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Expressivity in Choral Performance: The Role of Text Diction

ABSTRACT

Background

Musical performance requires choices (Rink 2002). In choral music, performance choices include aspects related to text diction, such as the duration and the dynamics of vowels and consonants, which may contribute to performance expressivity.

Choral conducting handbooks generally discuss diction in terms of uniformity of pronunciation and clearness of enunciation, or also in terms of its relationship with choral blend and/or with a legato line. Despite the necessity of making decisions regarding possible durations and dynamics of vowels and consonants, only a few writings on choral conducting are explicit about such aspects of diction, and even rarer are those which offer examples as to how text diction can contribute to an expressive choral performance.

Researches that discuss expressivity in recorded performances of solo vocal repertoire (e.g. Leech-Wilkinson 2009; Siegwart and Scherer 1995; Sundberg 2000; Sundberg, Iwarsson, and Hagegård 1994; Sundberg Lã and Himonides 2013; Timmers 2007) have analysed elements such as vibrato, portamento, voice quality, intonation, variations in tempo or dynamics, among others. Text diction is mentioned, for example, by Leech-Wilkinson (2009, ch. 8.3, §§5–6, §90), who observed the use of lengthened or sharp consonants in some recordings of Schubert solo songs.

In the last decades, interest in performance expressivity has increased, nonetheless little is known about the expressive use of diction specifically in choral performances and about the effects of it on performance expressivity.

Aims and Repertoire Studied

This paper aims to shed light on how text diction may be used as an expressive device in choral performances and on the implications of such use for performance expressivity. It discusses performance choices related to German choral diction in recordings of movements ‘Unter deinem Schirmen’ and ‘Trotz dem alten Drachen’ of J. S. Bach’s motet *Jesu, meine Freude* BWV 227, as well as in recordings of Schubert’s part-song *An die Sonne* D. 439.

Methods

The research used a mixed methods approach. Firstly, it consisted of analysing writings on choral conducting (e.g. Bastian and Fischer 2006; Blocker 2004; Ehmann 1981; Ehmann and Haasemann 1990; Ericson, Ohlin, and Spångberg 1976; Halsey 2011; Thomas 1979), on German diction for singing (e.g. Johnston 2011), and on German pronunciation (e.g. Siebs 1969). These bibliographical studies aimed to

identify suggestions with regard to the duration and dynamics of vowels and consonants, as well as to the expressive use of diction. Secondly, conductors Georg Christoph Biller, Timothy Brown, John Butt, Stephen Cleobury, Martin Ennis, and Peter Neumann were interviewed; questions were related to their approach to text diction and about possible uses of diction as an expressive device. Thirdly, the movements ‘Unter deinem Schirmen’ and ‘Trotz dem alten Drachen’ of J. S. Bach’s motet *Jesu, meine Freude* BWV 227 and Schubert’s part-song *An die Sonne* D. 439 were used as case studies. In addition to score analyses, in these case studies six recordings of Bach’s motet and four recordings of Schubert’s part-song were analysed with the software Sonic Visualiser (Cannam, Landone and Sandler 2010), aiming to identify manipulations in the duration and dynamics of vowels and, especially, of consonants. Bach’s *Jesu, meine Freude* recordings were directed by Wilhelm Ehmann (BnF Collection), Eric Ericson (EMI 5099960230), John Eliot Gardiner (SDG716), Philippe Herreweghe (LPH002), Helmuth Rilling (Hänsler 92069), and Kurt Thomas (0013292BC). Schubert’s *An die Sonne* recordings were directed by Frieder Bernius (PH06020), John Eliot Gardiner (Philips 4544282), Peter Neumann (Carus 83138), and Jörg Straube (CTH 2358). Finally, data collected in the bibliographical studies, in the interviews, and in the case studies were compared.

Implications

Results show that in some of the analysed recordings important words are highlighted by means of emphasis or lengthening of the initial consonant(s) of tonic syllables (e.g. the consonant ‘w’ in the word ‘wittern’, or ‘schm’ in ‘verschmachtet’) or, also, of the initial consonant of the atonic syllable following the tonic one (e.g. ‘ch’ in the word ‘Drachen’). This is consistent with suggestions found in some choral conducting writings, such as in the books by Ehmann and Haasemann (1990, 159–60) and Halsey (2011, 210–11), as well as with some of the information collected in the interviews with conductors. Recording analyses also show that occasionally the sonority of a consonant is reduced as an expressive device. Such manipulations in the duration and dynamics of consonants occur in parts of the music that have a vigorous or an energetic character (as in the movements of Bach’s motet), or also a dramatic character (as in Schubert’s part-song). The degree of emphasis or lengthening of a consonant varies in each recording (as one would expect) and does not seem to be influenced by tempo (i.e., consonants are not necessarily shorter in faster tempi nor longer in slower tempi).

The manipulations in text diction observed in some recordings can be understood as expressive gestures, as defined by Leech-Wilkinson (2009, ch. 8.1, §13–15): firstly, a lengthened consonant can shape a note and add meaning to it; secondly,

this lengthening distinguishes the consonant from its surrounding, thus resulting in a change, in respect to the expectation created by the performance, that is perceived as expressive. Furthermore, these expressive gestures not only reinforce the meaning of a piece, but may also add different meanings to it, as Leech-Wilkinson (2009, ch. 8.4, §96) pointed out. Recording analyses suggests that an expressive diction may contribute to revealing different potential meanings of a piece, thus corroborating Leech-Wilkinson's (2012) claim that performance creates different musical meanings depending on the expressive gestures a performer chooses to employ.

The use of long or incisive consonants also resembles characteristics of emotional speech. In some vigorous moments of 'Unter deinem Schirmen' and 'Trotz dem alten Drachen' by Bach, emphasis or lengthening of consonants resemble characteristics observed by Fónagy (1991, 154) in aggressive emotions and by Trojan (1952, 183–4) in emotions with an element of tension. In some dramatic moments of Schubert's *An die Sonne*, the use of long consonants can be compared to the effects of sorrow, as described by Sundberg (1987, 151).

Although only some of the analysed recordings explore the expressive potential of diction, results suggest that when manipulations in the duration and dynamics of consonants are frequent, text diction can play a central role in the expressivity of choral performance. In such situations, these expressive gestures can be as significant as aspects more commonly analysed in researches on performance expressivity, such as variations in tempo, portamento or vibrato (Juslin and Timmers 2010). Diction is certainly not the only element that contributes to expressivity in these recordings — as Juslin (2003, 280) explained, 'expression is a multi-dimensional phenomenon' —, but indeed it can play an important part in it.

With these results in mind, we suggest two elements concerning text diction that may contribute to an understanding of the experience of listening to an expressive performance. These elements concern the listener's perception and reaction to musical performance, and are hypotheses that need testing. The first element relates to perceiving the performers as having a deep understanding of and/or identification with the piece, as if they were part of the music. Text diction most certainly could contribute in conveying this sense of belonging, since it can show how one is familiar with a particular sung text, both in terms of its meaning and its sonority. The second element relates to the listener's reaction to the performance, and refers to a sense of being in the present moment. This means that listeners could be so absorbed in the performance that thoughts about the past and the future would be absent from their minds. An expressive diction could play a role here, reinforcing contact with listeners through the sound impact of manipulations in the duration and dynamics of consonants, thus contributing to bring them to the experience of the present.

Keywords

Choral Performance, Text Diction, Expressivity, Performance Choices, Recorded Music.

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