

Singing in Your Head, Words Flowing from Your Hands

I had always sung, and words had always registered deeply with me. And it wasn't just the songs that had been composed with words from the start, it was songs made up of pre-existing melodies with words interpolated, sometimes most awkwardly, that appealed to me. I remember briefly, when I was 8, joining the children's choir at the church of a very Christian friend, much to my mother's dismay. I came away from my few rehearsals (before bowing out because I didn't want to actually have to go to church) obsessively singing a re-use of the primary theme from Brahms' Academic Festival Overture, setting the words 'The King in his glory goes marching along, Hosanna in the highest, so sings the awaiting throng'. I would sing this over and over, at the top of my range (the church choir director was the first person to tell me I was a soprano) until my parents told me I needed to stop. After my first summer at Merrywood Music Camp, and my first experience singing in a 'real' choir, I couldn't stop singing the final movement from Vivaldi's Gloria – 'Cum sancto spiritu, in gloria dei patris, in Gloria dei patris, amen.' Again, I was asked to stop after a while. And at Sarah Lawrence in my freshman year, I sang in the chorus for Handel's oratorio Belshazzar, with a fugue built on the inimitable line 'And every step he takes on his immortal head precipitates the thunder down,' and in a Lou Harrison piece setting text in Esperanto.

It wasn't until I started singing Bach and Monteverdi and Schütz in the University of Michigan Early Music Ensemble that I started to understand the connection between what I had been singing and what I had been playing all these years. I remember a breakthrough after struggling with the shifting accent (hemiola, to be technical) in a chorale text: 'Es bringt das rechte Jubeljahr, was trauen wir deinimmer dar' – it was the same pattern as a lively triple-meter variation I had been wrestling with in Georg Böhmer's keyboard setting of 'Ach wie flüchtig, ach wie nichtig'. The words were there, even when they weren't there. Since then, I've felt badly for any keyboardist who's trying to bring expression and nuance to works of Bach without having sung any of his cantatas. The weeping appoggiatura figure, the pairing of running eighths, the lift at large leaps, the separation of repeated figures – all of these things can be so naturally planted at the roots of

an instrumentalist's intuition when learned through music that is texted and sung. Word accent, punctuation, breath, and, of course, *meaning* – what more could we ask for as a guide to natural inflection in our playing? In the interest of such learning, Ed Parmentier had his harpsichord students set words to the fugue subjects of the Well-Tempered Clavier Book I. We were required to sing our masterful renderings in our studio class, and the pinnacle of these performances was by a quirky older student, very shy but funny, who had applied the subject for the Bb major fugue to the words: 'I hate to sing this song, please don't make me sing this song, no...'

I can't begin to give an account of all the ways in which words have been integral to my own playing and my work with students. At the beginning of my Baroque Performance class each term, the first project has been to create nonsensical but idiomatic texts in a variety of languages to a number of different 17th and 18th-century melodies, exploring the words' shapes, their patterns, their rhetorical value, and what they do to where we breathe, how we deal with groups of notes, what we accent, what we separate. Many of the results are comical but the students have still come into serious contact with a basic, although surprisingly unfamiliar, concept. Like me at the age of 19, many of these students had never really made the connection. Once they do, they never hear their musical materials the same – they start thinking differently about phrases, clauses, beginnings, endings, and the hierarchy of importance, some notes and figures, like words, being more worthy than others of our flexing and caressing.