

Composed for presentation by bass trombonist Randall Hawes at the Melbourne International Festival of Brass, 2006. --Kathryn Goodson, www.kathryngoodson.com

A Pianist's Perspective: Vocal Music on a Brass Instrument?

INTRODUCTION

When the reknowned symphony band conductor H. Bob Reynolds retired from the University of Michigan several years back, composer William Bolcom wanted to write a symphony band piece to honor the occasion. He asked H. Bob what he'd like---a march? Fanfare? H. Bob said----we have SO MANY of those...we want a SONG!!! I reminded Bill of this story recently and we agreed----brass players need to explore their inner lyricism in order to play songs well. In his words: "Drop all that West Point stuff."

Rehearsing and performing music with any partner is like taking a long hike in the mountains together---it can be in turns challenging, exciting, arduous---but it's always glorious to stand together at the pinnacle. Singers and brass players have been standing in the curve of my instrument, using their lungs and mouths to make music with me, for many years. Those who revel in feeling connected to the energy of *all* the music---mine and their own---are the ones with whom I plan projects.

VOICE & BRASS---PARALLELS & DIFFERENCES

Producing sound fired by breath and standing in the curve of the piano are obvious parallels between singers and brass players as chamber music partners to pianists. There, usually, the parallels stop. If singers are notoriously melodramatic, brass players have an equally prevalent reputation for lacking charisma. In orchestras and bands predictable rhythm and uniform sound are often desired. But when audiences experience a soloist and pianist alone on stage, they respond to emotion, color, rubato. Audiences also love gorgeous melody, found frequently in songs and arias. A lot of repertoire written for brass players with piano, though improving in general, is often difficult without being musically rewarding for the players or listeners. It seems the great composers of the past could best conceive the beauty of a trombone, trumpet or tuba inside of an orchestral texture, and then not so often. Horns have a slightly better repertoire situation with pieces by Schubert, Beethoven and Strauss. As brass players and their instruments develop, they seek challenges beyond endless counting until the "big gun" moments. As much vocal repertoire is opulent, full of lush phrases requiring vast reserves of breath and beautiful sound, it's an understandable choice.

BRASS INSTRUMENTS PLAYING SONGS

What does a brass instrumentalist need in order to communicate a song effectively? Let's assume she or he already has a beautiful sound, great rhythm and a wide dynamic palette. That's a wonderful start! Challenging for most brass players when playing alone with piano, in my experience, is to let go emotionally, to be passionate and intense, flexible, to use rubato. Perhaps they are afraid of being too loud, or they are self-conscious to be finally in the spotlight. Perhaps they've been told too often: *You're late!* And yet, barring very contemporary literature, most songs are not virtuosic in terms of fast passages, bizarre leaps and intervals or heroic counting. They require instead athletic feats of *emoting*----with a huge range of feelings. Even a *Vocalise*, written without words, is by nature pure emotion.

HOW TO SHOW EMOTION

Everything about the performance of a song needs intensity, purpose, passion. Obviously it's good to find a decent translation if the song's not in your native language. Songs are usually sung by a specific person feeling something strongly enough to sing about it: anger, love, erotic desire, despair, joy, spiritual awe, etc. The piano usually begins and ends a song---the "singing" brass player needs to look like the central emotion of the song from *before* the sounding of the first note of music (*piano or horn*) until a good few seconds longer than the last note of music (*piano or horn*). This includes how the horn is picked up, set down, your posture, your face, your eyes. BREATH is something to be inspired and expired in the character and emotion of the phrase you are about to sing/play through. If the phrase is angry, breathe quickly; if it's sensual, breathe slowly but intensely; if it's solemn, breathe deeply. All these types of breathing do and should take different amounts of time; the song is poorly served if they do not. As the pianist at your side, I like to gauge my own breathing with yours---then I know how far to stretch the length of an amazing phrase---my own breath tells me. Remember---usually the piano has the moving notes and controls the tempo. We're ready to carry you through to the end, gloriously with lots of time, or get through phrases quickly if you're feeling uncomfortable, which we sense very well. (...another reason to be nice to us before concerts...)

HOW TO SING WITHOUT WORDS

Breathing is allowed in a song anywhere EXCEPT in the middle of words. In any language, breathing at punctuation (commas, periods, exclamation points, etc.) is best. Flexibility of rhythm is SO important. Successfully communicating a phrase of text without words needs much more than observation of rhythm and dynamics---it needs inflection, rubato. No two quarters/eighths should sound exactly alike. For example, say: *Randall* Hawes. Notice where the inflection is: *Ran*---is pronounced slightly louder and longer than the rest. *Richard* Strauss in the same, or *Gustav Mahler*. So it goes with every set of words organized into a sentence or phrase. German as an inflected language is very similar to English. "Ich *liebe* Dich." (I *love* you). This phrase in either language needs the emphasis on the word *love*. Color is another element where you can show expression---think of all the sounds possible with consonants and vowels---"ee" is a more intense sound than "ah;" "sh" takes longer to pronounce than "s." This is a powerful tool singers use to create color. Strive with your own instruments, on top of your basically beautiful sound, to create a whole palette of color possibilities: hollow, rich, pale, warm, cool, all ranges of vibrato and sotto voce. Be able to spin out a sound and stretch it through dynamic variety; imagine timing and inflecting words.

SING YOURSELF & LISTEN TO SINGERS

This is invaluable---perhaps the best way to "get it." If you can sing to a child tenderly---you'll understand. For yourself--it's more about the emotion and the words, the feeling, than the sound. Listening to a *great* singer means you'll hear everything---beauty, control AND emotion.

HOW TO CHOOSE REPERTOIRE

There are thousands of songs. Start with one in your own language---for English speakers, Samuel Barber's *Sure on this Shining Night* is a great one. Choose songs where words are secondary. You can tell by looking at the sheer number of words in a song whether the melody or text is more important. Avoid patter songs, strophic songs or songs by Hugo Wolf, where poetry is paramount. Brahms and many Russian songs are often good choices. Choose one with words you know--*My Funny Valentine*, *Misty*, *Danny Boy*, or even *Happy Birthday*...whatever. Sing it first. Then record yourself playing it and hear if you can imagine the words. Dare to communicate them with your whole person---the instrument is just a medium. And of course, find a pianist who feels as you do and explore! Have fun! --kg