

Interview with Luis Gago

Jury Member in the category Duo for Voice and Piano (Lied)

Interviewer: Jennifer Ronyak, Senior Scientist at *Institute 14: Aesthetics of Music*

JR: Luis Gago, thank you for serving on the jury and for doing this interview. You come to the jury with a broad background in publishing, as well as producing and organizing musical events. From this perspective, what do you think that art song contributes to modern musical life, especially that other genres don't?

LG: Well, it's funny, because just this morning I was having breakfast with François le Roux, who is also on the jury. And I told him, it's nothing against you, of course, as a singer, but after a whole week here of listening to so much modern music and so many modern songs, why are all the singers singing the same stuff over and over again? It is difficult to understand, because we have listened to so many different kinds of modern songs, that you just cannot understand. Also, if we make a list of the Schubert lieder we have listened to during this week, the list is like fifteen¹. So they are doing the same ones over and over again. So something is going wrong. So from the theoretical point of view, the answer to your question is very easy, song could make a big difference. But in practical terms it's not happening. I mean I have been attending lieder recitals for many, many, many years, and the list of songs and lieder I have listened to is quite reduced, because they are doing the same ones.

JR: That's interesting. What do you think is behind this?

LG: I don't trust the reason that it is because of the audience, because the audience wants this sort of thing. No, the audience is not like that. I have a long experience, and if you give to the audience the right things, the audience is very happy to have that, instead of the usual stuff. I don't know where is the problem – if it is the promoters of concerts, if it is the performers. I don't think it's the audience, really. I would never blame the audience. As far as I'm concerned, after many experiences, in different countries, the audience is almost, every time, right. Almost!

JR: That's wonderful that you say that. It makes me wonder also that if the repertoire is so narrow as it's practiced: who is generating that? We were talking before we started recording about scholarship. Do you think that from that side, along with the side of concert producing, that there is too much focus on a very narrow repertoire?

LG: I have no complaints about the scholarly point of view, because we both know that a lot has been done and a lot has been researched. If you want to know, you can get to the information. I guess it is more not the musicians themselves than the promoters. Because the promoters also, with some exceptions, tend to be conservative. And they are thinking just about filling the hole. I was talking earlier today about how I have been organizing concerts for the last four years, at the Beethoven-Haus in Bonn, and they have a wonderful, really nice, 200-seat chamber music hall.

¹ During the entire FS&MM competition, 97 different lieder by Schubert were performed by the participating duos.

They are always complaining about how to fill it. In a city which has a university, which has several offices of the United Nations, which still has several federal institutions, from the times when Bonn was the capital, and they are always concerned about filling seats. And, sometimes I would say, “how about Ligeti?,” and they would say “Ligeti!?” They are scared of Ligeti. So then, in the small places, they tend to be extremely conservative. But in a big city, and I live in Madrid, it is more or less the same. The lied series in Madrid has been running non-stop for the last 25 years or so, and the programming is so conservative. You cannot really listen to anything that we have been hearing here.

JR: Yes, it is a pity that you cannot hear more variety in concert. And there is a lot of work for people to do on all sides to keep enlivening the scene.

LG: Yes, some years ago, in Madrid, in a very nice cultural foundation called Juan March, they asked me to do a whole series of seven concerts. With a one-hour introduction by myself, telling more or less the history of the lied. It was not the whole history of course. We went from *Winterreise* to Schoenberg’s *Buch der hängenden Garten*. It was interesting, because the audience was not the same every time, of course, but the core of the audience was the same. And after all these introductions and explanations, the audiences had evolved so much. And at the end they were so much better. And I could notice in the comments after the concert, and when looking at the faces of the people when I was talking. So it’s also necessary, I think, to introduce people to the repertoire. You cannot just throw this new repertoire at them. You do it properly, though, and then it works.

JR: Yes, it is so important from the side of classical art music in general to realize that the audience is to be cherished and respected. They bring so much to it.

LG: Yes, audiences are not stupid.

JR: Exactly.

LG: I am really tired of this idea [that audiences don’t get it]. Audiences are not stupid at all! Sometimes they make mistakes, or when musicians play tricks on the stage the audience is easily deceived. But many times they are not. They know. I was running a chamber music series in Madrid for eight years, and I used to say that this audience had heard so much different music and so many performers, that they could really make the difference between a good concert, a very good concert, an extraordinary concert, and an absolutely outstanding concert. So the level of applause showed how high was the judgment.

JR: Absolutely. You mentioned introducing the audience to new works. One thing I noticed in the competition setting is that it is not necessarily desirable or practical to hand out texts of the songs for the public audience. But this is a common practice, traditionally, with song recitals – that you have either the text or the translated text. But some also find it very distracting, in terms of how one engages with the performers on the stage. Since you have done some text translations for liner notes, what do you think the role of that printed text is in a concert situation?

LG: I think it is absolutely necessary for the audience to follow the text. But I can tell you that since only last year, in Madrid, both at the national concert hall, and at this cultural foundation that I just mentioned, where there are many concerts a year, they are now surtitling the lieder. So instead of giving the printed texts, they are giving surtitles. And I think this is working, because you don't need to be concentrated on your programme, or trying to read with not much light, you just can look at the stage, and have the text there, both the original and the translation, and this is very useful. Going to a song recital, and not having the texts, and not having the translations, is useless. I mean if a person goes to *Winterreise*, and doesn't know anything, doesn't know anything about the cycle, and doesn't know German, what's the point. I mean of course it's wonderful, it's moving, but you need to know what's going on there, otherwise it doesn't make any sense. So I'm now very much in favor of these surtitles.

JR: That's a really interesting perspective because – not that there's a lot of debate on this – but I think some people like to think that song should be kept separate from opera. They look to things to distinguish the two, and the projection of surtitles can be one thing.

LG: They both have text; opera has also action, but music and text is exactly the same, so they should share that. Also, normally, the poetry of the songs is so much better than the libretti. I mean apart from some libretti, but normally they are crap. If you look at the action in opera, though, you know what is going on. But in a song, if you don't have the text, you are lost! You are completely lost!

JR: That makes me think also of another question, concerning how specific performers are important to bringing across this repertoire. How are specific performances important to bringing to life not just the core canonical repertoire, but also lesser-known music?

LG: Well, there are people out there that try to do something different, for instance. Matthias Goerne's presentation of *Winterreise* involves images which were prepared specifically for the cycle, which is also an extra stimulus for the audience to follow the story. Of course, I think you don't need that. But I think for some people in the audience it may be helpful, and I think it is a very strong aesthetic experience. And there have been other attempts, not always very successful. But I don't know of many performers who are trying to do something like that. As for broadening the repertoire, there are some musicians who have tried, Ian Bostridge for example, who has performed Thomas Adés and Hans Werner Henze. So there are some musicians who are very much in favor of broadening the lied repertoire.

JR: Yes, that's good to hear. I also wish that the field would be more experimental and that a broader repertoire would be in circulation in performance. You mentioned just now Ian Bostridge, and I noticed that you translated his book on *Winterreise*, as well as some other monographs featuring performers' perspectives. What do you think is most interesting about the performer taking up the authorial role in books like these?

LG: I really like Ian Bostridge's book, I have to say. This is the only book in my life where I was sad when I finished the translation – normally you are so happy! Especially when you translate long books, as I have translated. I have translated *The Rest is Noise*, which is 800 pages and the *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, which is 1200 Spanish pages! So with Bostridge's book I was

enjoying every page. I don't agree with everything he says, but, he always has a point. And he always knows how to express it. And if you read Bostridge's book, you absolutely forget about *Winterreise* being just an early nineteenth-century piece, if you had this idea. You really have the feeling that somehow everything is there. Everything. That it is an eternally modern piece. And as a performer of the piece, for twenty years, and a clever person, who has studied in Oxford, he really has a point. And his approach is of course really different. I recently met Alfred Brendel, and we were talking about this book, and he said "yes, it's a good book, *but* Bostridge is wrong about the triplets. I told him!" And he wrote a very nice review of Bostridge's book for *The New York Review of Books*, where he mentioned this triplet thing. But the thing is not every performer is like Brendel or Bostridge.

JR: Do you feel that a book like that could especially inspire new performance approaches?

LG: Oh yes, I mean for some performers, if they read Bostridge's book, or Susan Youens', or any others, they find new insights into the piece that they were not aware of. Even me, although I have never sung it, if I sang *Winterreise* after knowing what I know, it would be very different of course.

JR: Coming back now to your role on the jury, what aspects of your professional activities have been affecting your work on the lied jury?

LG: This is a tricky one. I am not a singer, I am not a pianist – I am a violinist. So I felt on the first day like the black sheep. Because they are so professional and so famous, and they know everything about vocal technique, and piano technique. One of my brothers is a pianist, so I know a little bit about piano, and I have so much piano in my life, but of course yesterday, when we got the results from the final, we were all talking the same, more or less. It is so subjective, it doesn't matter if you are a pianist, or not, or a singer, or not, at the end it is just a matter of personal taste, and a matter of what you value more and what you value less. There are so many different things that you can judge. The stage presence, the choice of repertoire, the contact with the audience. For instance, this competition is called Franz Schubert and Modern Music, so that means that modern music has to have a role. And some contestants made risky choices of repertoire, and some contestants made very conservative choices of repertoire. How performers handle this, I think, is something to be valued in this competition. In this context, I tried to be fair all the time, I tried to readjust my judgement every day, and I think we made a fair judgement.

JR: I was interested also watching the second round, where they had short programs of 15 minutes, that the contestant really must think about programming even in such a short span of time. They are also in a position where they need to present some Schubert, and they need to present other pieces. I was wondering how you saw the newer songs and the Schubert songs playing off of each other.

LG: I think that quite a few contestants made very wrong choices. And this was important. If you see that a singer is not even able to choose the right repertoire, for his or her voice, or for his or her qualities, then this is saying something. But for instance yesterday, this young singer who got into the final, Sophia Burgos, she made a wonderful combination of George Crumb and Franz Schubert. She even made something that was absolutely unorthodox. She sang two verses of

Schubert's *Des Fischers Liebesglück* at the beginning of her recital, and sang two verses at the end. And in the middle she sang more Schubert and George Crumb. And the nicest thing they did I think was with the last chord, after the second verse of *Des Fischers Liebesglück*, this they made *attacca* into the George Crumb. So just to show that you can just do it that way, you can connect songs that are 250 years away from each other. I think this is nice. This is Franz Schubert *and* Modern Music.

JR: Yes, and that sounds very exciting I think also for the audience. It makes them hear the music in a different way. Thank you for your time.

LG: Thank you.