

Interview with Roberta Alexander

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

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

JR: Thank you for joining me. I first have a question from one Ohioan to another, looking a bit at the issue of where one comes from locally and how one becomes adept in a cosmopolitan and international singing style. You, for example, were originally educated in the Midwestern United States, and then went on to have an international career and importance as a classical singer. Similarly, many singers at this competition are expected to have developed a broad linguistic expertise, regardless of their own cultural background. How do you view the presence and significance of this issue in classical singing?

RA: Well, I think that languages are extremely important, especially for singing. Because our main goal is to communicate and to tell our story. And, of course, this is always easier in your native language. However, coming from a country as large as the United States, where – at least when I was growing up, there was one language, and that was English – you have a definite deficit. You may think that you are on the right track, because you have coaches, but there is nothing like being in the actual country of the song, the opera, whatever the singing language is – there is nothing like being in that country and hearing how the people speak. And that you have to learn how to do that. So I think I was very lucky.

JR: Yes, I see how that is very important. And I think also coming from the States, it seems very hard to get out and be comfortable in these different cultures and styles. In a more cosmopolitan place growing up, it is sort of normal life. The world of classical singing then becomes a reflection of that.

RA: Yes. But it is also hard work. It's hard work. And also there are, even among the so-called experts, regional differences. Just like the United States: you travel five hundred miles and somebody is saying "warter" instead of "water."

JR: I think I asked this question because when I think about language and poetry in song, like in this repertoire for the competition, I wonder if, especially with the Schubert, the native German-speaking singers have a particular advantage. I noticed however this year, that the singers who made it to the finals, that none of them come (at least it appears so) from the German-speaking area. So I'm wondering, as you listen to the participants, especially the finalists, how you felt they did with language, diction, and the potential for expression in these elements?

RA: I thought they were – very, very many of them – brilliant. And the hard thing about this particular competition is that you are not only judging the singer. There were some singers who were wonderful, and their pianists were not on the same level. And there were some pianists who were absolutely fantastic, but their singer wasn't on the same level. So if you are talking about having a lied duo, then you have to try and put a lot of things aside. I just said, ok, I wonder, would I want to sit and listen to a whole evening of this duo? And it was hard. There were many

that I said yes. I'm happy with who got through. But there were other people that I thought were equally good or excellent. And sometimes there is a natural proclivity for certain types of languages, so someone may be fantastic with French, or terrible with German, or vice versa.

JR: Yes, exactly. It is so interesting to think about the role of such a competition also in the careers of such singers, especially, and duos – I shouldn't just say singers – (I keep focusing on it, since I know that you are a singer), that for the duos, there is a whole mass of them that are really on a successful and professional level. What do you feel the importance of a competition like this is for the careers of the participants?

RA: That's a very loaded question....One of the things that is important, is that you see how far along you are, compared to all of the other participants. It is like, "Oh, wait a minute, these people are doing this, and this, and this, maybe I should be trying to do this" or the cleverness of how you make a program. How do you make a program for each round? That is a whole business within itself. And you need these skills, because one of the hard things to do is to make a program – to make it good for you, make it good for the audience. Any time you have a chance to hone these skills, that is very good. I personally wonder about competitions, I always have. I think, you know, you have people who do all of them. And I wonder why they are busy with that. But for this competition there is a performance attached to it, in a very good place. And a chance to do more performances. And that's what people want. They want to be heard by people who can help them.

JR: Definitely. I would imagine, also, thinking back to my student days as a performer, just anything to get you before a public, and to get venues...

RA: And the feedback: what you need to work on, what is already strong. I do think it has gotten a bit too important. Instead of getting it done, you're out doing competitions. So, I don't know, sometimes I wonder whether they have time to take in what they just did before going on to the next one. So that it gets in, what people say to you, or what you heard, or what you experienced, that you have a chance to process it before going forward.

JR: Yes. I would imagine that it is hard to find that balance.

RA: What did you do as a performer?

JR: Oh, I was a pianist and I accompanied a number of vocalists for a time, but just in my student years. I am in musicology now, but I do study lieder, actually. This portion of the interviews is very fun for me.

RA: Ok.

JR: Maybe we could switch subjects a little bit. Some decades ago, with lieder, it was largely expected in the case of songs with a strong persona that was clearly gendered male or female, that men would sing "roles" in poems that were appropriate to men, and that women would sing other lieder. This has of course changed more recently, especially as regards the major Schubert

song cycles – more often *Winterreise* than *Die schöne Müllerin* – and I wonder how you view these gender issues when it comes to programming, either outside of or within the competition?

RA: I think it is interesting, although sometimes I think it doesn't work.

JR: Can you give some examples?

RA: No.

JR: Well, you don't have to say anything about anyone in the competition!

RA: No...I like it because it's fresh, and because there can be a different take on it...you know, we are so boxed in...however, there are certain moments in certain songs where if there's not that *frisson* of...when there's like a really high note for a baritone, and there's a certain kind of excitement about the way the note sounds with that word at the moment in the music, and when you have a different type of voice doing it, where it sounds easier, it just doesn't quite get there. Then I'm old fashioned, I'm like "Oh, I miss that." It is like when a man sings *Knoxville* of Barber...it doesn't work! There are times when it works and times when it doesn't. Kaufmann is now singing the *Vier letzte Lieder* – I have not heard that, I would be interested to. I'm sure that the last one would be really fantastic. I'm not sure about number 1 since it's so delicate. I don't know. Also, Strauss said he wanted a woman to sing them. Do we keep to what the composer said, or do we take the liberty of doing what we want?

JR: That's a wonderful question. I find it interesting, in that I was thinking of the question in terms of a sort of gender identity or role within the poem, and I think you took it immediately in the direction of what type of voice and sound is embedded in this music.

RA: Well, that's also part of gender. Just for example, they just did a production of *Rake's Progress* in Amsterdam, and 'Baba the Turk', who is the bearded lady, was sung by a countertenor. And I found that annoying. Because the whole part about the Bearded Lady is the fact that she is a bearded lady. So if you take away the woman part, it almost becomes a caricature.

JR: Yes, it really changes the reading of the character.

RA: Absolutely. So you have to be careful about how you choose to do things. There are some songs where I think...well, I remember when I sang "I hear an army" that a baritone said to me, "You can't sing that, well that's a baritone song." Well, I said to myself, I probably sing it better than you but...[makes fighting cat sound]!

JR: I'll make sure to transcribe: [fighting cat sound]!

RA: [Fighting cat sound]!

JR: Then they'll have to translate it into German! Just to continue with this subject a little more, what do you think about *Winterreise* in particular for women's voices.

RA: Well, I happen to like Fassbaender a lot. So, I think that's really, really nice. But she also has a dark-timbered instrument. So it is possible.

JR: So it is very dependent on the individual singer.

RA: Yes, I wouldn't want to hear, you know, like a little soubrette singing *Winterreise*. There's so much other stuff you can do. I also think that it challenges the establishment, about what they will accept. And I think that any time that this happens, it's quite good.

JR: Yes.

RA: I like that.

JR: I do too. Having had so much experience with opera and song, as perhaps maybe a number of singers do, what do you find essential to quality lied interpretation that is maybe different than handling an operatic role?

RA: Well, I was talking about this the other day, because some people, I've seen them, and their interpretive communication skills have stopped with the outward. And so, with the lieder, it is in – out – and then back in. And then you give. Because otherwise, it's too blatant. And one of the main things is that with lieder, you have only you and the pianist. There's no lighting, there's no sets, there's no costumes, there's no story – you are the one who has to make all these stories. Each one you have to communicate with your audience. There's tons of other stuff you have to be busy with in opera. It still is about communication, very much so. But in a different way lieder are smaller. And I don't mean a smaller emotional palate, it's a smaller gesticular palate. People who think that they have to hit you over the head with the obvious can be problematic.

JR: I see.

RA: I told a girl this week: "Most of the people who will come to hear you, they will have done their homework. And they probably know the songs better than you do, and have heard them more. So you don't have to make a gesture to indicate that you are making this point. Sometimes a look will do." Just things like that. There are certain songs you can move around in. If you are singing "I bought me a cat" [Aaron Copland] then you don't want to have your hand on the piano and be stiff – you want to have fun with it. And also your palate of colors is more varied in songs, and the amount of voice that you need to use is more varied. You don't need the same amount of voice that you need for an opera aria. Sometimes. But sometimes you think that sounds really good. And it doesn't matter – big, small voices – it doesn't matter. What matters to me is that the person who is interpreting this stuff stays true to their instrument, and doesn't try to overproduce. If you have a small voice and it's pretty, well, use that, that's an advantage that someone else doesn't have. But a lot of times you find that people want to be who they're not.

JR: Actually, when I am working with lieder, I associate them with a longstanding discourse of authenticity: that the stage trappings are gone, it's just you and the piano. That makes us as an audience ask whether the singer is being true to him or herself, true to the song, or are they

putting one over on us? Is this real? Is that something that you think is especially present in song?

RA: I've never thought of it like that. It's just communication in a different way. The honesty of telling the story. You see people get in the way, their own selves get in the way of things. I've never thought of it like that, about authenticity. Because opera is also authentic. I'd have to think about that a little longer. That's a good question.

JR: I ask it because I've read too many centuries of critics laying these things onto the lied. Thank you so much for your time.

RA: Thank you.