

A personal view of a singer, past or present, who shares a vocal register with the candidate. The essay is divided into a first, biographical section, considering the singer and his or her background, education, career trajectory, critical response, relationship with conductors, directors and composers, looking at problems encountered on the way, and showing how a singer today can learn from lessons from the past; and a second, programmatic section in which a recital programme of about an hour's length is selected from the chosen singer's repertoire, with full programme notes about each song or aria, detailing its context in a song cycle or opera, the meaning of its text, and appropriate ornamentation, phrasing or expression learned from marked-up scores or recordings of the chosen singer. Each section should aim for about 3500 words.

Birgit Nilsson (1918-2005)

Background

Born in Skåne in Sweden, celebrated dramatic soprano Birgit Nilsson did not have the easiest passage to success. Nilsson came from a poor farming family where money was hard to come by, and the need for Nilsson to take lessons in home economics and marry a farming boy as a financial aid to her family became ever pressing as she grew older. She began her singing career in her local church choir as a young girl, where it was her director of music who first noticed her outstanding potential and soaring soprano voice which added richness to the choral tradition in his church. Encouraged by the Director of Music to enrol in voice lessons, Birgit and her vocal talents became more widely known within the local community. Nilsson's mother reluctantly spent the small inheritance that she was left to send her daughter to study voice in Stockholm at the Royal Academy of Music.¹ Birgit was somewhat reluctant, as her dream was not for the stage but for a career in church music,² but indeed she was able to

¹ Mayer, Martin: '...and then I had to sing like an Indian', *Sunday Evening Post*, 19th October 1963, p.90.

² Mayer, Martin: '...and then I had to sing like an Indian', *Sunday Evening Post*, 19th October 1963, p.90.

complement her studies with singing in churches at weddings and funerals to help her fund her studies, which she adored.

Education

Her work ethic was incredibly strong from a very young age, and she practised her art for many hours a day. Although pursuing a career in singing was not encouraged by her parents, they nonetheless put ever increasing pressure on her to perform every time they had visitors or hosted a party. This led Birgit to feel frustrated with her parents for treating her as an accessory for them to show off and she became even more aggravated as she was not able to use her voice solely for church performance. Thus, while Birgit was required to perform at numerous family events, she was simultaneously discouraged from using her voice to its full potential in a career because her father needed her to marry so that their farm might stay in the family.

In 1941 Birgit took lessons with well-known vocal coach Ragnar Blennow for six months before her audition for the Royal Academy of Music in Stockholm at which she was placed top of 47 competitive places. It was from this moment onwards that Nilsson's career as a singer truly began. Taking up the offer of a place, Birgit was awarded the prestigious Christina Nilsson Scholarship which was an augur of an incredibly successful career. Birgit considered herself to be largely self-taught, learning a great deal of her art from being on the stage itself, although she was very grateful for the support of her teachers at the Academy.

Career Trajectory

Nilsson had a long and dazzling career, with her debut at Stockholm's Royal Opera at short notice in 1946 as Agatha in Weber's *Der Freischutz*. This fact is even more remarkable when we consider that Birgit learned every single role in Swedish first as she was insistent of getting the greatest meaning from the text. More often than not, she would learn Italian roles in German too as she found languages notoriously difficult to learn.³ Her career continued to grow, and she quickly won national acclaim as Verdi's Lady Macbeth, again at Stockholm's Royal Opera. While building up a repertoire of lyric-dramatic roles in Stockholm, Birgit Nilsson made her Metropolitan Opera debut as Isolde in 1949, aged 41. Later than expected for a singer to make their international debut, with a voice of this size it is unsurprising as it is often singers who have enjoyed success singing Spinto roles before they are able to break into the world of Wagner, and Birgit Nilsson is no exception. Following from this, Nilsson enjoyed tremendous success, singing the role of Electra in Mozart's *Idomeneo* at the Glyndebourne Festival in 1951. From this, Birgit Nilsson went on to make her debut in Vienna State Opera in 1953, where she was a regular performer for over 25 years. Able not only to capture people's hearts with her voice, Nilsson was able to give resounding stage presence gave great strength to any performance.

Once she had begun her career as a Wagnerian soprano, Nilsson became renowned for her execution of some of the most challenging Wagnerian roles. A regular at the Bavarian State

³ Mayer, Martin: '...and then I had to sing like an Indian', *Sunday Evening Post*, 19th October 1963, p.89.

Opera, Birgit Nilsson performed the complete Ring cycle in 1954 as well as returning to sing Sieglinde, Brünnhilde and Isolde until 1969. Yet Nilsson was insistent on not being pigeonholed, and her most performed role at The Met was in fact Puccini's *Turandot*. Nilsson retired from the stage aged 64, but continued her career by recording songs, becoming a jury member for singing competitions and coaching advanced singers.⁴

In a 2002 interview, Nilsson states that it was not until the summer of 1954 that she found a satisfactory vocal technique to build upon.⁵ This is noticeable in a number of her recordings, with her voice developing a richer, even tone both in the lower and upper registers, the latter of which has grown a piercing brilliance. Nilsson does not state how she found developed this technique, but we can assume that she grew more comfortable with her voice, no longer afraid of the sheer size of it and the depth of sound and meaning that it brought to the music.

Critical Response

Nilsson was renowned for great modesty in her accomplishments, which could be due to the lack of desire she had for a career on the operatic stage. She was described as 'an accomplishment of voice, musicianship, and acting that established this intelligent artist not only in the history of the Met but in the History of Opera'⁶ which attests to her achievements as a singer and artist. Yet while her voice was of dazzling quality, her acting needed much work. Nilsson was often told she was static on stage, but as she began to relax into the role and gain more confidence in the portrayal of her characters on the stage, her acting began to

⁴ Olve, Nils-Göran, 'Birgit Nilsson 100 Years' *The Record Collector*, September 2018, p.226.

⁵ Johansson, Stefan, 'A post-script: interviewing Birgit Nilsson', *The Record Collector*, September 2018, p.228.

⁶ Mayer, Martin, *The Met: One Hundred Years of Grand Opera*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), p.282-283.

improve,⁷ giving an entirely new angle to her performances, both realistically and dramatically.

One of the most notable moments in her career were the 26 curtain calls she received in her performance in *Salome* as Lady Macbeth⁸. This was completely unheard of for any singer and calls attention to the sheer amount of respect she received from critics and audience members alike, which was highly unusual for many singers of her generation. Her Met debut made the front page of the *New York Times* as did her obituary, which again shows how deeply loved and respected she was.

Relationship with Composers, Directors and Conductors

Nilsson had many challenging relationships with composers, conductors and directors during her career, some positive and some that were less successful. Having performed Agathe in *Der Freischütz* aged 28 (her debut at Stockholm Opera) with three days' notice and receiving outstanding praise from the critics, Nilsson was not awarded another role with them for over a year, as the conductor deemed one small musical error unmusical.⁹ This goes to show just how unforgiving the industry was, and indeed remains so today. Writing in her autobiography, Nilsson states that during a production of *Der Freischütz* the conductor Leo Blesch was so unkind to her she was left contemplating suicide after the final performance. Whilst it appears that Nilsson was not overly fond of conductors as a whole, 'conductors not interested in you singing it the way you feel is best but the way that they want you to sing it'¹⁰, a number of

⁷ Davis, Peter G., 'Farewell To The Valkyrie' *Opera News*, April 2006, p. 82.

⁸ Mayer, Martin, *The Met: One Hundred Years of Grand Opera*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), p.284.

⁹ Hines, Jerome, *Great Singers on Great Singing*, (New York: Limelight Productions, 1982) p. 196.

¹⁰ Mayer, Martin, '...and then I had to sing like an Indian', *Sunday Evening Post*, 19th October 1963, p.90.

them were responsible for aiding in the success of her career. The German conductor Fritz Busch was central to the success of her career: in 1951 he gave Birgit Nilsson her debut at the Glyndebourne Festival, her first platform outside Sweden. Birgit maintained a close relationship with Busch throughout her career and continued to value his advice and musicianship.

Her relationship with stage directors was arguably as challenging. The director Herbert von Karajan rejected Nilsson from his Salzburg casting but included her in his cast at The Met. The pair famously clashed in opinions 'because Nilsson, however hard she tried, was unable to accord Karajan the reverence he considered his due.'¹¹ In a 1954 production of Strauss's *Salome*, the director Göran Gentele taught her to crawl over the stage 'as a serpent'¹². This was a risky move, as he wanted not to tell Nilsson how she should best sing, but to enable her performance to gain greater depth through the addition of some acting techniques. Thankfully, she was not offended, and this proved to be a great success for Birgit Nilsson. Instead of just commenting on her wonderful voice, the reviews began to share the drastic improvement in her acting skills and how this contributed to an overall more rounded performance.

Yet Nilsson was still characteristically a diva, but in the greatest sense. She knew the power of her voice and was not willing to let anyone bypass or take advantage of her good nature or her abilities. When she was promised travel expenses for three performances at The Met, Nilsson refused to turn up on the fourth night for which she had not received payment.

¹¹ Mayer, Martin, *The Met: One Hundred Years of Grand Opera*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), p.316.

¹² Johansson, Stefan, 'A post-script: interviewing Birgit Nilsson', *The Record Collector*, September 2018, p.229.

Desperate to have her on stage, she was called requesting her immediate presence, but Nilsson still refused to attend the performance without payment. However, by the end of the first act, Nilsson had received her expenses and by Act II she was on stage performing.¹³ Birgit Nilsson maintained a wonderful friendship with soprano Astrid Varnay throughout her career.

Problems encountered on the way

Singing across the world proved to be a challenge for Birgit Nilsson. As with a number of gifted musicians, Nilsson had perfect pitch, which was both a hindrance and a help. Often, the pitch changed between countries in which she was singing, and she stated that this proved a challenge as “the pitch of the instruments is lower in London than Vienna.”¹⁴

As well as her sometimes challenging relationship with colleagues, Nilsson was required to adapt to situations outside her control. For example, the Internal Revenue of 1975 halted her North American career for four years, which constituted a large proportion of her performance venues and income. To combat this, Nilsson was required to increase her stage presence within Europe to ensure that she was able to maintain a satisfactory level of financial stability as well as performance opportunities. Furthermore, during her debut at Buenos Aires’s Teatro Colon, a revolution to overthrow Peron took place. Bombs were planted all over the city whilst she was sat on her suitcase in the basement of the opera house not thinking that she would ever escape.¹⁵

¹³ Mayer, Martin, ‘...and then I had to sing like an Indian’, *Sunday Evening Post*, 19th October 1963, p.91.

¹⁴ Mayer, Martin, ‘...and then I had to sing like an Indian’, *Sunday Evening Post*, 19th October 1963, p.91.

¹⁵ Mayer, Martin, ‘...and then I had to sing like an Indian’, *Sunday Evening Post*, 19th October 1963, p.91.

How a singer today can learn from the past

Birgit Nilsson was one of the greatest singers of her generation, and an inspiration to those who follow her legacy. Renowned for her modesty and encouragement of other singers, Nilsson showed the greatest level of decorum around her colleagues. Whilst everyone was aware that Birgit took her career incredibly seriously, she held on to her passion for church music. This enabled her to remain modest; she was not selfish, nor did she believe that she was superior to other singers and continued to learn much from her peers Martha Mödl and Astrid Varnay. Nilsson was pleased to offer advice to young singers, recommending that they 'should think more and sing less otherwise the voice will tire too much.'¹⁶

Although a dramatic soprano specialising in the Wagnerian repertoire, Nilsson began her career singing lighter repertoire and built upon it as her voice developed. Birgit Nilsson is an inspiration to any young singer who wishes to sing substantial Germanic repertoire. Nilsson never complained nor pushed her career forwards to sing bigger roles, and in fact it took her time to become established as a performer before she found a solid technique that she was able to successfully build upon. Young singers who wish to pursue heavier operatic repertoire can learn from Nilsson that it is possible, but it must not be rushed so that the true brilliance of the voice will be shown in the greatest of beauty.

¹⁶ Hines, Jerome, *Great Singers on Great Singing*, (New York: Limelight Productions, 1982), p. 198.

Conclusion

Birgit Nilsson serves as an inspiration to many young singers. Similarly, to Birgit Nilsson, I began my love of singing in my local church choir, I was also insistent that were I to pursue a career in the music industry, it would be in sacred music. Furthermore, being a choral scholar has also helped fund my further education.

Nilsson was a singer who knew her own mind and was never afraid to ensure that she was portraying the roles that she was most comfortable with. Although many were keen to pigeonhole her as a Wagnerian singer, which was arguably her strong point, Nilsson was insistent on a varied repertoire including Verdi, Puccini and Strauss. Many of these roles depict a different beauty and fragility in her voice and allow her to approach each Wagner role with a fresh face.

Nilsson was careful not to advance her voice into Wagnerian repertoire too soon, maintaining roles such as Donna Anna for a significant part of her career. This led to her career spanning a number of decades with very little time off due to illness or vocal tire. Once her singing career was over, because of many performances of resounding success Birgit Nilsson was able to continue a career inspiring the next generation of young singers.

I am inspired by the success that Birgit Nilsson enjoyed, never having been hungry for power or success. Through studying her life and work, I have learned not to rush my voice by singing challenging repertoire that is not possible at a young age as there is time for the repertoire to sit more comfortably.

Programme of Repertoire of approximately one hour's length

I have selected a programme which I feel encompasses an overview of Birgit Nilsson's career, right from her beginnings singing the role of Donna Anna in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* through to her greatest performances as a Wagnerian soprano in *Tristan und Isolde*. Alongside this, I have selected art songs by Strauss that Nilsson loved and performed so compellingly. The music of Strauss suited the richness of her voice magnificently, moving throughout the tessiturae with gentle romantic tones. I have also included some Verdi arias in the programme, notably 'Vissi d'arte', the most famous soprano aria from *Tosca* which was one of Nilsson's favourite roles. A voice of such versatility and great beauty, this programme shows off Birgit Nilsson's voice at the highest quality.

Non mi dir

Don Giovanni (1787)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Crudele?

Ah no, giammai mio ben!
Troppo mi spiace allontanarti
un ben che lungamente
la nostr'alma desia...
Ma il mondo, o Dio!
Non sedur la costanza
del sensibil mio core;
ahbastanza per te mi parla amore

Non mi dir, bell'idol mio,
Che son io crudel con te.
Tu ben sai quant'io t'amai,
Tu conosci la mia fe'.
Calma, calma il tuo tormento,
Se di duol non vuoi ch'io mora.
Forse un giorno il cielo ancora
Sentirà pietà di me.

I cruel?

Ah no, my dearest!
It grieves me much to postpone
a bliss we have for long desired...

But what would the world say?
Do not tempt the fortitude
of my tender heart,
which already pleads your loving cause.

Say not, my beloved,
that I am cruel to you:
you must know how much I loved you,
and you know what I am true.
Calm your torments,
if you would not have me die of grief.
One day, perhaps, Heaven again
will smile on me.¹⁷

¹⁷ Camila Argolo Freitas Batista, Translation, [accessed via <www.ariadatabase.com>, 3 January 2020.

Mozart's 1787 opera *Don Giovanni* is today still regarded as one of his greatest works. Da Ponte's libretto is based on the legend of Don Juan, by Spanish writer Tirso de Molina. Da Ponte's libretto follows the story of the young Don who spends his life trying to outwit everyone in his path until he himself is outplayed. The opera was premiered at Prague National Theatre of Bohemia on the 29th October 1787 and conducted by Mozart himself. The opera breaks convention in that the protagonist, Don Giovanni, is sung by a baritone. We would usually expect the lead role to be sung by a tenor. However Mozart is likely to have come to this decision due to the nature of the character who is unromantic and therefore not as well suited to a tenor voice as he is an anti-hero.

Taking place in Donna Anna's house, Don Ottavio has been urging Donna Anna for her immediate hand in marriage. In her lament, Donna Anna sighs upon the unfriendly response they will receive should they marry quickly. The aria is in a gentle rondo style, with building coloratura to reflect Donna Anna's strength and independence. During the Allegro section, Donna Anna asks with growing intensity for heaven to take pity on her. Could it be that she is in denial as to whether her true love lies with her fiancé Don Ottavio or with Don Giovanni, for whom her feelings are divided.

In questa reggia
Turandot (1926)
Giacomo Puccini

**In questa reggia, or son millanni e mille,
un grido disperato risonò.
E quel grido, traverso stirpe e stirpe
qui nell'anima mia si rifugiò!
Principessa Lo-u-Ling,
ava dolce e serena che regnavi
reigned**

**In this palace, thousands of years ago,
a desperate cry rang out.
And that cry, passing down the generations
found refuge here in my soul!
Princess Lo-u-Ling,
sweet and serene ancestress, you who**

nel tuo cupo silenzio in gioia pura,
e sfidasti inflessibile e sicura
l'aspro dominio,
oggi rivivi in me!

(Fu quando il Re dei Tartari
le sette sue bandiere dispiegò.)

Pure nel tempo che ciascun ricorda,
fu sgomento e terrore e rombo d'armi.

Il regno vinto! Il regno vinto!
E Lo-u-Ling, la mia ava, trascinata
da un uom come te, come te
straniero, là nella notte atroce
dove si spense la sua fresca voce!

(Da secoli ella dorme
nella sua tomba enorme.)

O Principi, che a lunghe carovane
d'ogni parte del mondo
qui venite a gettar la vostra sorte,
io vendico su voi, su voi
quella purezza, quel grido e quella morte!
Mai nessun m'avrà!
L'orror di chi luccise
vivo nel cuor mi sta.
No, no! Mai nessun m'avrà!
Ah, rinasce in me l'orgoglio
di tanta purità!
Straniero! Non tentar la fortuna!
Gli enigmi sono tre, la morte una!

in your deep silence in pure joy
and defied, unyielding and confident,
the harsh domination (of men),
today you live again in me!

(It was when the King of the Tartars
unfurled his seven banners.)

And yet in the time that everyone
remembers,
there was dismay and terror and the roar of
arms.

The kingdom was conquered!
And Lo-u-Ling, my ancestress, dragged away
by a man like you, like you,
stranger, there in the terrible night
where her young voice was stifled!

(For ages she has slept
in her vast tomb.)

O Princes, who in long caravans
from every part of the world
come here to try your fortune,
I avenge upon you, upon you
that purity, that cry and that death!
No man will ever possess me!
Horror of the man who killed her
remains alive in my heart.
No, no! No man will ever possess me!
Ah, in me is reborn the pride
of such great chastity!
Stranger! Do not tempt fortune!
The riddles are three, death is one!¹⁸

Turandot is based on the play of the same name by Carlo Gozzi. Set in China, the plot follows the story of Prince Calaf and his developing love for the Princess, Turandot. Calaf is required to solve three riddles in order to gain her hand in marriage; however, should he fail any of the tasks, his fate will be death.

¹⁸ Rebecca Burstein, Translation, [accessed via <www.ariadatabase.com>, 3 January 2020]

'In questa reggia' takes place in Act II and marks the vocal entrance of Turandot. Whilst the most famous aria in this work is arguably 'Nessun Dorma', sung by Calaf, this is arguably the most dramatic moment of the entire opera. Before explaining the riddle test, Turandot explains that she put the riddle system in place to avenge the death of her ancestress. The moment of greatest excitement comes at the end of the aria, when the Prince and Turandot repeat their final lines, culminating in a riveting double high C.

Wiegenlied

Op. 41, No. 1 (1878)

Richard Strauss

**Träume, träume, du mein süßes Leben,
von dem Himmel, der die Blumen bringt.
Blüten schimmern da, die beben
von dem Lied, das deine Mutter singt.
Träume, träume, Knospe meiner Sorgen
, von dem Tage, da die Blume sproß;
von dem hellen Blütenmorgen,
da dein Seelchen sich der Welt erschloß.
Träume, träume, Blüte meiner Lieb
e, von der stillen, von der heiligen Nacht,
da die Blume seiner Liebediese Welt zum
Himmel mir gemacht.**

**Dream, dream, my sweet, my life,
of heaven that brings the flowers;
blossoms shimmer there, they live
from the song your mother sings.
Dream, dream, bud born of my anxiety,
of the day the flower unfolded;
of that morning bright with blossom,
when your soul opened to the world.
Dream, dream, blossom of my love,
of the silent, of the sacred night,
when the flower of his love
made this world my heaven.¹⁹**

Strauss was one of the greatest representatives of the German art song tradition, his lyrical accompaniments and soaring melodies have remained standard concert repertoire of the dramatic singer to this day. 'Weigenleid' is the first in the five-set Opus 41 collection and is a gentle lullaby. The beauty of this song is contained in its gently flowing accompaniment which settles the key in the firm tonic with the use of a two-bar introduction on the tonic pedal. The

¹⁹ Richard Stokes, Translation, [accessed via <www.oxfordleider.co.uk> 4 January 2019].

accompaniment pattern remains constant throughout the song, modulating to a variety of related keys before concluding firmly in the home key once more. The beauty of the vocal line can be found in its largely conjunct movement with a few leaps which build the tension and show the voice off with sustained notes in the thrilling upper tessitura.

Zueignung

Op. 10, No. 1

Richard Strauss

**Ja, du weißt es, teure Seele,
Daß ich fern von dir mich quäle, Liebe
macht die Herzen krank,
Habe Dank.
Einst hielt ich, der Freiheit Zecher,
Hoch den Amethysten-Becher,
Und du segnetest den Trank,
Habe Dank.
Und beschworst darin die Bösen,
Bis ich, was ich nie gewesen,
Heilig, heilig an's Herz dir sank,
Habe Dank!**

**Yes, dear soul, you know
That I'm in torment far from you,
Love makes hearts sick –
Be thanked.
Once, revelling in freedom,
I held The amethyst cup aloft
And you blessed that draught –
Be thanked.
And you banished the evil spirits,
Till I, as never before,
Holy, sank holy upon your heart –
Be thanked.²⁰**

Another of Strauss's most well-known songs, 'Zuiegnung' is the first in this set. The text is drawn from the poem 'Habe Dank' by Hermann von Gilm zu Rosenegg. The song is set in simple strophic form, with the refrain 'habe Dank!' at the end of each strophe. The accompaniment features continuous quavers over broad chords which demonstrate confidence juxtaposed by a sense of longing and despair. The song was orchestrated by Strauss in 1940.

Strauss cleverly sets the poem which translates as 'dedication'. The melody flows in a rising and falling pattern for each strophe, with the climax of each verse reaching an F natural before

²⁰ Richard Stokes, Translation, [accessed via <www.oxfordleider.co.uk> 4 January 2019].

descending for 'habe Dank' each time. The climax of the piece is reached in the word 'Heilig' at the end of the final strophe. Marked with a double forte dynamic, this phrase is matched with a highly dense chordal accompaniment which encompasses chromaticism. We also see triplet patterns in both the left and right hand of the piano accompaniment for the first time in the song along with a cross rhythm created by triplets in the left hand against quavers in the right hand and the vocal part. This creates the moment of greatest excitement in the song.

Mild und leise wie er lächelt

Tristan und Isolde (1859)

Richard Wagner

Mild und leise, wie er lächelt
Wie das Auge hold er öffnet,
seht ihr, Freunde?
Seht ihr's nicht?
Immerlichter, wie er leuchtet
Sternumstrahlet hoch sich hebt?
Seht ihr's nicht?
Wie das Herz ihm muthig schwillt
Voll und hehr im Busen ihm quillt?
Wie den Lippen, wonnig mild,
süßer Athem sanft entweht
Freunde! Seht!
Fühlt und seht ihr's nicht?
Höre ich nur diese Wiese
Die so wundervoll und leise
Wonne klagend, Alles sagend,
mild versöhnend
Aus ihm tönend, in mich dringet,
auf sich schwinget
Hold erhallend um mich klinget
Heller schallend, mich um wallend,
sind es Wellen sanfter Lüfte?
Sind es Wolken wonniger Düfte?
frangrance?
Wie sie schwellen, mich umrauschen,
soll ich athmen, soll ich lauschen?
Soll ich schlüpfen, untertauchen?
Süß in Düften mich verhauchen?
In dem wogenden Schwall

Softly and gently, see him smiling
How the eyes that open fondly,
see it Friend?
Don't you see?
Ever lighter, how he's shining
Borne on high amongst the stars?
Don't you see?
How his heart so bravely swells
Full and calm it throbs in his breast?
As from lips so joyfully mild,
sweet the breath that softly stirs
Friends! Look!
Don't you feel and see it?
It is only I that hear this way
So wondrous and gentle
Joyously sounding, telling all things,
reconciling
Sounding from him, penetrating me,
rising upward swinging on itself
Echoes fondly around me ringing
Ever clearer, wafting round me,
are they waves of gentle breezes?
Are they clouds of gladdening sweet
As they swell and murmur round me,
shall I breathe them, shall I listen?
Shall I sip them, plunge beneath them?
Breathe my last amid their sweet smell?
In the billowy surge,

**in dem tönenden Schall
In des Weltathems, wehenden All
Ertrinken, versinken, unbewusst
all thought
Höchste Lust!**

**in the gush of sound
In the World's Spirits, Infinite All
To drown now, sinking, unconscious, void of

Highest Blisse!²¹**

This is the final section of the opera *Tristan und Isolde* and is sung as Isolde laments over Tristan's dying body during the finale of the opera. Believing that he is coming back to life when she hears a beautiful melody, Isolde's visions become so intense that she falls down dead next to her lover. Also known as the 'Liebestod' or 'Love death', it is an incredibly grand and powerful ode to the life of Tristan. Known for breaking convention in classical music, Wagner's 'Liebestod' has become known for the influence it has had in *Tristan and Isolde*. Perhaps the most famous feature of the whole opera is the Tristan chord, which remains to this day the subject of great musicological debate both due to its significance on its own, and as a reference to the rest of the opera itself. The simplest explanation of the chord is the formation by the intervals of an augmented fourth, augmented sixth and augmented ninth above a bass note. This ambiguous musical chord which sits in no certain tonality but rather in the middle of two keys, sets us up for the fate of both Tristan and Isolde, right from the opening of the opera.

Vissi d'arte
Tosca (1900)
Giacomo Puccini

**Vissi d'arte, vissi d'amore,
non feci mai male ad anima viva!
Con man furtiva
quante miserie conobbi aiutai.
Sempre con fè sincera**

**I lived for my art, I lived for love,
I never did harm to a living soul!
With a secret hand
I relieved as many misfortunes as I knew of.
Always with true faith**

²¹ ²¹ Barbara Pothen, Translation, [accessed via <www.ariadatabase.com>, 3 January 2020.

la mia preghiera
ai santi tabernacoli salì.
Sempre con fè sincera
diedi fiori agl'altar.
Nell'ora del dolore
perchè, perchè, Signore,
perchè me ne rimunerì così?
Diedi gioielli della Madonna al manto,
e diedi il canto agli astri, al ciel,
che ne ridean più belli.
Nell'ora del dolor
perchè, perchè, Signor,
ah, perchè me ne rimunerì così?

my prayer
rose to the holy shrines.
Always with true faith
I gave flowers to the altar.
In the hour of grief
why, why, o Lord,
why do you reward me thus?
I gave jewels for the Madonna's mantle,
and I gave my song to the stars, to heaven,
which smiled with more beauty.
In the hour of grief
why, why, o Lord,
ah, why do you reward me thus?

One of the most famous and powerful soprano arias ever written, 'Vissi d'arte' appears at the end of Act II of *Tosca* as Scarpia, the police chief, explains that in order to save her lover's life, Tosca must sleep with him. Tosca devotes this aria, in the form as a prayer, to God asking why he treats her in this way when she has never committed a sin; whatever decision she takes, she will betray her lover unwillingly. The beauty in this aria comes from its pianissimo dynamics which evince a vulnerability within her character before we hear a soaring high Bb, creating a true cry for help and creating a moment of intense beauty and highlighting Tosca's defencelessness.

Frühling
September
Beim Schlafengehen
Im Abendrot
Four Last Songs (1948)
Richard Strauss

FRÜHLING (Hermann Hesse)

In dämmrigen Grüften
träumte ich lang
von deinen Bäumen und blauen Lüften,
von deinem Duft und Vogelgesang. Nun
liegst du erschlossen
in Gleiß und Zier,
von Licht übergossen
wie ein Wunder vor mir.
Du kennest mich wieder,
du lockest mich zart,
es zittert durch all meine Glieder deine
selige Gegenwart.

SEPTEMBER (Hermann Hesse).

Der Garten trauert,
kühl sinkt in die Blumen der Regen. Der
Sommer schauert still seinem Ende
entgegen.
Golden tropft Blatt um Blatt nieder vom
hohen Akazienbaum. Sommer Lächelt
erstaunt und matt in den sterbenden
Gartentraum. Lange noch bei den Rosen

bleibt er stehn, sehnt sich nach Ruh,
langsam tut er die (großen)
müdgewordnen Augen zu.

SPRING

In dusky caverns
I dreamed long
of your trees and azure breezes, of your
scents and birdsong. Now you lie
revealed
in glitter and array,
bathed in light
like a miracle before me.
You recognise me again, tenderly you
beckon to me. Through all my limbs
quivers your blissful presence.

SEPTEMBER

The garden is in mourning:
the rain sinks coolly on the flowers.
Summertime shudders
quietly to its close.
Leaf upon golden leaf is dropping
down from the tall acacia tree.
Summer smiles, amazed and exhausted,
on the dying dream that was this
garden. Long by the roses still
it tarries, yearns for rest,
slowly closes its (great)
weary eyes.

BEIM SCHLAFENGEGEHEN (Hermann Hesse)

Nun der Tag mich müd gemacht,
soll mein sehnliches Verlangen
freundlich die gestirnte Nacht

wie ein müdes Kind empfangen. Hände,
laßt von allem Tun, Stirn, vergiß du alles
Denken, alle meine Sinne nun

wollen sich in Schlummer senken. Und
die Seele unbewacht
will in freien Flügen schweben, um im
Zauberkreis der Nacht tief und
tausendfach zu leben.

IM ABENDROT (Joseph Eichendorff)

Wir sind durch Not und Freude
gesungen Hand in Hand,
vom Wandern ruhn wir beide nun
überm stillen Land.
Rings sich die Täler neigen,
es dunkelt schon die Luft,
zwei Lerchen nur noch steigen
nachträumend in den Duft. Tritt her und
laß sie schwirren, bald ist es
Schlafenszeit,
daß wir uns nicht verirren
in dieser Einsamkeit.
O weiter, stiller Friede,
o tief im Abendrot.
Wie sind wir wandermüde – ist dies
etwa der Tod?

GOING TO SLEEP

Now that day has tired me,
my spirits long for
starry night kindly

to enfold them, like a tired child. Hands,
leave all your doing;
brow, forget all your thoughts.
Now all my senses
want to sink themselves in slumber. And
the soul unwatched,
would soar in free flight,
till in the magic circle of night
it lives deeply and a thousand-fold.

AT GLOAMING

Through want and joy we have walked
hand in hand;
we are both resting from our travels
now, the quiet countryside below us.
Around us the valleys incline; already
the air grows dark.
Two larks still soar alone half-dreaming,
into the haze.
Come here, and let them fly about; soon
it is time for sleep.
We must not go astray
in this solitude.
O spacious, tranquil peace,
so profound in the gloaming.
How tired we are of travelling –
is this perchance death? ²²

Strauss was well known to have been hugely affected after the Second World War, given important roles in Nazi Germany both as head of the Reichsmusikkammer and leader of the Bayreuth Festival. Whilst Strauss has been continuously criticised for his association with the

²² William Mann, Translation [accessed via www.philharmonia.co.uk 2 January 2019].

Nazi party, it was later understood that he did it in part to protect Jewish members of his extended family and musicians, as well as to ensure that there were continued performances of banned composers' music such as Mahler and Mendelssohn.

By the summer of 1948, Strauss had moved back out of voluntary exile in Switzerland, but his health was now failing significantly. These four songs were his final compositions, and he died before their premiere at the Royal Albert Hall by Kirsten Flagstad and the Philharmonia Orchestra under Wilhelm Furtwängler in 1950. 'Im Abendrot' is set to a text by Eichendorff whilst 'Frühling', 'September' and 'Beim Schlafengehen' are set to Hermann Hesse's poems. All the songs were completed by September of 1948. The rich orchestration blends beautifully with a rich dramatic soprano voice.

The horn is a major feature of these orchestrated songs, and it could be argued evinces a war-like imagery whilst mirroring heaven-like imagery showing that Strauss was finally coming to terms with his impending death. The horn melody in 'September' is amongst some of the most famous orchestral solos in music, which could be inspired by his father who himself was a professional horn player.

Whilst the songs clearly have a theme of death, particularly 'Im Abendrot', Strauss seems to write as if death is almost a friendly face that he is waiting to meet. The poem talks about an ageing couple who, having been through life together, gaze at the sunset and wonder if they are staring at death, but are somehow at peace with it due to their satisfying lives lived, possibly reflecting how Strauss felt about death.

The first song, 'Frühling' expresses the beauty of the spring season, with new life and brightness abundant in nature. 'September' uses the imagery of the setting sun and

hibernation as death becomes a more pressing probability. 'Beim Schalfengehen' is perhaps the most tragic of the four poems, calling for the desire of eternal life.

Pace, pace o mio Dio (1862)

Le Forza del Destino

Giuseppe Verdi

Pace, pace, mio Dio!
Cruda sventura
M'astringe, ahimé, a languir;
Come il dì primo
Da tant'anni dura
Profondo il mio soffrir.
L'amai, gli è ver!
Ma di beltà e valore
Cotanto Iddio l'ornò.
Che l'amo ancor.
Né togliermi dal core
L'immagin sua saprò.
Fatalità! Fatalità! Fatalità!
Un delitto disgiunti n'ha quaggiù!
Alvaro, io t'amo.
E su nel cielo è scritto:
Non ti vedrò mai più!
Oh Dio, Dio, fa ch'io muoia;
Che la calma può darmi morte sol.
Invan la pace qui sperò quest'alma
In preda a tanto duol.
*Va ad un sasso ove sono alcune
provvigioni deposte dal Padre
Guardiano*
Misero pane, a prolungarmi vieni
La sconsolata vita ... Ma chi giunge?
Chi profanare ardisce il sacro loco?
Maledizione! Maledizione!
Maledizione!
*Torna rapidamente alla grotta, e vi si
rinchiude.*

Peace, peace, O God!
Cruel misfortune
compels me, alas, to languish;
my suffering has lasted for so many
years,
as profound as on the first day.
Peace, peace, O God!
I loved him, it is true! But God had
blessed him
with such beauty and courage
that I love him still and cannot efface
his image
from my heart.
Fatal destiny! A crime
has divided us down here!
Alvaro, I love you and in heaven above
it is written
that I shall never see you again!
O God, God, let me die, for only death
can bring me peace.
In vain this soul of mine here sought
peace,
a prey to so much woe.
*She goes to a rock on which the Father
Superior has left food for her.*
Wretched bread, you come to prolong
my inconsolable life. - But who comes
here,
daring to profane this sacred retreat?
A curse! A curse!²³

²³ Translation, [accessed via www.operaarias.com
5 January 2019].

The opera *La Forza Del Destino* was written in 1862 after Verdi received a commission for a performance in St. Petersburg. The original libretto was written by Francesco Maria Piave, but the version we know today (which was composed for a performance in La Scala in 1869) was edited by Antonio Ghislanzoni.

Sung by Leonora in the fourth act, Leonora sings of the thoughts of her lover Alvaro and her call for peace “pace, pace o mio dio” is in vain. This is renowned as one of the most powerful arias ever composed by Verdi as Leonora beseeches God to end her life as she sees no way to continue. The complex harmonies underneath the beautiful melody are incredibly poignant as they reflect the complications of the situation that Leonora is experiencing.

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