THE SUBSTANCE OF STYLE

HOW SINGING CREATES SOUND IN LIEDER RECORDINGS, 1902-1939

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In this dissertation, I examine the relationship between vocal technique and performance style through 165 audio clips of early Lieder recordings. I proceed from the starting point that many stylistic gestures are in fact grounded in a singer's habitual vocalism. Vibrato, tempo and rubato are directly affected by a singer's voice type and his physical condition, and portamento has long been a technical term as well as a stylistic one. If we consider these technical underpinnings of style, we are inevitably moved to ask: how do a singer's vocal habits affect what we perceive to be his style? Does a singer's habitual vocalism result in his being more likely to make certain style gestures, or even unable to make others?

To address these questions, I begin by defining a vocabulary that draws on three sources: the language of vocal pedagogy, data derived from voice science, and evidence drawn from recordings themselves. In the process, I also consider how some Lieder singers distorted the word "technique," using it to signify emotional detachment. Next, I examine the ways in which a recording represents the performer, addressing how singers are affected by both changing aesthetics and the aging process; both of these lead to a discussion of how consistently some performers make certain stylistic gestures throughout their recordings. Finally, I offer a case study based on Schubert's song "Die Forelle" which suggests a clear link between voice type, gender and style.

Whereas many academic studies of recordings are organized around contemporaneous writings on performance practices or musical meaning, this one is not. Instead, my work proceeds from the assumption that performance style is a reflection of what performers do. As such, what we typically call style may in fact be rooted in the substance of singing.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Rebecca Plack was born in Texarkana, Texas and raised in both San Francisco and Davis, California. She received the A.B. in Music from Princeton University in 1991, and the M.M. in Voice from Manhattan School of Music in 1996. Her training also included three summers at the Aspen Music School, both in the Opera Center and as a Vocal Chamber Music Fellow. In 1999 she completed the M.A. in Musicology from Cornell University, and in 2003 received the Postgraduate Diploma in Vocal Performance from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. She has performed with Sacramento Opera and Ithaca Opera, and has given solo recitals at festivals across Europe and in Canada, as well as throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. She currently teaches voice in Davis, California.

For Jane and Blaise, with gratitude, admiration and love

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My good fortune continued during my time at Cornell. Knowing that my experience as a singer would shape my scholarly work, the Cornell music faculty encouraged me to perform and to teach singing even as I pursued the Ph.D. in musicology. Discussions with many professors and fellow students influenced my work; in particular, I am grateful to Tekla Babyak, Cliff Eisen, Gary Moulsdale, Steven Pond, Annette Richards, David Rosen, Emanuele Senici and James Webster. For these conversations, and for others I have forgotten but that nevertheless shaped my thinking, I am grateful.

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It was in my voice studio that I developed my ideas about singing – and so I am greatly obliged to my students, too numerous to be named here, for giving me the opportunity to teach and learn. I owe a similar debt to the pianists who have shared my interest in old recordings – particularly to Jonathan Summers and Blaise Bryski – for with them I have had opportunities, again, to learn from experience. I am also grateful to numerous friends: in particular, to Ellen Lange and Cynthia He for their help with library resources; to Kristin Sad for her careful proofreading; and to Lila Biard for helping me transcribe for Appendix B the scratchy French recordings of “Die Forelle.” Also to Adam Gottlieb, whose love and good humor made the final stretch a happier one. And to my family, who couldn’t escape my dissertation even during holidays, I owe the greatest debt: my grandfather, the late Milton Plack, my brother, Joshua Plack, and my parents, Les and Linda Plack, and Carole Plack and Jim Faulkner. I couldn’t have done it without you.

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[1] The sources are (a): the online score service Schubertline: http://www.schubertline.co.uk/home.htm; (b): CD Sheet Music, CD-ROM (CD Sheet Music, 2003); and (c): Gaetano Donizetti, *Don Pasquale*, (Milan: Ricordi, 2006).

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[2] All recordings are excerpts unless otherwise noted.
[3] These numbers correspond with those in the Discography, which gives full details of each recording. These details may include any or all of the following: accompanist, matrix number, original issue, and, where applicable, information about reissues and digital transfers.

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PREFACE

I became interested in historic recordings almost fifteen years ago, while I was a Master's student in voice at Manhattan School of Music, taking a graduate seminar from Will Crutchfield. We had been listening to a recording of Loewe's "Canzonette" sung by Elly Ameling, who had long been one of my favorite singers. Although I hadn't heard that particular recording before, it sounded comfortably familiar: the voice lovely and clear, and the delivery rhythmically precise, each note distinctly articulated (1988; CD 1, track 1).

So I was completely unprepared for what happened next. Crutchfield played two more versions of "Canzonette" by singers I'd never heard of – Hulda Lashanska and Elisabeth Rethberg – and asked us to pay attention to portamento and rubato. The contrast between their performances and Ameling's was shocking. Lashanska and Rethberg sang with such limpid line and such breathtaking ease (as does soprano Alma Gluck, whose 1916 recording I have excerpted here: CD 1, track 2). Suddenly, Ameling's performance sounded labored and unmusical. I was at once devastated and thrilled. On the one hand, I imagined I'd never be able to listen to Ameling again – but on the other hand, Lashanska's and Rethberg's singing was inspiring. I wanted to understand everything about how they did what they did.

I soon learned that there were commonly accepted generalizations about vocal style on early recordings. For example, singers used to sing with more rhythmic flexibility, and also more portamento. They had, on average, better legato and coloratura. They weren't always faithful to the score. These observations are mostly accurate – but they only begin to brush the surface of what old recordings can tell us about singing and style. If we listen further, we find that the details beneath such generalizations have much to say not only about what vocal style is (or was), but also

about the very nature, the essence of style. Does singing create style, or do style choices result in singing? How are technique and style related?

These questions led to this dissertation, which addresses the relationship between singing and style on old recordings. As such, it joins a growing number of scholarly works on recordings. By studying vocal recordings in particular, however, I wish to address the discrepancy between the disproportionately large number of early recordings that featured singers, and the relatively small number of scholars that have focused on them.[4] This imbalance may exist in part because musicologists are more likely to have been trained as instrumentalists than as singers.

There are, however, special challenges involved in discussing style as it relates to singing, challenges which traditional musicology is ill suited to address. In making specific claims about style on recordings, academic writers tend to focus on elements such as ornamentation, tempo, vibrato, portamento and rubato. With the possible exception of vibrato, all of these are concerned with how performance relates to a musical score, and all are relatively easy to transcribe and compare.[5] But singers make an enormous diversity of sounds, many of which are not so easily quantified. Writers in other disciplines – namely, critics and record collectors – have long relied on a rich vocabulary of metaphors to describe singing. Should musicology follow suit? How should scholars go about considering the sounds singers make?

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[4] In the past several years, Daniel Leech-Wilkinson has turned his attention to vocal recordings – in particular, to performances of Schubert song. See "Portamento and Musical Meaning," *Journal of Musicological Research*, 25 (2006): 233-261; "Expressive Gestures in Schubert Singing on Record," *Nordisk Estetisk Tidskrift* 33-34 (2006): 50-70; and "Sound and Meaning in Recordings of Schubert's 'Die junge Nonne'," *Musicae Scientiae* 11 (2007): 209-36. Vocal recordings also figure prominently in Leech-Wilkinson's forthcoming book, *The Changing Sound of Music: Approaches to Studying Recorded Musical Performances* (in press); I am grateful that he has shared this work with me in advance of its publication.

[5] See Will Crutchfield, "Vocal Ornamentation in Verdi: the Phonographic Evidence," *19th Century Music* 7/1 (Summer 1983), 3-54; José A. Bowen, "Performers Interpreting History: Finding "'Una voce poco fa'" (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Musicological Society, Toronto, Canada, November 2000); and Emanuele Senici, "Per una biografia musicale di Amina," (paper presented at the Atti del convengo "Vincenzo Bellini: verso l'edizione critica," Siena, Accademia, Chigiana, June 1-3, 2000).

Daniel Leech-Wilkinson has begun to address these questions from the point of view of the listener. In his forthcoming book, *The Changing Sound of Music: Approaches to Studying Recorded Musical Performances*, Leech-Wilkinson notes the usefulness of metaphorical language and incorporates it into analytically rigorous methodologies. His groundbreaking work includes combining subjective descriptions of recordings with spectrographic measurements that provide visual evidence of vocal effects. He also draws on the work of cognitive psychology to explore why listeners are moved by certain sounds. In these ways, Leech-Wilkinson's work aims to describe how performance is experienced by the listener.

It is also possible, however, to describe the sounds singers make from the point of view of the performer. Many of the gestures commonly considered under the heading of style are in fact grounded in a singer's technique. Vibrato, tempo and rubato are directly affected by certain corporeal realities, such as a singer's voice type and his physical condition, and portamento has long been a technical term as well as a stylistic one. If we consider these technical underpinnings of style, we are inevitably moved to ask the question: when is style art and when is it function? To put it another way: how do the habitual choices singers make in the practice room affect their stylistic choices, or whether they are even able to make certain style choices at all? How do the physical realities of aging, gender and voice type impact a singer's style? These are the questions that give rise to this dissertation, which discusses style as a function of the physical act of singing.

Because academic study of recordings is in its infancy, we must start with some basics. There are numerous challenges associated with using recordings, especially early ones, as sources. Moreover, choosing a particular repertoire – in this case, Lieder – influences not only the kinds of questions that can be asked about style,

but also the answers that will result. These, and other nuts-and-bolts issues, are taken up in Chapter 1.

The main body of the dissertation, however, is concerned with linking the sounds listeners perceive with the nature of singing as a physical activity that relies on a set of skills. Whereas many academic studies of recordings are organized around contemporaneous writings on performance practices or musical meaning, this one is not.[6] Instead, I seek to add to these by proceeding from the assumption that performance style is a reflection of what performers do, and to describe it as such. This is the goal of Chapter 2, which argues that much of what we call style actually has its roots in a singer's technical habits.

Armed with a vocabulary that interrelates vocalism and style, we turn to the question of what a recording represents – specifically, to the ways in which a recording represents the performer. Can we say that a recording represents anything beyond what a couple of musicians did with a particular piece in a particular studio on a particular day? To answer this question, we must ask several others. How does aging affect style? To what degree are performers affected by changing aesthetics over the course of a long career? How consistently might a performer make certain style gestures? Questions like these become important when we compare many singers' recordings of a single work: to ensure our comparisons are accurate, we must first know what we are comparing. I address these issues through three case studies, which comprise Chapter 3.

These two frameworks – a better understanding of how singing and style are related, and a sense of how a singer's art may or may not change over time – position

[6] Other scholars have spoken to the need for performance studies that proceed from performances rather than documents; in particular, see Joel Lester, "Performance and Analysis: Interaction and Interpretation," in *The Practice of Performance: Studies in Musical Interpretation*, edited by John Rink (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 197-216, and Daniel Barolsky, "The Performer as Analyst," in *Music Theory Online: A Journal of Criticism, Commentary, Research and Scholarship* 13/1 (March 2007).

us well to consider the questions of the last chapter. Does voice type influence a singer's style choices? Does gender? To address these questions, I offer a case study based on Schubert's "Die Forelle," which suggests a clear link between gender and style. Because documentary evidence makes no mention of a gender-style connection, "Die Forelle" also makes an essential case for a performance-centric methodology of recordings. This is not to suggest that methodologies structured around documentary evidence are flawed or wanting. I simply want to propose that recordings themselves may suggest alternative methods in which performance occupies center stage.

Musicology need not concern itself with performance, nor performers with musicology. But if, as musicologists, we involve ourselves in discussions of performance, we would do well to describe not only what we think performers do, but also to consider how they themselves might describe what they do.[7] To do so enriches our understanding of the sounds we hear, which in turn leads to more accurate analyses and conclusions. As a performer-musicologist, I myself hope my work leads to greater collaboration between the two communities. Certainly my own love of music has been enriched through my participation in both worlds – and like anyone who cares for something deeply, I wish that others might see it as I do.

[7] Along these lines, see Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2004), and Robert Philip, *Performing Music in the Age of Recording* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004). Both include material obtained directly from interviews with performers.