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Abstract

The song cycle has been one of the most important musical forms across the span of vocal music. From the time of Beethoven’s composition of *An die ferne Geliebte* to the present, the basic elements of a song cycle have remained mostly unchanged. The form of the song cycle is also present in concept albums of today and epic poetry of the ancient past. The melding of story and song happens so naturally, the two were truly created to work together. Whether in an ancient mead-hall, a nineteenth-century salon, or a modern-day living room the song cycle has adjusted and will continue to adjust throughout history to remain one of the most important forms of musical expression.

Keywords

Song cycles

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The Journey of the Song Cycle: From “The Iliad” to “American Idiot”

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The song cycle has been one of the most important musical forms across the span of vocal music. From the time of Beethoven’s composition of *An die ferne Geliebte* to the present, the elements of a song cycle have remained unchanged. It is still one of the most emotionally powerful musical forms in the classical repertoire. Not only has its power touched the classical music world, but the form of the song cycle is also present in ancient epic poetry as well as the modern day concept album, making the song cycle one of the only musical forms to span thousands of years of human history.

The definition of a song cycle has necessarily changed along with the relevant musical concepts. A traditional classical era view defines a song cycle as a series of three or more clearly individual songs with related tonicities and a central poetic theme.¹ A more modern definition says a song cycle makes use of “the cross reference of a motive, harmonic progression, or harmonic/contrapuntal complex;...cross reference and/or pattern completion at strategic points to define formal boundaries;...a logical key succession;...the association of key and character, or, of musical character with the ongoing progress of the work;...the use of mode for expressive (and often ironic) effect;...cyclic closure by means of pattern completion, summary statement, or other means.”²

In addition to this, song cycles use the accompaniment music as a commentary on the text by means of text painting. A combination of all this information defines the song cycle: a musical form with three or more defined sections that uses text painting and a logical sequence of tonicities to express a single poetic theme.

The first serious work traditionally classified as a “song cycle” was Ludwig van Beethoven’s *An die ferne Geliebte*,³ composed in 1814 to a set of six poems written by Aloys Jeitteles. As the first major song cycle, *An die ferne Geliebte* set the standard for what would become the traditional stylistic traits of the song cycle. Beethoven used six clearly distinct sections (one for each poem), text painting, and related tonicities (E-flat is the key of the first and last songs, the other songs all relate back to E-flat often through mediant relationships). The title *An die ferne Geliebte* means “to the distant beloved” and deals with the concept of

¹ Peake “Song Cycle,” 3-4.

² Kaminsky, 39.

³ Peake “Antecedents,” 242.

longing; the speaker desires to be with his beloved who is far away from him. It is Beethoven's only song cycle and was composed after he was completely deaf.

Three compositional devices make this work different from the music that came before it: smooth transitions between songs, the importance of the accompaniment part, and the integration of text painting. In this song cycle, all of the songs are to be played consecutively; there is no thick ending bar anywhere in the cycle because the songs were intended to be a continuous circle of song. The transitions between songs are additionally smoothed by relating the key of each song to E-flat which is the primary key of the cycle. The accompaniment part is more musical than was often given to accompaniments prior to Beethoven. At one point in the score (Ex. 1), the vocalist sings a repeated note for thirteen measures while the piano plays the melodic line!

The image shows a musical score for a song cycle. The top staff is the vocal line, and the bottom staff is the piano accompaniment. The vocal line has a repeated note for thirteen measures. The piano accompaniment features a melodic line. The lyrics are: "Pri - mel dort sinnt, weht so lei - se der Wind, möch-te ich sein!". The score includes dynamic markings like *pp* and *ppp*, and a tempo marking *And.* with a star symbol.

Ex. 1. Ludwig van Beethoven, *An die ferne Geliebte* No. 2, mm. 25-29.

This was a very adventurous move for Beethoven to make musically. However, it beautifully evokes the text of this particular section. The literal translation of this verse says "There is the restful valley/Stilled are suffering and sorrow/Where in the rock/Quietly the primrose meditates/Blows so lightly the wind/I wish I were there!" The music text paints the image of the speaker sitting still and observing the nature around him.

Following closely in the steps of *An die ferne Geliebte* came Franz Schubert's first song cycle, *Die Schöne Müllerin*, written in 1823. It is a setting of twenty-four poems by Wilhelm Müller telling the story of a young man who falls in love with the miller's daughter (hence the title "The Beautiful Miller-maid") but is rejected by her and commits suicide.⁴ This cycle helped to establish the popularity of song cycle form since audiences from the nineteenth-century to the present have loved this work. Schubert also continued to expand the role of the accompaniment to match the more romantic ideology; his piano accompaniments are quite virtuosic.

Schumann was the third great composer of song cycles. *Dichterliebe* "The Poet's Love," his most famous cycle, was composed in 1840. It is a setting of Heinrich

⁴ English translations of text at http://www.recmusic.org/lieder/assemble_texts.html?LanguageId=7&SongCycleId=48

Heine's *Lyrisches Intermezzo*, from *Das Buch der Lieder*. *Dichterliebe* is a highly romanticized description of the love of the Poet. The last piece in the cycle "Die alten, bösen Lieder" (The old, angry songs) opens with a very dramatic piano solo in octaves (Ex. 2) but as the music progresses, the poet becomes more nostalgic about his love and the music becomes sadder and more romantic sounding. By the end, instead of being angry he is shedding tears. The last words of the song cycle are, "How could the coffin [in which he is burying his old dreams] be so large and heavy? I would also sink my love with my pain in it."⁵

Ex. 2. Robert Schumann, "Die alten, bösen Lieder," mm. 1-5.

Schumann's effect on the genre of the song cycle can hardly be overstated. As Barbara Turchin explains:

Schumann, along with his fellow song reviewers on the staff of the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, were the first (and perhaps only) group during the nineteenth century to stress the desirability of musical as well as poetic coherence and integrity in a song cycle. More specifically, to all the commentators in this group, close key relationships between adjacent songs constituted the primary means of musical coherence.⁶

Schumann did more to raise the level of music to the level of text in importance than any previous composer. Schubert and Beethoven certainly moved in this direction, but Schumann was more overt and verbal in his quest to elevate the accompaniment its full capability.

One of the next important song cycles is Hugo Wolf's *Mörike Lieder* composed in 1888. The cycle is a set of fifty-three poems written by the German poet Eduard

⁵ English translation of text at

<http://members.macconnect.com/users/j/jimbob/classical/Schumann_Op48.html#song16>.

⁶ Turchin, 232.

Mörike dealing with love, nature, travel, and Christianity.⁷ This song cycle began to shift the genre from telling a complete story to being a group of songs in one mood or about one subject. The musical style retains many characteristics of the cycles by Schubert and Schumann: the music is lyrical and melodic in both the piano and vocal parts, the accompaniment is text-focused, and the music is tonal. Wolf does add more chromaticism and less traditional rhythms to his music. For example in No. 6, “Er ist’s,” Wolf uses the unusual rhythm of 4/8 with a basic note value of sixteenth triplets in the piano part. The voice stays in duple, so the song gives a distinct contrast between two and three (Ex. 3).

Ex. 3. Hugo Wolf, *Mörike Lieder* No. 6, “Er ist’s,” mm. 28-30.

Wolf also uses non-traditional harmonies that reflect the more romantic era conception of tonality. For example the beginning of No. 8 “Begegnung” opens with an A-flat minor tonality (retained as a pedal tone in the piano part for the first twelve measures) even though the vocal part enters with a clear E-flat tonality that is mostly major (Ex. 4).

⁷ Wolf, ix – xiii.

Lebhaft bewegt

Was doch heut Nacht ein Sturm ge-we - sen, bis erst der Mor - gen sich ge-regt!

Ex. 4. Hugo Wolf, *Mörike Lieder* No. 8, mm. 1-8.

The next important song cycle explodes into the atonality of the twentieth century. It is Schoenberg's cycle *Pierrot lunaire* published in 1912 from the *Three Times Seven Poems* by Albert Giraud. *Pierrot lunaire* is uniquely scored for voice, flute/piccolo, clarinet, violin/viola, cello, and piano instead of solo accompaniment. The unique sound of this cycle comes from the style of vocalizing, which Schoenberg called *Sprechstimme* [spoken-voice]. He desired the singer to create a timbre between spoken language and sung melody (Ex. 5) giving an eerie feeling to the composition.

jauch - - zend, süß und schmach - - tend,

Ex. 5. Arnold Schoenberg, *Pierrot lunaire* No. 5, mm. 28-29.

Text painting is the one element of a song cycle that Schoenberg did not include. He intended for *Pierrot lunaire* to be primarily music-driven instead of text-driven. He says:

The performers' task here is at no time to derive the mood and character of the individual pieces from the meaning of the words, but always solely from the music. To the extent that the tonepainterly [sic] representation of the events and feelings in the text were of importance to the composer, it will be found in the music anyway. Wherever the performer fails to find it, he must resist adding something that the composer did not intend. If he did so, he would not be adding, but subtracting.⁸

The tonalities of *Pierrot lunaire* are very non-traditional, almost to the point of being non-existent. Tonality became so ambiguous that aural perception of key relationships was meaningless; each pitch had equal value and sound.

Since Schoenberg, many more song cycles have been composed, but they have mostly continued in the same style laid out by Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Wolf, and Schoenberg. Several of the more important recent song cycles are *The Holly Sonnets of John Donne* by Benjamin Britten, *Songs of Travel* by Vaughan Williams, *Hermit Songs* by Samuel Barber, *A Year of Birds* by Malcolm Williamson, *Honey and Rue* by André Previn, and *A Winter Come* by Morten Lauridsen.

Though the traditional view of the song cycle is that Beethoven was the first major composer of the genre,⁹ epic poetry such as *Beowulf*, the *Iliad*, and the *Odyssey* also fit the concept of a song cycle. Though epics are known primarily as poetry, they were originally performed in a song-like manner with instrumental accompaniment. They were not necessarily sung the whole way through, and often use more of a speak-singing timbre rather than full voice singing. Schoenberg uses a similar device in his *Pierrot lunaire* cycle. Epics are usually self-accompanied with only a lyre or similar instrument unlike song cycles that have an accompanist separate from the vocalist. The music of an epic would also be somewhat improvised instead of being completely written out so that it could flow with the story. It is generally agreed that the bards had a basic story line memorized, which they adjusted to oblige the audience for whom they were performing.

The Norse epic *Beowulf* is an excellent example of an epic that is related to the song cycle. Benjamin Bagby has done a significant amount of work in the genre

⁸ Schoenberg, 54.

⁹ Brewerton, 115.

of epic poetry and has created a video of himself performing *Beowulf* as it would have originally been performed with an Anglo-Saxon lyre. Bagby speaks, speaks, sings, and sings the text while accompanying himself on an Anglo-Saxon lyre, which he made himself.¹⁰ *Beowulf* has forty-four large sections, related tonicities, and significant text painting. The tonicities are always related, because the Anglo-Saxon lyre has only six strings and is usually tuned in a pentatonic-type scale, or a scale that emphasizes intervals of a fourth or fifth.¹¹ The text painting that Bagby uses in his performance is wonderful! In Chapter 2, when the bard is describing Grendel's wrecking of Heorot, the voice makes wailing crying sounds. In Chapter 1, the harp and voice depict the celebration and music that took place in Heorot, "So lived the clansmen in cheer and revel a winsome life," but the music suddenly stops, and the fiend Grendel is introduced "till one began to fashion evils, that fiend of hell. Grendel this monster grim was called."¹² In Chapter 4, when Unferth challenges Beowulf's courage by recounting his loss of a race at sea to Breca, Bagby colors his voice to create a drunken sound giving the idea that Unferth was drunk and therefore foolish to challenge Beowulf.¹³

It is probable that most, if not all, epic poetry was performed in this manner, although there has not been as much research on reconstructing Greek epic performances as has been given to Norse epics. The connection of music and poetry is evident in Greek mythology, such as the tale of Orfeo, famous for his music and poetry. His mother was Calliope, the Muse connected with philosophy and epic poetry.¹⁴ It was not unusual for the Greeks to think of music and poetry as two parts of the same thing, although our culture tends to separate them.

Song cycles not only extend further back in history than the classical era, they have also been integrated into modern day pop culture through the advent of the concept album. A concept album possesses all the defining characteristics of a song cycle but expresses them in more modern language: three or more defined sections that use text painting and a logical sequence of tonicities to express a single poetic theme. There are two big differences between concept albums and song cycles, however. First, concept albums often have more than one vocalist or narrator in a song. Second, concept albums are primarily a recorded musical form, while song cycles can be performed live or recorded.

One of the first musicians to create a narrative-driven concept album was Frank Zappa. He was directly influenced by Igor Stravinsky,¹⁵ and composed in many different styles including classical, rock 'n roll and jazz. His album *Freak Out!*, released in 1966, is the first concept album in rock music. There are certainly earlier examples of concept albums, such as *Folk Songs of the Hills* by Merle

¹⁰ *Beowulf*.

¹¹ Baby, 190.

¹² "Beowulf."

¹³ *Beowulf*

¹⁴ Paranda.

¹⁵ Borders, 126.

Travis (folk), *House Rent Party* by Pete Johnson (jazz), *In the Wee Small Hours* by Frank Sinatra (jazz), and *Ride This Train* by Johnny Cash (folk), but these concept albums were just albums centered on a concept instead of being narrative-driven. Zappa's third concept album, *Lumpy Gravy*, "took the concept album to the next stage in its modernist development."¹⁶ It has no breaks between songs, although there are distinct sections: Part 1 is structured A B1 C B2 D B3 + coda (an inverted rondo form) and Part 2 uses a more complex theme and variations type form.¹⁷ The lyrics to both parts create a single poetic theme; the lyrics are structured as conversations between characters. Part 1 is more of a narrative, while Part 2 consists of short conversation clips with the same themes or phrases repeated in different ways.¹⁸ Zappa also uses text painting techniques. For example, on Track 6 at 5:45 a voice says "Bored out .90 over with 3 Stromberg 97's" and the music become very machine-like with lots of different rhythms and sounds like bolts being dropped. Tonicities are somewhat related because the music (or sounds) never completely stop. However, by this point in musical development the concept of relating tonicities was nearly meaningless because dodecaphony and polytonality had nearly eradicated the aural sense of how keys should be related, so all pitches were treated equally.

The recordings of Frank Zappa, especially *Freak Out!* were one of the main influences on the Beatles.¹⁹ Their most famous concept album, released in 1967, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* catapulted the concept album to popular fame. Frank Zappa's work was somewhat more eclectic in style, like Stravinsky; but the Beatles' style was a bit more cohesive and fit better into the pop genre. *Sgt. Pepper* contains thirteen distinct songs (seven on Side 1 and six on Side 2). It is a bit difficult to analyze the keys of the songs and obtain a coherent tonal expression, though E and G seem to be somewhat more important keys. However, this is not out of keeping with the modern traditions in either classical or popular culture. The text painting is less overt than text painting in classical song cycles because the focus of the composers seems to have shifted back to the text; the music is less of a commentary on the text. However, the style or mode of a particular song helps to color the meaning of the individual song. For example, "Within You, Without You" is about universality so it was recorded using an Indian orchestra which emphasizes the concept of universal unity. The central theme of *Sgt. Pepper* is the idea of the fake personas of the Beatles as Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band. The album is designed to simulate a live performance.

Since these two initial recordings, concept albums have continued to develop and grow in popularity. Many more concept albums have been made, such as: *The Story of Simon Simopath* by Nirvana, *Tommy* by The Who, *The Dark Side of the*

¹⁶ Borders, 128, 142.

¹⁷ Ibid., 126.

¹⁸ Lyrics at <http://globalia.net/donlope/fz/lyrics/Lumpy_Gravy.html#Very>

¹⁹ Borders, 153.

Moon and *The Wall* by Pink Floyd, *Antichrist Superstar*, *Mechanical Animals*, and *Holy Wood* by Marilyn Manson, and *American Idiot* by Green Day.

The form of the song cycle is present in concept albums and epic poetry as well as its traditional classical music form. The melding of story and song happens so naturally, the two were truly created to work together. Whether in an ancient mead-hall, a nineteenth-century salon, or a modern-day living room the song cycle has adjusted and will continue to adjust throughout history to remain one of the most important forms of musical expression.

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