Mozart lieder on the fortepiano

by Kathy Wolfe

Mozart Songs Vol. I
Teresa Ringholz, soprano; Robert Spillman, fortepiano
Arabesque No. ABQC 6576, 1987.
Cassette tape, $8.98; compact disk, $19.95

A good recording of Mozart's great lieder, which created the lied genre, on the fortepiano, as Mozart composed them, with all the vocal and instrumental register shifts scientifically placed, as he intended, is a huge challenge. Unfortunately, Arabesque's new release by Teresa Ringholz and Robert Spillman, the first on fortepiano I know, is not close.

In particular, both artists pay only the slightest attention to what ought to be the "main event" in a fortepiano recording: the overt use by Mozart of extensive human vocal registration in the fortepiano and human vocal scores, in cross-voice.

Mozart wrote most of the keyboard parts for his lieder in five or more distinct registral colors, corresponding (at least) to the four soprano voice registers (low, middle, high, "superhigh"), and the bass register, below the soprano first register. These of course are largely lost on a modern piano, with its many metal components. The major point of a first Mozart lieder recording ought to have been to bring them out, and show them in chorale, with the singer. The singer, too, given this new opportunity to "collaborate" with the fortepiano, must bring out the color distinctions, between the three registers used by Mozart in the singer's vocal line.

Instead, we have here the usual modern practice of "smoothing out" both the singer's and the pianist's registers. Furthermore the modern replica fortepiano, built by John O'Connor, Rockport, N.Y., is more "tinny" than its 1830 Streicher model, as are most replicas.

The original fortepianos were made by time-consuming methods including extensive aging of the wood on the tree, tearing of the wood along the grain (rather than sawing at angles), and other techniques which better preserved the living cellular geometry of the wood, allowing a sound remarkably more like a human voice.

The fortepiano here is thus nearly wasted and the only net difference between this, and Elly Ameling's 1979 "Complete Mozart Lieder," is that Spillman's fortepiano renders this recording more "quaint." The present recording also takes the same too-quick and uniform tempos as does Ameling (no innovation there), but unfortunately lacks Ameling's occasional charming poetic phrase.

Inventing the lied

Mozart invented the classical lied, contrary to Philip Miller's liner notes (cribbed from Alfred Einstein), which say Mozart's songs are "not lieder." Mozart's use of human voice register in his lieder in fact shows why the lied is known as the "Rosetta Stone" for all poetry and music.

The German song goes back to the Minnesingers of the Middle Ages, but up through the work of Mozart's predecessors and contemporaries such as C.P.E. Bach (1714-88) and J.F. Reichardt (1752-1814), it was far more restrained. There was little or no independence of the keyboard from the voice, and in fact, most songs were written out in only two staves, where the singer simply sang the keyboard treble line.

During the period 1783-87, when he was working on the great keyboard Fantasy in C-minor and related compositions, Mozart created the first real lieder, "Das Veilchen" and "Abendempfindung," with two new parameters. First, he gained access to the poems of Schiller, Goethe, and others which were the first real "secular" poems in modern German.

Second, Mozart expanded the explicit use of human vocal register shifts as the singularity which creates the counterpoint of the lied, using registers to highlight those points of the poetry where ironic transformations, especially verbal transformations, occurred.

Mozart did this as a conscious representation in music, of Schiller's scientific dictum: The human mind creates the singularities which determine history.

As Schiller used poetry and drama, so Mozart sought to use music to demonstrate that Kant was wrong, that the creative process of the human mind can be made intelligible, for, with music as with all great art, the composer can demonstrate to the audience exactly how the mind creates new singularities.

"Das Veilchen" (K. 476, 1785), shows the use of register to highlight singularities in the poetry in the clearest, most amusing way possible. How did Mozart choose the key, G, for the song? Proceed, as in any good joke, from the punchline, backward. Mozart seems to have scanned the poem from the final irony: "Und *sterb* ich denn, so *sterb* ich doch durch *sie*, durch *sie*, zu ihren Füssen doch."

The final verbal transformation of the poem, of course, is that the violet, dies (Shakespearean pun intended). No

tragedy, this. Then, wherein lies the comedy? In the irony that the silly flower is happy to die, if only "through her," trod "by her feet."

Mozart decided he wanted a register shift, to highlight the verbal transformation: "How does it die?" Answer: "durch *sie!*"

Mozart chose the key of G not merely because it rises from the fifth (D) to the tonic, G, in exactly four notes (D–E–F-sharp–G) for the four measures needed for the four phrases: "Und *sterb* ich denn, so *sterb* ich doch, durch *sie*, durch *sie!*" He chose G, because in G, the shift into the third soprano/tenor register occurs on the high F-sharp on the first "durch *sie*," on the plaintive 7th, and then resolves to the tonic G only on the second "durch *sie*." Both the F-sharp and the G are in the new, third register.

This is just a hint. Any scientific analysis of the song, however, will depend on these kinds of registeral considerations. Already we see that unless the registers are performed, clearly, by both singer and pianist, a key irony of the song is lost.

Abendempfindung

Similarly, "Abendempfindung" (K. 523, 1787) is built entirely around the two voices generated by the soprano register shift at F-sharp, which breaks the C octave into two registral colors. Without emphasis in both the keyboard and voice, upon this register shift, we have only one color, and only one voice. We lose the counterpoint entirely.

The theme of the song is the three measure phrase in the keyboard treble which begins with the figure C–F–A–C, which divides the C octave into two registers, and thus two voices, at the F-sharp: C–F/A–C.

This figure occurs for the first time in the keyboard treble in measure 11, on the offbeat, after the word "Silberglanz." We hear it seven times, transposed into four keys. At the end, as the theme is repeated twice, starting on the offbeat at C.

If the last six measures were to be sung, by a soprano, the most obvious feature of them would be the register shift. The sixth measure from the end has a C octave, split between the low C and low F, in the soprano first register, and the middle A and C, in the second register. The fourth measure from the end repeats the point, to underline it, and again splits the C octave into two register voices, from C and high F in the soprano second register, to A and C in the third and fourth registers.

This is the point, of the fortepiano, which alone has register shifts, and could possibly execute a credible imitation of a human voice, for all this is written in the keyboard line!

Again, this is a mere hint at how Mozart "constructed" the song, but the song depends on register shifts in both the keyboard and the human voice. Play no register shifts, and sing none, and you do not perform the songs Mozart wrote.

Goethe's 'Das Veilchen'

Ein Veilchen auf der Wiese stand,	A violet stood on the meadow
gebückt in sich und unbekannt,	Alone in itself and unknown,
es war ein herzigs Veilchen.	It was a dear little violet.
Da kam ein' junge Schäferin	There came a young shepherdess
mit leichtem Schritt und munterm Sinn	With light step and merry heart
daher, daher,	Hither, hither
die Wiese her und sang.	Here, through the meadow, and sang.
Ach! denkt das Veilchen, wär ich nur	Oh, thought the violet, were I only
die schönste Blume der Natur,	The most beautiful bloom of Nature
ach nur ein kleines Weilchen,	Oh, only for a little while,
bis mich das Liebchen abgepflückt	Until my sweetheart plucked me up
und an dem Busen mattgedrückt!	And held me upon her bosom!
Ach nur, ach nur!	Oh, only, oh, only
ein Viertelstündchen lang!	For a quarter of an hour long!
Ach, aber ach! Das Mädchen kam	Oh, but oh! The maiden came
und nicht in acht das Veilchen nahm	And made no notice of the violet,
ertrat, das arme Veilchen.	She trod upon the poor violet.
Es sank und starb und freut' sich noch:	It sank, and died, and rejoiced still:
Und sterb ich denn, so sterb ich doch	And though I die, so that I die
durch sie, durch sie,	Through her, through her
zu ihren Füssen doch.	At her feet!