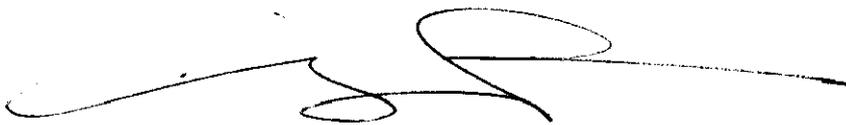


# Senior Voice Recital: A Survey of Musical Styles

Matt Davis

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Craig Priebe'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

-Craig Priebe

## Abstract

In preparing the repertoire for my Senior Recital, I had to choose pieces that covered a wide variety of musical styles and showcased my vocal skills. A number of artistic considerations were at work in shaping my decisions, as were the requirements imposed by the School of Music. In this paper, I discuss those considerations and the final decisions they led me to, as well as some of the general musical characteristics of the chosen pieces. Included is a recording of the recital.

### Acknowledgements

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Choosing the repertoire for my recital was a difficult task, requiring me to balance a number of factors that all shaped my choices of songs. Unfortunately, artistic concerns were not always foremost in my mind when making these decisions, since the recital was required first of all to meet certain specifications set by the professors of the voice area. Since it is intended as a capstone of sorts, my senior recital needed to include songs that displayed a variety of styles, so that I could demonstrate my ability to sing music from the major musical periods, and in the four "standard" languages for vocal literature – English, German, French, and Italian. The most common way to provide this variety while still retaining a sense of artistic cohesiveness is to identify the major musical styles or periods that need to be represented, and choosing a small group of songs that represent each of those styles, typically all by the same composer or by composers that have similar styles. Then, it is within these groups of songs where artistic ideas can take over, since the formal requirements of the recital are largely taken care of once an appropriately diverse group of song sets has been chosen.

The first of these song sets that I performed in my recital was a group of three songs composed in the early to middle baroque period, and attributed to Salvatore Rosa. These three songs, "Vado Ben Spesso," "Selve Voi," and "Star Vicino," make a good song set together because they complement each other when heard together. "Vado Ben Spesso" is a bright, cheerful love song, expressing the singer's devotion to his love even if he is wandering to many different places far away from her. "Selve Voi" serves as a contrasting middle piece in the set, since its lyrical, meditative character is clearly distinguished from the outer songs. "Star Vicino," the last song, is another expression of love, actually fairly similar thematically to the first song because its main idea is the

drastic contrast between being near to the one you love and being forced to be far away from that person. Also, in terms of subject matter, the pieces are very typical of the time period, particularly the second piece, "Selve Voi," a contemplative song that praises the beauty of nature.

I put these three songs together as a set for a number of reasons. As already noted, they are musically and thematically varied just enough to provide an interesting, yet cohesive group of pieces. Also, they are good representatives of the early baroque style. The poetry they set is light and not at all difficult for the listener. The composer's setting of these texts is similarly straightforward, allowing for easy performance and expression. This is typical of the chamber music of the day that this song exemplifies. It was intended mostly as a simple diversion for people to perform in their homes, not as an elaborate concert piece. They also display a number of characteristics of baroque music, including the frequently occurring running passages of a single syllable. These passages are not particularly complicated, reflecting both the early baroque style and the relative simplicity of the genre.

An interesting side note to these pieces is the fact that the origin of the songs is in question, to say the least. The man to whom they are attributed, Salvatore Rosa, is primarily known as a painter of the early seventeenth century. Like many artists, his circle of friends included a number of artists who worked in other media, including poetry and music. Somewhere in history, his name became attached to a number of art songs, which were probably actually composed by one of his musical friends. However, with no better indication of who might have actually written them, his name is still attached to these songs.

The next set of songs I performed in my recital unfortunately did not have the same cohesiveness as the first set, largely due to concerns about the requirements of the recital. One of the major forms of vocal music in the baroque era, especially in the middle and late baroque periods, was the *da capo* or ternary aria. In fact, this form, which features an ABA' form in which the singer ornaments the music of the A section on its return, was practically the only form used for opera arias of the time. As a result, it was really necessary to include at least one piece of this kind in my recital. The major criticism of opera music of this era, which eventually motivated Gluck's idea to "reform" opera a century later, is that this strict attention to form tends to ruin all sense of dramatic flow and pacing. From the perspective of a modern audience, even one ternary aria tends to seem ponderously long, especially given the ornate, florid aspects of baroque music. Thus, it seemed wise to me to include only one such aria in my recital.

I chose an aria from *The Tempest* by Henry Purcell called "Your Awful Voice." Purcell was an optimal choice, because he is considered one of the best composers of the middle baroque period, and has a reputation for his excellent settings of English texts. This way, I could perform a *da capo* aria, and then fill out the set with songs that have a greater sensitivity to their texts and would be more engaging for the audience. The other two songs I chose to accompany the aria certainly fit the description. The first was Purcell's first setting of the well-known text "If Music Be the Food of Love." He set this text a number of times, but the version I performed is the simplest and most straightforward. The song uses a minimal number of florid passages, and contains several examples of Purcell's excellent text setting. The most prominent of these comes on the line "Your eyes, your mien, your tongue declare that you are music everywhere." As the

singer lists off the virtues of his love, the vocal line rises in pitch, volume and intensity, beautifully underscoring the singer's fervent love. The other song in this set is the mournful "Since From My Dear," a definite contrast to "If Music...." It uses a number of descending lines and harsh, angular melodic ideas to express the grief and anguish of its text. The most striking moment in the piece comes at its conclusion, on the line "On her whose absence 'tis that makes me wish to die." Obviously, the poetry at this point is leaning dangerously toward the melodramatic, but the setting (and, I hope, my performance) takes the text at face value, ending on a ghostly descending repetition of the word "die," which slowly fades away as the song ends. These pieces are excellent representatives of Purcell's style.

The final set of pieces that were performed on the first half of the recital was a pair of songs by Cesar Franck. These pieces were very similar to each other, both being highly meditative in nature. In the first of these, "La Procession," the singer watches an organized, open-air religious service, while in the second, "Nocturne," the narrator looks for solace in a more individual manner, seeking comfort in the night sky. Despite the similar subject matter, the two pieces complement each other quite well. "La Procession" features an accompaniment that is often strictly chordal, almost chorale-like. The accompaniment in "Nocturne," however, is a bit more agitated, and is in almost constant motion, reflecting the singer's mood. Also, the forms are different, as the first song is through-composed, a form in which the music does not follow any stanzaic pattern, but changes freely to reflect the text. The second song in the set is in varied strophic form, a form in which the music is arranged in verse that are repeated, but with some variations

among the music of the different verses. This represents the subtle changes in the speaker's mood throughout the song.

The style of these pieces is wildly different from that of the first two sets of songs. Written late in the nineteenth century, they are good representatives of the style of the time. They feature free uses of dissonances and some highly unique chord progressions. The music is also characterized by a wide expressive range that is demanded of the performers. Above all, though, art songs of the Romantic period are noted for their close attention to the relationship between the music and the text. This compositional concept manifests itself as word painting from time to time, but is more often seen in the overall mood of the piece and the way it changes with the text. For example, in "Nocturne," the first three verses express the singer's distress and an overall troubled spirit. Franck sets these verses to music in a minor key, expressing the anguish the speaker feels. In the last verse, however, the narrator attains some measure of peace from his musings, and the music shifts quickly to a major tonality. This practice of loading musical pieces with expressive, emotional is a hallmark of Romantic style.

This set unfortunately required me to break the chronological programming order that I had loosely been trying to stick to. Franck lived much later than Schubert, the composer of the pieces that opened the second half of my recital. However, it was necessary to program the Franck pieces at this point so that the two halves of the concert were well-balanced. Strict chronological order would have placed the substantial Schubert set in one half of the concert with two other sets, no matter how the five sets were divided up. The minor sacrifice of switching the order of these two song sets seemed a much better alternative.

The next set of pieces on my recital were definitely the most serious pieces I performed, and were probably the best pieces I performed from a compositional standpoint. Franz Schubert was one of the originators of the romantic style, and made tremendous advances in the standard harmonic vocabulary of the era. He was also largely responsible for the improvements in art song composition that occurred at the beginning of the nineteenth century. His two song cycles are among the most influential and finest works of the Lieder tradition.

These song cycles, based on poems by Wilhelm Müller, are both intensely emotional works, expressing deeply-felt grief and pain. The second of these cycles is *Die Winterreise* (A Winter Journey), telling the story of a man rejected by a woman he was courting. After she leaves him for another, richer man, the narrator sets off alone into the countryside, absorbing himself in his own thoughts and pain, eventually falling into despair. The poems give an interesting psychological portrait of a man who feels set apart from society, and resigns himself to a lifetime of loneliness. Unlike the narrator of Schubert's other song cycle, *Die Schöne Müllerin*, this man rejects the idea of suicide, despite grieving about the length of time he has left in life that he must spend wandering alone.

The pieces that I chose to perform from this cycle are a microcosm of the entire working, highlighting the main feelings expressed through the poems, and the major events that occur in the cycle. This made for a much longer song set than is typical, but the six songs were really necessary to give a good overview of the cycle. The first song in the cycle, "Gute Nacht," establishes the setting and context for the cycle, describing the narrator's thoughts as he begins his journey. His emotions waver between loneliness,

bitterness at his rejection, and the lingering love he still has for the woman who has rejected him. At the end of the song, he sets off on his journey, still thinking about her as he goes. The next song that I performed from the cycle, "Der Lindenbaum (The Linden Tree)," continues to develop this idea. The narrator passes by a tree that holds sentimental significance for him as a symbol of the happiness that his relationship with his former love brought him in the past. Now though, he hears it call to him as he walks past it, representing the singer's tendency to live in the past. The narrator knows that the past and his former love are lost to him, but he still wishes desperately to return to that earlier time.

The next three songs that I performed on my recital come in succession near the center of the cycle, and depict the speaker's awakening to the reality of his situation. The song "Rast (Rest)" describes the narrator searching for a place to sleep after a day of walking. He ends up sleeping in a small hut along the side of the road, and thinks about how he did not realize how tired he was until he stopped walking. Similarly, he never realized the emptiness, or as he calls it, the "worm" in his heart until his reflections during this journey. The next song, "Frühlingstraum (Spring Dream)," describes a dream the speaker has while he sleeps. He dreams of the warmth and greenery of springtime, which makes the cold and bleak world that he wakes up to seem all the more harsh. As he wakes to this harsh reality, he longs to return to his love. Finally, in "Einsamkeit (Loneliness)," the singer realizes how truly alone he is in the world, and weeps bitterly about his situation. Finally, in the last song in the cycle, "Der Leiermann (The Organ-Grinder)," the narrator finds a sort of kindred spirit in a wandering organ-grinder who is similarly cut off from society. The musician is ignored and relegated to the outskirts of

town, where he is hounded by dogs constantly barking at his heels. At the very end of the cycle, the narrator imagines himself traveling with the other wanderer, asking, "Will you play your music to my songs?" He has become a true outsider, completely separate from the rest of society.

Schubert's settings of these songs are an excellent example of his absolute mastery of the art song form. The music throughout is always closely related to the text, expressing the emotions and thoughts in the poems exactly. The tools Schubert uses to achieve his art include as just two examples his wide, expressive harmonic language and his beautifully evocative melodies. The brilliance of many of the songs in the cycle cannot be overstated, and a number of examples of Schubert's compositional skill are present in the songs I performed on my recital. The moods of the pieces are established perfectly by the piano accompaniments, and the vocal lines continue the musical explication of the text. One of the main innovations introduced by Schubert in his songs are the subtle variations he introduces throughout each song to reflect the changes in the narrator's mood. "Frühlingstraum" in particular is a fine example of this. Each verse is divided into three sections, depicting the dream the speaker is having, his immediate reaction upon waking, and the thoughts he has while reflecting on the dream. The musical character of each of these sections is unique, portraying the narrator's varying moods perfectly.

The last set of songs on my recital come from another song cycle, this one from the early twentieth century. *Songs of Travel* is a set of songs composed by the British composer Ralph Vaughan Williams, on poems by Robert Louis Stevenson. These songs are somewhat similar to those of *Die Winterreise* in subject matter, but quite different in

mood. The poems are written from the perspective of a man living a free-spirited, somewhat nomadic lifestyle. Unlike Müller's antihero, however, Stevenson's vagabond finds joy in the freedom this life affords him. Certainly the life the songs describe has its pain and hardships, but the narrator takes it all in stride as a fact of life. He tends to focus mostly on the good in his life.

Again, I chose songs from this set that gave a good overall picture of the set and worked well with each other. The first two of these pieces, "Let Beauty Awake," and "The Roadside Fire," are evocative of the simple pleasures that the narrator finds in his life. The first can be read as a love song to his companion, or as a paean to nature itself and the beauty it produces every day. The second of these describes the idyllic life the singer promises to share with his love. These two songs are very similar musically, featuring thick, lush accompaniments, which worked well in setting a brighter mood after the somber nature of the Schubert set. The third song in this set was "Whither Must I Wander," a wistful song that mourns the loss of friends and family. This set an interesting contrast for the set. The song is obviously sadder than the others, and the simpler accompaniment reflects the introspective nature of the song. Finally, "Bright is the Ring of Words" closed the set with the singer's thoughts on certain things we can do that outlive us. In this case, he thinks specifically of songs and poetry, which survive us after we are gone. Incidentally, I had personal reasons for choosing this song to perform on my recital, since it was the first piece I sang as a solo performer, in high school. It seemed fitting to program it in my Senior Recital, especially as the last song.