Opéra and Récital

by

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Born in Florence at the end of the sixteenth century, Opera emerged within a deeply hierarchical society.

A social and political art as much as a musical one, it flourished under the patronage of princes and aristocratic elites, who asserted their power and wealth through lavish sets, large orchestras, the virtuosity of singers and sumptuous costumes. And while drawing on ancient myths, Opera of this period brought human passions to life on stage, making them visible and audible through dramatic and musical expression.

In *The Marriage of Figaro*, for example, the individual, challenging the social order and its conventions, claims his rightful place, defends personal freedom and dignity, thus turning Opera into a space in which society as a whole can recognize itself.

By the eighteenth century however, first in Venice and then in the major European cities, music was no longer the exclusive privilege of the court. Public opera houses flourished and audiences became active participants in the cultural and economic life.

Thus, in the nineteenh century, with the rise of the bourgeoisie and its entry into the world of art, a new society emerged, one whose culture was founded on personal sensibility. At the same time, while Romanticism fostered poetry, the intimate journal, landscape, memory, nostalgia and dreams... music consequently became a privileged means of expressing subjectivity.

This is particularly evident in Schubert's lieder: Accompanied by the piano, a singer performs a poem by Goethe or Heine and, without sets or costumes, he evokes in just a few minutes a human experience on which the audience's attention is entirely focused. This is how a new musical form emerged: the Recital, a privileged space in which the individual encounters the self.

Therefore, from the princely court to the public opera house, from bourgeois salons to the piano, the lied and the recital...over time, music evolved from the collective experience of public performance towards the intimate expression of the individual.

Opera duets and arias, melodies and lieder...
two worlds, two ways of listening

✦ AT THE OPERA, THE VOICE IS AN ACTION

In opera, music serves a complete theatrical work. Voice, orchestra, acting, sets, lighting, costumes, movement and sometimes dance... emotion arises from the convergence of all these elements. By transforming a story into a structured narrative driven by action (dramaturgy), opera brings its characters to life: they evolve, confront one another, fall in love, betray, die... and music becomes the language of their passions.

In *Tristan und Isolde*, *Don Giovanni* or *Falstaff*, for example, not only we hear a succession of magnificent duets but the compelling power of an entire world with its own sense of time, its tensions and its characters.
Moreover, an operatic aria is always rooted in a dramatic situation connected to a character, a plot or relationships with other characters. Even when an aria expresses contemplation, something has already happened and something is yet to come. The singer acts through singing and a duet intensifies this dimension even further: Two consciousnesses confront one another!
Music thus becomes dialogue, conflict, intimacy and seduction while telling a story.

✦ IN THE LIED, THE VOICE IS A THOUGHT

With Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Wolf, Faure, Debussy, and Duparc, we enter a different experience of time.

A lied or a melody is often a poetic miniature in which just a few minutes are enough to evoke a landscape, a memory, a desire, a sense of solitude, or a revelation. Above all, the poem introduces a distinctive dimension: The singer does not necessarily portray a character but may simply become the voice of a consciousness.

This is the case in Schubert's *The Linden Tree*, *Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel* and *You Are My Peace*. In these lieder there is no need for scenery or theatrical action: Just a few lines of poetry and a few bars of piano are enough to create a powerful inner world. The music stands almost "bare" and therein lies its strength. By focusing on the singer's voice, the listener can also perceive the performer's personality: phrasing, breathing, silences, hesitation...in short, the deeply personal way in which he interprets a piece.

Thus, in the absence of scenery, staging, or dramatic action, the lied becomes more personal, more meditative, and more concentrated. By bringing the "event" to life through music, it offers the listener an imaginative experience from which an entire inner world emerges, shaped by the intimacy and freedom of interpretation.

✦ OPERA AND RECITAL: THE ELEMENT OF RISK

An opera singer benefits from the support of fellow performers, the orchestra, the staging and the dramatic action, whereas a singer performing alone bears full responsibility for everything that happens during a recital. For him, there is literally nowhere to hide.

In a melody by Faure or Duparc, the performer is indeed directly exposed. Without costumes, a partner, scenery or dramatic action, only the voice, the words, the breath, and the piano can convey the emotion.

✦ OPERA DUETS OR SOLO SONG: BETWEEN EXPANSION AND CONCENTRATION, TWO MUSICAL APPROACHES

In opera, music unfolds and expands

An operatic aria is generally designed to carry the voice through a dramatic space.
The vocal melody must have breath, projection, and a clear trajectory with expansive phrases and orchestral writing that supports and intensifies the expression, ultimately leading to an emotional climax.
The aria is therefore often directional: the music starts from a particular point and carries us towards an affirmation, an outburst or a resolution.
Consider for example *Casta diva* or *E lucevan le stelle* (from Act III of *Tosca*).
The melody must blossom; it is conceived to fill the space and create a kind of emotional arc.
As for the operatic duet, it can "exist" musically speaking only through the other.

In the melody or the lied, music becomes concentrated

It can be far more fragmented, subtle, and elusive. A two-note inflection, a harmonic shift, or a silence may carry as much weight as a grand lyrical phrase. This is because the music does not necessarily need to drive a character to action. Instead, it seeks to express something far more fleeting and intimate: A thought taking shape, a memory returning, a moment of hesitation, a sensation...
In Schubert, for example, a single modulation can suddenly transform the emotional meaning of a line of poetry.

✦ ORCHESTRA OR PIANO, TWO FACES OF ACCOMPANIMENT

Here is a particularly subtle musical distinction : In an operatic aria, the orchestra can express the outside world: it accompanies the voice and creates the atmosphere but it also contributes to the unfolding of the drama : it portrays, foreshadows, comments on and intensifies the action.

In the lied there is no orchestra and the piano often takes on the role of a second character. It can express what the words leave unsaid.
In Schubert's *Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel*, the piano's obsessive motion evokes both the spinning wheel itself and Gretchen's consuming love. The piano's music becomes almost the expression of her unconscious.

In Hugo Wolf's songs, the piano can become just as expressive as the voice. In other words, it introduces a kind of "polyphony of consciousness": the voice says one thing while the piano suggests another.

In Strauss's At Sunset (*Im Abendrot*) from Four Last Songs (*Vier letzte Lieder*), the piano (or the orchestra in the orchestral version) does more than accompany the text: it creates a contemplative space that reaches beyond words.
Therefore we might say that while the voice articulates conscious thought, the piano gives expression to what lies beneath the surface: memories, inner landscapes, unspoken feelings... that have not yet emerged into consciousness. Although opera can sometimes achieve a similar effect, the lied explores this intimate dialogue between the conscious and the unconscious with a particular depth and subtlety.

✦ THE VOICE, THE EXPERIENCE OF TIME, THE HARMONY

Unlike the lied, the operatic duet possesses a remarkable richness of its own: ***Confrontation!*** Two melodic lines encounter one another, intertwine, answer one another and sometimes oppose one another. In other words, an operatic duet brings two independent voices into harmony at the same time, creating a polyphony of singing. In the lied or melody by contrast a single voice express a different kind of polyphony: an inner dialogue in which conflicting emotions, thoughts, and perceptions coexist within a single consciousness, often centered on one poetic theme.

The two forms also differ in their relationship to time. The operatic aria unfolds within a dramatic framework. It may last ten minutes, yet it belongs to a theatrical narrative that can extend over several hours. Its musical development is shaped by the unfolding action and the relationships between characters.

The lied or melody by contrast unfolds within the psychological time of an inner narrative. In just a few minutes, a song can reveal an entire world, with emotional shifts of astonishing complexity. The singer must bring to life an invisible dramaturgy: an inner story that unfolds without any visible action.

This is particularly evident in the Lieder of Schubert, Schumann, Wolf, and Mahler where a profound emotional journey emerges through themes of nature, love, desire, and disillusionment. To achieve this, the music may turn back on itself, return to an earlier idea, interrupt a phrase, shift into an unexpected key without resolving or leave a question unanswered. It does not need to "conclude" as it would in a theatrical scene. Sometimes, harmony itself becomes the very heart of drama.

And this is where a musically fascinating distinction emerges between opera and the lied: whereas in an operatic duet, harmony often supports the dramatic exchange and the interaction between the voices, in the Lied, assuming a more autonomous role, harmony itself can become a form of psychological commentary on the text.

Indeed, Schubert's *Der Doppelgänger* (*The Double*) is a striking example since almost nothing happens in the conventional dramatic sense. Yet the chords, the repetitions and the terrifying stillness of the accompaniment create an atmosphere of tension that becomes the real drama.
The same can be found in Hugo Wolf and Gustav Mahler where the piano may challenge the voice, reveal what the singer leaves unsaid or expose the tensions beneath the words. The result is not so much a story being told but rather an unfolding drama within the depths of a single consciousness through the voice and the music that surrounds it.

✦ IN CONCLUSION ✦

If Opera originally brought society together around a shared spectacle while the Recital later on focused the listener's attention on the singing of a single performer, these two musical forms have highlighted two different conceptions of the human condition:

The individual who acts before others and the individual who reveals himself to himself.

In other words, music gradually moved from the collective to the individual, from spectacle to attentive listening, from action to introspection and from character to the person behind it.

Another important distinction is that in operatic singing, man is part of society. He belongs to a family, a social class, a community. He loves, clashes with others, obeys or rebels...

In short, he acts in the world! And his identity emerges through his relationships with others, his conflicts and actions that shape his destiny.

By contrast, in recital singing, face to face with himself, the individual turns towards the inner self. He dreams, desires, suffers, contemplates, thinks.... Everything unfolds inwardly within the subtle movements of his own consciousness and the complexities of his inner life.

Yet, whatever their differences and even their apparent oppositions, operatic duets and arias, melodies and lieder will continue to coexist and enrich one another through their distinctive musical and expressive possibilities while deepening our understanding of vocal music.

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