. Despite the development of students’ theoretical analysis and musicological lens, many will rightly fight to maintain the enjoyment of music as a part of human culture to be regularly consumed and appreciated. For singers, it is especially important to cultivate a similar relationship to poetic text.

One of America’s most witty and popular contemporary poets, Billy Collins, describes the instinctive tendency among students to merely study poems instead of experience them creatively in one of his most well-known verses titled “Introduction to Poetry.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The title itself invokes a double meaning of the customary name for a first university class on poetry and the introduction to something or someone previously unknown. This highlights the duality of poetic interpretation: where students in an academic setting may be praised for presumptuous assumptions, the same cannot be said for making hasty judgments of a new acquaintance. Collins begins with a list of metaphors for how he asks students to interact with poetry, to “hold it up to the light,” “press an ear against its hive,” and “drop a mouse into a poem / and watch him probe his way out” (2, 4, 5-6).[[2]](#footnote-2) His instructions ask for sensory involvement, curiosity, and a bit of bravery. A number of these images also highlight the fact that poems have a life of their own, other, and independent from the reader. Collins then shifts to larger, more spatial and active images, asking students to

walk inside the poem’s room

and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski

across the surface of a poem

waving at the author’s name on the shore (7-11).[[3]](#footnote-3)

Where the first grouping of verbs fall under the category of observation, “walk” “feel” and “waterski” are increasingly vigorous and progress towards the totality of one’s bodily, emotional, and even hormonal involvement. Literature students may instinctively balk at the instruction to stay above the surface of the poem, rather than digging underneath it. Yet that description captures the essence of the vocal melody in art song.

The poem turns in lines 12-16, “But all they want to do / is tie the poem to a chair with rope / and torture a confession out of it” (12-14).[[4]](#footnote-4) Collins’ tone in line 12 falls resignedly with forcedly uncreative verbs “do” and “is,” after which the decline suddenly jars with the violence of “tie” and “torture.” The brilliance of the torture conceit is expounded upon in the final couplet, “They begin beating it with a hose / to find out what it really means” (15-16).[[5]](#footnote-5) Though the last two lines lack traditional end-rhymes, the repetition of the [i] vowel in “begin beating” and “really means” provide satisfactory pairing. Indeed, Collin’s use of sound, alliteration, and the repeated use of the word “poem” throughout underpin the structure of this poetic verse. It reads largely with a conversational flow, yet holds together with a gossamer web of craftsman’s intentionality. The fallacy Collins so aptly captures applies equally well to literary and musical disciplines. The necessity of taking something apart in the act of intense study requires enough reverence that, when the time comes to put it back together again, none of its pieces are broken. Collins clearly advocates for the development of a creative and even childlike relationship with the thing studied rather than an abusive or demanding one. Students and singers especially must be given opportunities to actively participate in exploring poetic texts freely, if there is ever hope to produce artists capable of life-giving and vivacious interpretations.

**III**. **The Most Important Literary Genre: An Introduction to Poetry**

For many, poetry falls into a category of the past, something people used to do. Students may vaguely comprehend that some people spend their lives reading and writing poetry, but still may not associate it as a present and contemporary artform. Poetry’s power merely lies dormant when unheard and unread, much like music. For example, Collins’ poem above currently lays on many thousands of physical pages around the globe in addition to its evanescent presence smattered on the internet. Yet the simple process of interacting with it: eyes reading, ears to the hive of sounds buzzing and resonating brings it not to life, but rather into *our* lives. This project seeks to follow the example of Billy Collins in attempting to help music pedagogues introduce students to poetry and to supply some creative approaches to it.

One of the main processes used in poetic analysis is close readings, of which the short poetic exploration above serves as a small, humble example. As Professor Emma Mason from The University of Warwick in Coventry, England, explains, “a close reading is not a description of a poem from beginning to end: it is a view on a poem that sees it whole, and has an opinion about it.”[[6]](#footnote-6) In many ways, a musical setting of a text is itself a close reading of sorts. This point is especially evidenced by art songs in which many composers set the same text, each offering their own particular interpretation and viewpoint through their musical contribution. But how does one develop a personal “view” on a particular poem?

Perhaps part of the reason students feel arrested by textual analysis lies with the fact that grade school approaches can tend towards checklists and step-by-step instructions. Outside the trappings of guiding direction and some system of feedback, one never fully knows if one’s own interpretation is correct or not. In many contexts, modern American education is built upon finding *the* right answer. Though this resource’s purpose is pedagogical and some recommended textual exercises contain systematic elements, instructors must choose how best to present the information to their students. Some personalities or ages may flourish better when receiving single pieces or exercises at a time, where others may thrive with greater independence to develop their own processes of close reading from a wider, curated library of approaches.

Though there are many right options about where to begin analyzing poetic verse, two must be strongly discouraged: making assumptions and jumping to interpretation. Prior knowledge of an author can be helpful - but not when it flavors, unchecked, students’ ability to explore poetry independent of suppositions. Similarly, one must engage the senses and tour the landscape of a text to avoid unnecessary upset to its particular ecosystem. Principles of close reading can be grouped oversimply as either exercises in observation or interpretion. Keeping these basic categories in mind can stave off a sense of being overwhelmed in the close reading process.

**IV. Ratiocination: Close Reading through Inductive Observations**

This research must acknowledge the embarrassment of riches overflowing from the analytical toolboxes of literary and musical analyses traditions. In the interest of better understanding between these two academic ‘languages,’ some crossover terminology will be identified and captured in Appendix Table 1.11. For example, both poetics and music use the term “tone” to describe something specific, but the meanings differ. Musical tone usually signifies something about the quality of a sound produced, where poetic tone more closely denotes the mood or atmospheric effect created by the text. More than differences of semantics, this ultimately points to how notoriously difficult and discursive it is to describe auditory sound.

The title of this exercise sounds much scarier than it is. What is meant by ratiocination is merely the process of reasoning one’s way through a text, the work of a close reading. The clarifications of “inductive observations” serve two purposes, 1) to keep students focused only on the text before them without reference to any historical, stylistic, musical, critical information, and 2) to kindle and tend a spirit of active exploration and discovery without jumping to interpretation or assumptions of meaning.

For younger generations, it may be helpful to reimagine the rules of poetics as a more-powerful Twitter of sorts. Most literary rules serve a similar function to Twitter; parameters of a particular form, rhyming scheme, etc. deepen the saturation of meaning, not in spite of their particular rules but because of them. This process is best done on a clean sheet with only the text printed on it (or, if one must, an electronic copy which can be sufficiently annotated by hand). Color and/or distinctive shapes can be incredibly helpful for coding and should be encouraged.

Regardless of what elements singers choose to include in their ratiocination process, these first two elements are nonnegotiable:

A. **Read the Text Aloud before Annotating Anything**

This should be done at least twice ideally, regardless of how familiar the singer is with the text or a composer’s setting of it. This step is imperative for experiencing the flow and/or divergence of thought with multiple senses, and to taste the sounds and natural stresses of the words themselves.

B. **This Work Should Consist of a Two-sided Conversation***.*

All scholars and musicians should aim to let the written word speak for itself. In the observation stage (before a view is developed through close reading), questions and curiosity are the best tools. Use the “5W & H” questions (who, what when, where, why & how), allow space to not know the answer, honor the “otherness” of the author’s work and try to strike up a conversation to get to know it better.

C. **Poetic Devices to Consider:**

1. Meter / Rhythm
   1. Poetric meter measures rhythm in feet, specific patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables. There are four main types of feet in the English language: two with two syllables (like feet of the human body) and the two with three (perhaps like a shuffle or stumble). Memorizing the names is not particularly important; what is important is being able to feel out the natural rise and fall of words and then identify the patterns the poet uses.[[7]](#footnote-7)

|  |
| --- |
| **Table 1.1 Examples of Poetic Feet** |
| Iamb: 1 unstressed + 1 stressed – until ∪ \  Trochaic: 1 stressed + 1 unstressed – merry \ ∪  Anapestic: 2 unstressed syllables + 1 stressed – on the hill ∪ ∪ \  Dactylic: 1 stressed + 2 unstressed syllables – turn on the \ ∪ ∪ |

* 1. Metric lines refers to how many feet are in one line of poetry. Again, memorizing the names should be of lower priority than being able to identify how many feet are used from line to line. There will be much more variety in the metric line later in the modern era up to contemporary times as poets become more experimental with form.

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| **Table 1.2 Metric Lines** |
| **mono**meter: **one** foot  **di**meter: **two** feet  **tri**meter: **three** feet  **tetra**meter: **four** feet  **penta**meter: **five** feet  **hexa**meter: **six** feet |

1. Rhymes
   1. Questions to Consider:
      1. Are there any obvious rhymes?
      2. Can you find a pattern (*exemplum gratia* aa bb, abba, abab)?[[8]](#footnote-8)
      3. What type are they?
   2. Types of Rhyme

While many native English speakers can produce words that rhyme, many struggle to specify the ingredients of a rhyme. The following tables name concepts that seem obvious when explained, and can be recognized with minimal practice.

|  |
| --- |
| **Table 1.3 Most Common Types of Rhyme** |
| **Masculine “true” rhyme** – two words end with the same vowel + consonant combination (find / wind)  **Feminine “double” rhyme** – two-syllable rhyme (kettle / mettle)  **Trisyllabic rhyme** – three-syllable rhyme (patinate / latinate)  **Trailing “semi” rhyme** – one of the words + additional unstressed syllable (pail / failure)  **Slant rhyme[[9]](#footnote-9)** – stressed syllables rhyme either consonants or vowels (eyes / light) (years / yours)  **Eye rhyme** – syllables identical in spelling are pronounced differently (wind / bind)  **Pararhyme** – (different vowel sound) + penultimate & final consonants rhyme (blind / bland)  **Feminine pararhyme** 1) Both vowels differ (ran in / run on) 2) One vowel differs (blindness / blandness)  **Weakened “unaccented” rhyme[[10]](#footnote-10)** – when syllable relevant to the rhyme is unstressed (torn / forlorn) |

|  |
| --- |
| **Table 1.4 “Near Rhyme” Devices** |
| **Consonance:** identical final consonants (strain / feign)  **Assonance:** identical vowel sounds (old / goes)  **Alliteration:** repetition of consonant sounds at beginning of words or stressed syllables (Mary / Mattie) (horse / hounds) |

1. Enjambments
   1. Can the ending punctuation or word of one line mean something different when combined with the following line?
   2. Pay special attention to the layering of possible meanings via enjambment techniques in and after the Victorian Age.
2. Characters & Characterization
   1. Persona: voice of the “masked” narrator or speaker in a poem
   2. How many people are in this poem?
   3. What clues can be found to describe them?
   4. What point of view is used (first person “I”, second person “you”, third person “he/she”)?
   5. What verb tenses are used (are they primarily past, present, future, passive)?
3. Key Words and Themes
   1. Are there any words which, if removed, would alter the theme? The goal is to find diction choices that are pivotal to the author’s message.
   2. Allusions: references to outside sources, people, places, other writings, mythologies, etc.
4. Important Punctuation:
   1. The end of a sentence
   2. Descriptive punctuation: dash, colon, parenthesis or semicolon
   3. Clausal turns (esp. where a comma separates contrasting statements)
   4. Conjunctions: does it move in the same direction (*exemplum gratia* “and”), contrast (*exemplum gratia* “but”), represent a logical sequence (*exemplum gratia* “therefore”). Ask questions to reason through the sequence: what is therefore there for, what is being contrasted?
5. Form
   1. Is there uniformity or symmetry to be found in the number of lines?
   2. Are there any thematic turns (check between stanzas especially)?
   3. Meter can be a quick way to identify some poetic forms (*exemplum gratia* terza rima, sonnet, et. al.). [[11]](#footnote-11)
   4. Poetic forms often include a set rhyme scheme.[[12]](#footnote-12)

After one has spent time developing a personal close reading of the text and experiencing the musical interpretation of the composer, it is time to consider how to approach the historical context. This does not merely mean reading the Grove Music article or broadly generalizing the composition to a musical era, though those basic tasks can be helpful. Take time to thoughtfully consider that a piece of literary or musical art falls along a chronological spectrum. Consider whether the art looks backwards, is contemporary to its own time, or looks forward. Knowing where a piece lies on this matrix can greatly inform both the study and performance of an art song.

**Table 1.5 Considering The Historical Context of a Vocal Song**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Text Looks Backward | Contemporary Text | Text Looks Forward |
| Music Looks Backward | Contemporary Music | Music Looks Forward |

V. **Text vs. Music: A Tug-of-War of Primacy?**

Composers, critics, and musicologists have argued through the centuries about whether text or music is more important to the art of song. This battle of primacy swings at various points in early modern and modern history from one pendulum to the other, depending on the tastes of the time, location, its artists and schools of thought. But this view emerges rather late; historically, the segregation of music and poetry was negligible, if not completely absent, in the ancient world. As James Winn points out, “the origins and histories of the two arts make them more legitimate ‘sisters’ or ‘spouses’… Music and poetry begin together, and the frequent separations in their history lead to equally frequent reconciliations.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Indeed, Winn’s culminating work, *Unsuspected Eloquence: A History of the Relations between Poetry and Music,* remains the only general study of the topic as of 2019.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Controversy over text’s subordinate or defining role in music takes place within the context of many musical genres; for voice, these largely fall into two loose groupings: stage music and art song. In a section titled “English Literary Opposition to Opera: The Charms of the ‘Harlot Form,’” Winn explains a continental divide between England’s undying devotion to literature at the cost of musical innovation, and Europe’s ‘immoral descent’ into an aesthetic comprised of subpar poetry guilded within beautiful music. “On the continent, the development du Bos feared took place: the ‘handmaid,’ music as music, became the ‘mistress of the house.’ But in England, whose musical culture after the death of Purcell was essentially imported, the idea of imitation remained powerful, and literary men remained suspicious of music.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Further, Winn explores the practice of imitation in music and poetry which, along with dance and visual arts such as painting and sculpture, require some level of imitation to learn and participate in the craft. Vocal music demands some level of competency musically and poetically just as the sculptor must have both a hammer and chisel; without both, art cannot emerge.

**VI. Applied Poetics in Song**

The material of the project traverses through examples of various authors and composers. It roughly follows the chronological cannons of both literary and musical eras, with an exception in the third piece. Opera dominates the classical period’s vocal output. Since the best song contributions of that period are arias, the third example follows the literary chronology with Wordsworth set by modern composer William Walton.

The pieces and texts do not always represent seminal works equal to that of their authors’ or composers’ reputation and skill. Rather, they have been chosen as a sampling from a feast of possibilities. Each section dedicated to a particular piece contains pertinent background information on the composer and author, as well as an exploration of the composer’s setting. Additionally, certain poetic exercises, appropriate textual approaches and examples are expounded upon, so that singers may be inspired by the possibilities of applied poetics to interpretive performance.

|  |
| --- |
| **Figure 1.1 Timeline of Project Authors & Composers** |
| Timeline  Description automatically generated |

**A. Purcell & Shakespeare: “Ye Gentle Spirits of the Air”**

i. Pertinent Background Information (Composer)

Henry Purcell (1659-1695) ranks among England’s greatest composers, and certainly the best among his contemporaries. Indeed, his contemporaries are those who live much later into the 18th century, where Purcell died at age 36. Jacobs notes that “in his total achievements…song writing ranks high.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Purcell’s melismatic vocal lines come from the Italianate tradition; he also incorporates French style declamation into his seminal compositional style.[[17]](#footnote-17)

*The Fairy-Queen an Opera* (1692) is actually counted among Purcell’s semi-operas, because only some of the characters sing. According to the preface he penned for the work, this was not for lack of desire on Purcell’s part but rather due to a lack of resources. He states “I despair of ever having as good Voices among us, as they have in Italy.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

ii. Important Biographical Information (Author)

Though most students will have encountered at least one Shakespeare text in gradeschool, it is helpful to review a few basics. The poetics of iambic pentameter profers some difficulties for musical setting, so that it remains interesting and can achieve rhythmic variety. No doubt this is why many of the semi-operas of the time work with librettos that adjust the text, such as the anonymously-scribed adaption based upon *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. In terms of art song, there are two types of Shakespearen text settings: that from the text of a play and his sonnets. Common practice allows some freedoms with the text-setting of Shakespeare’s play texts especially.

“Ye Gentle Spirits of the Air” appears in the exciting chaos of the third act, among the entertainments Titania demands of her fairie elves “to charm my Lover till the break of day.”[[19]](#footnote-19) It invites the audience into the revelry of the fairies and also externalizes the impulsive quality of their frantic dances and frolicking.

iii. Poetic Exercises / Examples

For songs, especially those with older and often repeated texts, making a “florid map” can be essential to learning both the text and the structure of the piece. This process can be as simple as highlighting the words with melismatic passages written over them, or in general making notes of the melodic gestures or rhythmic setting that highlights the text and adds variety. It can also be helpful to add some musical notes, such as strong cadences, shifts in formal/mood sections. Beginning analyses start with only identifying florid text painting; additional information should accumulate as young singers develop greater confidence and knowledge of musicianship skills.

**Table 1.6 Example of Florid Mapping Exercise**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Text** | **Embellishments** | **Structure** |
| A Section (mm.1-29) | | |
| Ye **gentle** spirits of the air, | Gentle = melisma, disjunct | twice |
| Appear, appear  Prepare, **prepare**  And join your tender voices here | Prepare = melisma, sequential  Here = cadence | twice  twice (melismatic 1st time through)  (whole section repeats) |
| B Section (like A – mm.30-60) | | |
| Catch, catch and repeat |  |  |
| Repeat, repeat |  | twice |
| The **trembling** sounds anew | Trembling = melisma, syncopated | (whole section repeats) |
| B Section (with mood change – mm. 61-105) | | |
| Soft, soft, soft as her sighs |  |  |
| And **sweet** as pearly dew | Sweet: 1st melisma, disjunct  2nd, same + more florid | twice |
| **Run** new divisions, | Run = melisma, stepwise | Run repeated twice, then whole phrase repeated |
| And such measure keep, |  |  |
| as when you lull  You lull the God of **Love** **asleep** | Asleep = 1st melisma, syncopated  Love = 2nd melisma, cadential embellishment | Both phrases repeated, but only 1 melisma each time through  (strong cadence) |

iv. Composer’s Textual / Musical Setting

Once singers have created a florid map as above, dramatic purposes can be more clearly explored. It is highly important to complete this work early in the learning process, so that the notes of each melisma can be learned as separate entities rather than mere variations on the first melodic idea. Repetition also falls into this category as each iteration of “appear” and “prepare” is meant for specific and many magical beings coming into sight.

The vocal writing in the A section especially mimics the formal invitation of a trumpet with both its triadic shapes, and the almost echo-like repetition of each line throughout. Purcell also uses rests and silence to move the piece forward. Mm. 38-44 include a lively call and response between the accompaniment that literally catches and repeats the melody and intensifies into the exclamation of the melisma in mm. 45.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Purcell uses syncopation in multiple melismas to different effect. After the atmospheric turn into the B section proper, the vocal line leans into softness with half step dissonances which is followed shortly by an effusive descriptive sweetness. This contrasts subtly yet effectively from the affective use of syncopation to indicate trembling in mm. 45-49 and mm. 54-58, as seen in the figures below.[[21]](#footnote-21)

|  |
| --- |
| **Figure 1.2 Measures 72-74** |
| Diagram, engineering drawing  Description automatically generated |

|  |
| --- |
| **Figure 1.3 Measures 45-49** |
| A picture containing object, antenna  Description automatically generated |

Once singers spend the time to observe the sharp contrasts between floridity and forward motion in Purcell’s vocal writing, they can approach the song and others like it with more confidence and specificity.

**B. Arne & Milton: “By Dimpled Brook”**

i. Pertinent Background Information (Composer)

Thomas Arne (1710-1778) has tended in recent history to fall into the obscurity of Handel’s shadow, despite the fruits of a wildly prolific and popular composition career. Because of his Roman Catholic faith, Arne would not produce genres specific to the Anglican church like many other composers of his generation, but rather for the masses in English theatre music where he is said to be the most significant figure of the 18th century.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Arne obtained “at his disposal the greatest tragedienne of her time (his sister) and the finest English female singer (his wife), and they contributed to his first enduring success, his setting of Milton's 1634 masque *Comus* as adapted by John Dalton (1738).”[[23]](#footnote-23) Masque belongs to the category of not-quite-operas, which Stevens describes more specifically as “somewhere between a pageant and an opera.”[[24]](#footnote-24) A more apt description summarizes the masque as a short, allegorical drama performed by actors in masks. Brought to the Tudor court in the 16th century, the form was known for having “gorgeous costumes, spectacular scenery …and rich allegorical verse.”[[25]](#footnote-25) While Milton proves an appropriate source for rich allegorical verse, the choice and success of *Comus* can be in part attributed to the “beginnings of a pre-Romantic interest in the past, though its success also had much to do with Arne’s charming music.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Much has been documented about Arne’s compositional style in this first wild success, including some witness accounts: “They [Drury Lane Theatre] give us ... sometimes charming Opérettes. I saw the other day that of *Comus* & never have I had so much pleasure. The words and the music of it are admirable, & I am going to learn all the airs by heart, especially since they are not difficult to sing.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

A great testament to Arne’s work are the many quotations and imitations Handel employs, including imitating *Comus* two years after its premier with his oratorio, also based on a Milton text, *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato*.[[28]](#footnote-28) Besides the competition of Handel’s presence in England, composers born between 1710-40 faced a musical England that was rather invaded by Italian opera.

ii. Important Biographical Information (Author)

John Milton (1608-1674) is one of the many poets who, in their deep study and imitation of the classics, have in turn been added to the classical cannon. In dedication to what in literary theory has become known as decorum, Milton stands as a beacon of propriety by both creating and complying with a complicated hierarchical system while matching all written content to the supposed innate highness or lowness of its character. Milton’s devotion to rightness in more than one aspect awarded him the title of Puritan. Many scholars point out, however, that Arne’s adaptation is at least in part at odds with the seriousness of Milton’s original allegorical intent.

Piggott aptly traces how *Comus* furthered public approval of Milton over a hundred year span. He echoes the view of many scholars that, “in the eighteenth century Milton was elevated as the national poet” partly because of his idealism and partly as a convenient vehicle for contemporary political purposes.[[29]](#footnote-29) This poem, one of Milton’s shorter, was written in his mid-20s just after university. The character of Comus is widely accepted as the initial case study for Satan in *Paradise Lost,* which intersects with the text of this piece as it is lifted from Comus’ opening monologue.

iii. Poetic Exercises / Examples

Young American singers tend to struggle with making an emotional connection with pastorale poetry. There remains a perceived lack of excitement, depth, and overall triteness of metaphor and imagery. While pedagogues and scholars recognize the seeds of folklore and romanticism in the pastoral medium, students tend to grow warm and sleepy in the sunshine-filled meadows. For this purpose, an exercise in word association can be beneficial in enlivening interest in the text and finding a dramatic impulse. Without an urgency to say and sing the message, the resulting recitation may land somewhere between sagging under-energized and aimlessly sing-song.

This simple thesaurus-like exercise creates space for students to consider the words as well as possible and divergent meanings, and help develop their own view of the tone and intent. Each line of text should be taken one at a time and one word at a time, adding underneath the original text a list of related synonyms and concepts. As shown below, the process of brainstorming allows for themes to emerge from the cloud of experimental words: (magic, mystery, power, unknown), and (join, touch, together, closeness, joined).

**Table 1.7 Example of Thesaurus Exercise[[30]](#footnote-30)**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *text* | **Come,** | **where** | **fairies** | **dance** | **in** | **ring** |
| *student* | Invite  Join  Go  Waiting | Location  Space  Time  Unknown | Magic  Creatures  Power  Mystery | Frolic  Play  Touch  Movement | Inside  Together  Closeness  Where | Circle  Complete  Magic  Joined |

A straight delivery would sufficiently communicate the information, as in ‘come to where they do an activity.’ However, this exercise highlights the scintillating undertones of the invitation with something closer to, ‘Join me in a mystical place where fairies dance and frolic inside a magical circle.’ One of the reasons English remains so difficult for non-native speakers is its utter lack of regularity and adherence to straightforward, widely orthodox rules. One of its greatest strengths, however, is the degree of creativity that can be employed with syntax, for example. Tapping into phrase and sentence structure can be invaluable for singers. It is imperative to possess the skill of rearranging the elements of language and parts of speech in one’s heart language, as this process proves immeasurably helpful and essential when working with foreign language texts.[[31]](#footnote-31)

iv. Composer’s Textual / Musical Setting

Unlike Shakespeare’s play, which was both intended for public theatre performances and extensive use of music throughout, Milton’s *Comus* humbly requires little more than incidental music and a few airs. However, Thomas Arne lifts a number of additional verses for musical setting, “By Dimpled Brook and Fountain” among them. This new song was significantly assigned to the famous lead soprano Kitty Clive.[[32]](#footnote-32) While the melodic gestures of the piece’s first phrase starts rather like a folksong with slightly widened range (mm. 3-11),[[33]](#footnote-33) this scholarship furthers the view that Arne intended to do more than merely present Milton’s poem as a pastorale allegory, “[pitting] Vice against Virtue in order to celebrate Puritan values through Virtue’s triumph. In Arne’s version, by contrast, Vice was transmogrified into a familiar Pleasure (Mrs Clive) who had the last word.”[[34]](#footnote-34) In fact, Arne’s musical setting of “By Dimpled Brook” pushes the bounds of double entendre towards overt sexuality.

In Milton’s verse, the lines belong to Comus himself; but Arne gives it to Mrs. Clive who plays the powerful role of Sabrina, the Nymph. Some historians cite the contemporary theater practice of only allowing gods and magical creatures to sing on stage; but it seems equally plausible that Arne took the opportunity to extend sexual innuendos. “By Dimpled Brook” is preceded by the first song of Camus in which the title role finishes in sleep, and is followed by a completely interjected drinking duet celebrating freedom and ending with the lines “No dull stinting hour we own / Pleasure counts our time alone.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

Immediately following the initial, highly regular 4-bar phrases of “By Dimpled Brook,” the melody surprisingly jumps up the large interval of a tenth to repeat the previous question, “What has night to do with sleep?”[[36]](#footnote-36) The effect of waking the audience physically and imaginatively is a quite brilliant and effective gesture. Falling in a rather seductive stepwise motion back down to the bottom of the interval, Arne gives the audience time to consider the possibilities with an interlude, after which he repeats the entire A section. Only after the second interlude and pondering the activities of the night does the musical material progress. Even more brazenly the text proceeds

Night has better sweets to prove,

Venus now wakes and wakens Love.

Come let us our rights begin,

Tis only daylight that makes sin.[[37]](#footnote-37)

The pitch sequence of “better sweets to prove” is quoted with varied rhythm for “let us our rights begin” (mm. 16-17, 21-22). The melody climbs again as it asserts that sexual rights are not sinful, and repeats simply and self-assuredly with straight rhythms into a strong cadence.

**C. Walton & Wordsworth: “Glide Gently”**

i. Pertinent Background Information (Composer)

Sir William Walton (1902–1983) stands as an example of the modernist tendency towards pastiche, amalgamation, and experimentation. This fact can be observed in his seemingly contradictory list of influences: Anglican anthems, Jazz, and Stravinksy to name a few. Stylistically, Walton is known for rhythmic vitality and irregularities, what usually sounds like an orchestrally-concieved accompaniment, and his sensuous, Romantic flair.

This Romantic flair is expressed in its full power in the song cycle “The Lord Mayor’s Table” which was commissioned for the 1962 City of London Music Festival and dedicated to the city of London. Though Walton is not as well known and less performed in the vocal cannon, his compositions display deep understanding of the texts, likely due to lifelong friendships with many of his contemporary literary giants such as the Sitwell siblings.

ii. Important Biographical Information (Author)

William Wordsworth (1770–1850) is lauded as one of the best English Romantic authors of lyrical poetry, with a staggering output. The text for “Glide Gently” comes from the beginning of the poem “Remembrance of Collins” written in 1798. In the 1815 printing of two volumes, it is grouped thematically with lyrical poetry under the title “Poems Proceeding from Sentiment and Reflection.”[[38]](#footnote-38) Wordsworth also gives the details that his lyrical remembrance was “written upon the Thames, near Richmond.”[[39]](#footnote-39)

While it is unnecessary to delve into the deeper allusions and content of the final two stanzas, the one important fact to know is the identity of Collins. William Collins was an English poet highly influential during the mid 18th century; as a lyrical poet who progressed England closer to full Romanticism, Wordsworth would have known and admired his work.

iii. Poetic Exercises / Examples

For singers, one of the most important literary exercises they must learn is how to approach the construction of a song cycle. Because the composer usually selects the texts and arranges the songs in a particular order, several special considerations should be given. More than independent songs, song cycles essentially bind the poetic content to the musical content to create a progression of some sort that is strong enough to create an identifiable narrative and theme. Some song cycles rely more heavily on plot such as Robert Schumann’s *Dichterliebe*, Op. 48, where others focus on internal emotion which one can see clearly in Franz Schubert’s *Winterreise*, D911. The first task is to identify the poetic source or sources; a cycle composed with text from the same author or poetry collection already contain some unifying elements. Note: this must be done whether the singer performs only one excerpted piece or the whole cycle.

“The Lord Mayor’s Table” is unique not only in the cycle’s use of six different sources but also because Christopher Hassall, an accomplished man of the theater who wrote the libretto for Walton’s opera, chose the texts and structure.[[40]](#footnote-40) Regardless of how simple or complex the origins of the song texts, one must then proceed to read them back to back like one single story and look for themes. The process can be simple: read each poem twice through and make some preliminary notes about what stands out. For example:

|  |
| --- |
| **Table 1.8 Example Song Cycle Notes** |
| 1. The Lord Mayor’s Table (Thomas Jordan)  witty, fun, lilting, about writing “a ditty in praise of the City”  2. Glide Gently (William Wordsworth)  praises the river Thames as a muse to poets, beautiful flowing construction  3. Wapping Old Stairs (Anon)  lower class/folk diction, about a Molly who chides her Tom for flirting with other girls when she has been faithful to him  4. Holy Thursday (William Blake)  elaborates a scene of children on Maundy Thursday, described “they like Thames water flow”  5. The Contrast (Charles Morris)  funny, contrasts life in London and the countryside, commenting on love and activities  6. Rhyme (Anon)  Witty and charming, couplets about what each of the church bells in Londontown “say” |

After the initial readings, one could easily see London as the cycle’s theme, even without the aid of historical research. This practice of allowing the poetry to speak for itself should be fostered throughout study; for if singers learn to depend exclusively upon resources such as song anthologies, how will the cannon of performed works escape from its endless repeat, or new works (both contemporary and discovered) find artists to sing them?

iv. Composer’s Textual / Musical Setting

As a whole, “Glide Gently” is the most beautiful and lush setting of the cycle, showcasing that infamous romantic flair running through Walton’s compositional style. Just looking at the accompaniment figure shows the smooth gliding gesture Walton mimics from the text. He also takes the line “thus for ever glide” seriously, and applies the technique throughout the piece. Some of the harmonies contain some dark colors to them, mimicking the depth and impenetrable nature of the Thames river.

Vocally, the lines are beautiful, crawling and splashing with small and large interval gestures that lean heavily into disonnance while the ripples of the surface smooth themselves out. Walton’s choice in mm. 7 to suddenly interject the leap in the vocal line seems to capture Wordsworth’s intensity of feeling. This same purpose can be seen with the rhythmic adjustment in mm. 17 with the tense pull of two-against-three.

Within the constant motion of the accompaniment, Walton still manages to include a pedal point at “quiet soul” in mm. 19 underneath the bubbling chromatic right hand.[[41]](#footnote-41) The contour of the vocal line also ebbs and flows in watery ways throughout the piece, most obviously between mm. 21-6, aptly embellishing “deep waters” with appropriate low notes.[[42]](#footnote-42) Satisfaction is reached upon repeating “now are flowing”[[43]](#footnote-43) with the descending intervals of an octave in the first iteration and a perfect fifth in the final.

**D. Beach & Browning: “Ah, love, but a day!”**

i. Pertinent Background Information (Composer): Beach

Mrs. H.H.A. Beach, born Amy Marcy Cheney Beach (1867-1944), was part of the second New England school of composers who wrote in the late-romantic European style while living in Boston, MA. Despite her American heritage, she maintained her commitment to this aesthetic throughout her portfolio of 117 art songs.

Beach argued openly that women composers should spend their efforts on applied, printable and performable composition rather than in boosting their literary knowledge. Some composers set high quality poetry because they love it, and others set good poetry because it is necessary to associate their work with orthodoxically approved literature. This fact should not be taken so far as to misunderstand Beach’s commitment to poetic aesthetics. Very much a student of the themes prevalent in late-romantic style, Beach spent quite a lot of time in nature, and is lauded for her ability to capture all the essential Victorian themes in her compositions.

ii. Poetic Exercises / Examples

“Ah, love, but a day!” from *Browning Songs* Op. 44 exemplifies why it is always prudent to review the original poetic source when possible.[[44]](#footnote-44) [[45]](#footnote-45) Composers, especially post-Renaissance, increasingly take liberties in making adjustments for the purpose of art song composition. Comparing the original and lyrical texts also reveals something of the composer’s view and close reading of the poem. Table 1.9 highlights Beach’s adaptions in bold, and words within brackets have been interpolated from the preceding stanza.

|  |
| --- |
| **Table 1.9 Example Scansion Exercise** |
| —James Lee’s Wife Speaks at the Window  I. *Scansion*  Ah, Love, but a day, \ \ ∪ ∪ \  And the world has changed! ∪ ∪ \ \ \  **Ah, Love, but a day,** \ \ ∪ ∪ \  **And the world has changed!** ∪ ∪ \ \ \  The sun’s away, ∪ \ ∪ \  And the bird estranged; ∪ ∪ \ ∪ \  The wind has dropped, ∪ \ ∪ \  And the sky’s deranged ∪ ∪ \ ∪ \  Summer**, Summer** has stopped. \ ∪ \ ∪ ∪ \  **Summer** **has stopped.** \∪ ∪ \  **Ah, Love, but a day,** \ \ ∪ ∪ \  **And the world has changed!** ∪ ∪ \ \ \  II.  Look in my eyes! \ ∪ ∪ \  Wilt thou change too? \ \ \ \  **Look in my eyes!** \ ∪ ∪ \  **Wilt thou change too?** \ \ \ \  Should I fear surprise? \ ∪ \ ∪ \  Shall I find aught new \ ∪ \ ∪ \  In the old and dear, \ ∪ \ ∪ \  In the good and true, \ ∪ \ ∪ \  With the changing year? \ ∪ \ ∪ \  **[Ah, Love,] look in my eyes,** \ \ \∪ ∪ \  **Look in my eyes,** \∪ ∪ \  **Wilt thou change too?** \ \ \ \ |

Beach set only the first two of Browning’s three stanzas. Making up for lost length, Beach exercises her creative authority with noticeable repetition. All additions symmetrically fit within the original form, though the sheer quantity of adding ten lines to the verses’ original fourteen is rather significant. The repetitions in the first stanza serve to emphasize the persona’s inner thoughts, and to connect the external manifestation of the world changing more bluntly with “summer has stopped” (I, 9-12).[[46]](#footnote-46) In the second verse, Beach manages to intensify the persona’s address and the pathos of the song by repeating the persona’s imploring question “Wilt thou change too?” (II, 4).[[47]](#footnote-47) Perhaps the most interesting change to the text is the addition of “Ah, Love” before the final section of repeated text. Beach’s choice fuses the two stanzas together and adds a sense of finality by returning to the top of the circle, the first utterance of the text. Similar in affect to lines 9-12 of the first stanza, Beach connects the imperative statement and following question “look in my eyes, / wilt thou change too?” a direct address and name.[[48]](#footnote-48)

iii. Pertinent Background Information (Author): Browning

Robert Browning (1812-1889), one of the major Victorian Age poets, is known for his mastery of dramatic monologue and psychological portraiture. When discussing authors with students of singing, it is helpful to highlight if the author brings any new forms or styles into the canon, in addition to commentary on the quantity and quality of their output. A true contemporary of his time, Browning brought psychological developments into his work, as well as blending aspects of dramatic poetry with the freer forms available in lyrical construction. The collection that Beach’s song comes from, *James Lee’s Wife,*[[49]](#footnote-49)was published in 1864, just three years after his beloved wife Elizabeth Barrett Browning died. *“*Ah, Love, but a day” is the first poem in *Dramatis Personae* with the title, “James Lee’s Wife Speaks at the Window.” It is not surprising that Beach sets a text from this collection which gained much acceptance by the time of her setting in 1900. The significance of the work lies somewhat in Browning’s artistic development. Kennedy and Hair point out that “*the poet was in fact moving in new directions,* shaping material from the Breton coast into the related lyrics of ‘James Lee’ …exploring the nature of music… and responding to some of the major theological and scientific issues of the day” (emphasis added).[[50]](#footnote-50)

As with all lyrical poetry, a scansion exercise to assess the author’s use of rhythmic feet and patterns can be indispensable to understanding how mood and tone is created. Faverty identifies that,

For *James Lee’s Wife*, the poem which opens *Dramatis Personae* and sets the disconsolate mood for much of the volume, no sources have thus far been discovered. The most convincing suggestion as to origin is that by Herford, who believes that the poem grew out of Browning’s dejection over the loss of his wife and out of his residence on the ‘bitter coast of France,’ where he spent his late summer vacations in 1862 and 1863. The problem confronting James Lee’s wife was, like Browning’s own, ‘how to live when the answering love was gone.’[[51]](#footnote-51)

Looking at the scansion in Table 1.9, the rhythm shows how Browning captures this disconsolate attitude with a restlessness in stress and pattern. There are several lines with punctuating stresses interrupting the verse’s ability to flow - namely, the first two lines of each stanza. This construction brings effortless emphasis and forces those words with subsequent stresses to take up more space physically when spoken and psychologically when read.

iv. Textual / Musical Setting

Scansion also reveals why Beach needed to adjust the selected verses for musical setting. Lines 5-9 of the second stanza show the persona going down a rabbit trail in her mind, the rocking back and forth of stressed and unstressed syllables spiraling deeper into her anxious thoughts. Beach could have included the third verse, as the inertia of these lines invites; but Browning introduces a turn with new thematic content that contrasts this initial conceit.[[52]](#footnote-52) Another use case for scansion in art song analysis is melodic contour. A good example of this is the line “Wilt thou change too” comprised of all accented syllables. Beach sets the first iteration of this line as a question with a half-step neighbor followed by a descending tritone and half step rise (mm. 31-33),[[53]](#footnote-53) just before rhythmic and textual augmentation builds into the spiral of subsequent questions. The final repetition which ends the piece honors the equality of each word, as Beach holds the melody on the same note (mm. 45-48).[[54]](#footnote-54)

The beautiful ambiguity of “Love” in this text allows the identity to be a person whom the persona loves, the verb (when the first two lines are read across the enjambment as a sentence), or the concept of Love itself. As explored previously, Beach’s inserted address to Love in line 10 of the second stanza functions as an added refrain of sorts which could indicate the possibility of a musical coda. But Beach instead uses this repetition of the poem’s first two words as the musical climax of the piece melodically, texturally and emphatically with accents and fermatas.[[55]](#footnote-55) In the wake of accompaniment silence from mm. 41, Beach creates overt textural intimacy in the piano’s mm. 42-43 with a singing melodic motive echoing the vocal line. This, significantly, is the first and only time in the song the piano directly quotes melodic material from the voice. Hauntingly it echoes in many sonorites, without a satisfying harmonic release until after the vocal line has ended.

|  |
| --- |
| **Figure 1.5 Measures 41-43** |
| **Diagram, schematic  Description automatically generated** |

**E. Dickinson & Laitman: “Good Morning Midnight”**

i. Pertinent Background Information (Composer)

Lori Laitman (b. 1955) is one of America’s most celebrated living female composers and known for composing art song extensively. Her compositional canon consists of “settings that seek to retain the integrity of each poem while deploying the fullest resources of the voice …[and] her prosodic techniques encompass stream-of-consciousness and French didacticism.”[[56]](#footnote-56) For Laitman, “﻿Poem and music is a DNA combo.”[[57]](#footnote-57)

One of the special benefits of performing the works of living composers is the insight they often give when explaining how they compose. Laitman explains her process of setting a poem to music:

My goal is to create dramatic music to express and magnify the meaning of the poem. I compose the vocal line first… emphasize what I consider important in each line, but also taking great care to set the words properly for the singer… I typically craft the accompaniment to color the emotions behind the words, and all musical aspects (rhythm, textures, etc.) are chosen to add additional layers of interpretation to the poem itself. Each song thus becomes my musical interpretation of the poem.[[58]](#footnote-58)

From this description, Laitman’s art songs could be accurately labeled musical close readings. Thankfully, the markings in Laitman’s music are sufficiently extensive, and she works to provide plenty of guidelines and clues to help decode her interpretation.

ii. Important Biographical Information (Author)

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) has in many ways eluded orthodox classification among the literary community. She has been grouped with both Romantic and late Gothic poetry, and remains subject to a plethora of suppositional and conspiracy theories. Her skill for writing beautiful and striking poetry persists, and she represents a transition towards more individualistic poetic styles.

Previous literary eras are marked more by adherence to rules, with only minor aberrations, than the creation of entirely new systems. But Dickinson’s intense privacy and protection over her altogether unique poetic style reframed the possibilities for poets to not only be masters of language but more essentially creators as well. Her compression of text, unusual and complex syntax, and more experimental later poems compliment the haze and mystery of her life perfectly.

iii. Poetic Exercises / Examples

The amount of ambiguity and multiplicity of possible readings extends across Dickinson’s canon, with only a comparatively small number of poems attaining a somewhat stable sense of meaning in the literary community. Why, then, have so many composers set “Good Morning Midnight” when it receives negligible exploration in literary criticism? Written in 1862, deep into Dickinson’s decade commonly referred to as the “writing years,” this verse reads like so many of her other poems: deceptively simple on the surface.[[59]](#footnote-59) In the instance of Dickinson, and many of the poets and movements that follow her, the best option for singers approaching the text is to spend extended time swimming in the sounds and unknowns. Alongside this, the composer’s own view captured in the music must be heavily relied upon for the development of meaningful performance.

Ratiocination exercises often produce fruitful results with Emily Dickinson’s poetry, though it requires slightly different expectations than previously discussed. In the case of modern, free versed poetry, a looser approach can lend better results. For example, Dickinson changes meter and stress pattern so often, it forces a sort of tripping over the words with few, if any, moments of reprieve where the rhythm falls into a natural groove. Let the poem itself guide towards its most important linguistic elements rather than expecting to check off every item.

A visual scan already highlights some of Dickinson’s hallmark stylings such as long dashes and the capitalization of specific words. Therefore, punctuation, enjambments, and diction choices of important words should go on the list of items to explore more closely. It reads aloud quite clearly as prose, especially if one does not pause with every dash. Extensive use of the first-person “I” throughout indicates that characterization of the persona can be investigated. One of the reasons the verse reads closer to prose is the lack of a strong rhyme pattern; but there are some repetitions of sounds, and which should also be included. Again, one of the helpful aspects of annotation in poetry is that students are free to mark in ways most helpful to them.

**Figure 1.6 Example Ratiocination Exercise**

A picture containing map

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**Key:**

Red and purple – repeated sounds (assonance)

Green – rhymes

Yellow – punctuation

Circles – important words

Dickinson is noted for her extensive use of slant rhyme, such as “Morning” and “Midnight” in the first stanza and “place,” “stay,” and “Day” in the second. Listing all possible enjambments in Dickinson seems daunting; but examining a small number can help singers, especially when considering the composer’s choices in setting the melodic line. Dashes, like many punctuation marks indicate a pause in time or logical relationship between words and phrases. But unlike other more commonly used punctuation, dashes and especially Dickinson’s long dashes take up more physical space on the page. This is one of the ways she builds layers of meaning into her brief verses. For the sake of this exercise, dashes will be explored as commas and periods to show how they add a plethora of structural and meaning possibilities:

**Table 1.9 Example of Enjambment Exercise**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Good Morning –– Midnight ––  I’m coming Home ––  Day –– got tired of me –– | Good Morning**,** Midnight (stop) I’m coming Home.  Good Morning (stop) Midnight (stop) I’m coming Home.  Good Morning (stop) Midnight**,** I’m coming Home. |

The only images of this poem occur internally in stanzas two and three with “sunshine” and the more descriptive “when the East is Red” (ll: 5, 10).[[60]](#footnote-60) Note the clever double meaning of “the East” as both sunrise, and somewhere foreign with the use of “abroad” in line 12. Some diction choices are highlighted through capitalization; simply listing them can reveal a pattern. The opposite forces of night and day showcase the broader theme of contrast and opposition, and the “little Girl” trying to find a home where she will be wanted.

iv. Composer’s Textual / Musical Setting

Though many modern settings of this poem explore the darker interpretations and themes, Laitman’s view of the poem clearly includes humor and lightness. The first lively measures alone communicate this; and Laitman explains even more explicitly in her program notes. She describes a, “conversational vocal line over a bouncy accompaniment, emphasizes the humor in the poem.”[[61]](#footnote-61) To make sure singers have some examples of where Laitman sees this humor, see the marking at mm. 15 which directs the singer to be “cute, tell ‘Day’ off!”

She goes so far as to take the persona’s self-description as “a little Girl” at face value. Literary academic Dobson groups “Good Morning Midnight” with a dozen other poems in which Dickinson utilizes the persona of a little girl; so this reading has equal merit alongside some of the other more serious and heavy musical moods composed.[[62]](#footnote-62) Speaking of mm. 31-33, where the “little Girl” pleads, the accompaniment figure is a rhythmic augmentation of the prelude’s initial figure, though admittedly with a deeper, heavier atmosphere.[[63]](#footnote-63) It brings back full circle the poem’s problem: that the persona came to Midnight with a hopeful greeting but is let down when he turns away.

When asked why she does not use key signatures, Laitman states that “My tonal centers shift so often that it would be impractical to utilize key signatures in my music.”[[64]](#footnote-64) This concept of shifting tonal centers is absolutely perfect for Dickinson, and probably one of the reasons why most settings of her poetry date to 1945 and later. When asked how Laitman selects poetry to set as art song, she lists several aspects that also highlight why Dickinson proves such a good choice, and how the singer can more aptly lean into the poetic interpretation.

It’s easier when a poem isn’t too long… [or] complex, because the audience has to be able to grasp the meaning of the poem through the song. I have found that poems that tell a story work very well — as it is easy for the audience to follow along … I try to avoid poems with a lot of … complex … Most importantly, it is good if the poem has some emotional “breathing space” — so that the music can take over what is left unsaid.[[65]](#footnote-65)

What a wonderful help for singers to know that this piece is constructed to tell a story, and that the presentation can follow suit. Because Laitman’s view of the poem asks for a simpler “girl” characterization rather than a deeply dramatic and moody personality, the vocal production should also be lighter, flexible, and smooth throughout the disjunt melody.

**VII. Conclusion**

The elements of music that make it enjoyable, namely pleasant sounds, await discovery in the world of poetics. Though not comprehensive, this scholarship has gathered information on the personal application of poetics for singers, explored the relationship between music and poetic disciplines, and supplied practical case studies for how students and their teachers can apply this information to the craft of singing. The exercises and rationales introduced and explained herein lie along a spectrum of accessibility and can be applied to an even wider variety of textual and musical examples. Teachers should encourage their students to partake in this work, especially in their heart language, so that the work itself does not feel foreign when applied to foreign language texts. When equal learning and exploration extends to both poetics and musicality, issues of primacy melt into the background and a symbiotic relationship emerges.

**APPENDIX**

**A. Practical Exercises & Other Considerations**

* 1. Blank Sheet Exercises

This section of the Appendix serves as a catalogue of the practical exercises used throughout the scholarship. They are intended for pedagogical excerption and can be done with any song text. Their purpose aims at helping students approach poetic texts with greater confidence and curiosity.

* + 1. Ratiocination: Inductive Observations

This process[[66]](#footnote-66) is best done on a clean sheet with only the text printed on it (or, if one must, an electronic copy which can be sufficiently annotated by hand). Color and/or distinctive shapes can be incredibly helpful for coding and should be encouraged.

* + 1. Becoming a Thesaurus in Your Heart-language

One of the reasons English remains so very difficult for non-native speakers is its utter lack of regularity and adherence to rules. One of its greatest strengths, however, is the degree of creativity that can be employed such as with syntax. Tapping into phrase and sentence structure can be invaluable for singers. It is imperative to be able to rearrange the elements of language in one’s heart language, as this process will prove immeasurably helpful when working with foreign language texts. If one studies a few entries of a thesaurus, one can see that not all linked entries fall under the same part of speech. Students will benefit from strengthening concept associations that can cross the borders between parts of speech without losing their locale on the map.

Exercises:

1. Words as Lego-Blocks Exercise:

Start with single word association exercises rather than full phrase ‘translations.’[[67]](#footnote-67) Take a single line of text, write it on the long side of a piece of paper, (blank if possible) and draw lines between each of the words. Then go word by word adding your own thesaurus entries of synonyms and concepts.

1. Inside Out Exercise: This exercise can be especially helpful for Arias or songs with “internal monologue” content. These types of pieces may be more or less easy for some singers to connect with and portray. But whether the student is working on distinguishing the A’ section of a da capo aria or merely trying to avoid overthinking in performance, danger of monotony and sameness lurk.

Speak or write the text inside out (which in this case would be outside in). Instead of speaking to “the air,” put someone else in the situation and direct the text to that person. Shifting the form from monologue into direct address can quickly bring students out of a state of middling reaction into a state of greater action and specificity. This exercise can be done first on paper with two columns, picking at least two different entities or people to address. The example below highlights the fact that the meaning of questions can change drastically depending on whom one asks.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Table 1.10 Example of “Inside Out” Exercise** | |
| **Original Lyrics** | **Addressed Lyrics** |
| Will there really be a "Morning"?  Is there such a thing as "Day"? | (to mother)  Will tomorrow ever come?  Why isn’t the name “light”?  (to God)  Will life exist on the other side of death?  Why is this darkness happening to me? |

Once the student has explored this work on paper, it can then be applied in physical practice. The best results should come from applied spatial work such as using a practice room mirror as the person (which also helps the singer engage), imagining a second person at another proximity to the singer, or use a live person for the singer to interact with during the exercise.

* 1. Recommended Sources

Part of what makes approaching text so overwhelming for students of singing is the fullness of literary resources. One hardly knows where to start, especially since no clear authoritative poetic counterpart exists to the comprehensive musical resource of Grove. Some exist either broadly or with some specificity such as era-specific, with varying levels of success and helpfulness. Where “Dr. Google” guides towards trite answers or the ever-present and inconsistently accurate Wikipedia, library searches can generate information in the thousands for students to sift through.

Voice studio instructors may find it helpful to point students towards adding two simple “gateway” resources to their personal library as a starting place during their collegiate studies.

1. The Merriam Webster Encyclopedia of Literature, which contains surprisingly helpful information despite the average entry length of ~150 words, and

2. A reputable glossary of literary terms such as that produced by Cornell scholar M.H. Abrams. Secondhand copies can be obtained quite economically; but owning a “studio copy” for student use could be a suitable alternative.

* 1. Nuances of Terminology

Because both music and poetics deal in the world of sounds, and terminology eventually becomes discursive, it is important to consider what a term could mean in the opposite discipline. Consider these three simple terms and how different their meanings are depending on the contextual:[[68]](#footnote-68)

**Table1.11 Comparing Terms’ Linguistic and Musical Differences**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Term …*as a*** | **Linguistic device** | **Singer’s description** |
| Tone | mood or atmospheric effect created by the text | something regarding the quality of a sound produced or phonated |
| Diction | an author’s specific word choice (sometimes because it is striking on its own or in comparison to its synonyms) | Usually refers to either improper pronunciation, or an imbalance in the articulation of a particular word |
| Meter / Rhythm | The rhythmic structure used (basic units: syllables, feet -stress patterns, lines) | The rhythmic structure used (basic units: note values - time, musical measures) |

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7. Note: there are other patterns not listed here, such as ∪ \ ∪. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Also see section vii. Form. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Also see “Assonance” and “Alliteration” in Table 1.4. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Also see “Consonance” in Table 1.4. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
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67. See section B. Arne & Milton: By Dimpled Brook iii. Poetic Exercises / Examples for the list of poetic devices to consider for exercises in ratiocination. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. For quick reference, also consider Kimball’s curated list of poetic devices in her book *Art Song: Linking Poetry and Music,* pages 95-102. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)