



Words.

We all use them every day and we do this quite naturally to greater or lesser communicative effect.

As a composer creating music I am engaged in forging an abstract language in sound that uses no words to imply its meanings and emotional context. This meaning is in no way fixed; it can't be as each person who listens brings their own interpretation of meaning to the outpouring of sounds. Composers can use titles or culturally understood imagery to 'paint a picture' of certain things; for instance, music of the sea or pastoral music to imply landscape. However, if like me, the composer writes abstract, atonal music, these 'hooks' no longer apply as the language, syntax and dialectic being used is very personal and perhaps does not conform to historical or cultural precedents and norms. This is further complicated by the lack of functional harmony and key in the music, removing the accepted feel for happy and sad (major and minor) modal fluctuations. Of course, tonal music is much more complex than just those two polarities, but atonal music has no easy access to tonal foundations that aid emotional understanding, instead, a deeply personal, complex and ever-changing relationship with the sounds shapes an understanding of what the music is and what it's about.

Words too are not as obvious as they may seem at first glance. The contexts in which they appear to each other coupled with underlying meanings and implications often present in irony, sarcasm and humour create yet further layers of significance that surface examination of the written word alone may not reveal.

Context is everything.

When combining words with music, the abstract nature of the sounds is made more solid by the addition of words as the words themselves bring an inherent imagery with them that constrains the otherwise wide-open implications of the music. The words bring context. However, this context is not so easily fixed or understood. I have experimented with using the same words set against different music and the results are startling. The whole feeling of the words can be undermined or enhanced by the music that underpins it. Welcome to opera!

There is just too much to write about how opera works but suffice to say there are a great many musical devices that add huge significance and gravitas to words to create character, flashback, empathy, heroism, tragedy, irony, humour, violence and energy and many more states of meaning, besides.

Opera is perhaps the highest form of music and word combinations. Indeed, opera along with the symphony are considered by some to be the greatest forms of human creative expression.

As a composer I have worked with a range of word setting contexts, from music and the spoken word to operatic word setting. In each of these forms the relationship between words and music is different in as much as music and spoken word combinations leaves the words largely untouched by musical affect and treatment; they remain essentially spoken word. When setting words into a musical fabric as in songs or opera, the words are completely subjected to the processes brought to bear upon them by the composer. As listeners to opera will be aware, this often brings with it a loss of clarity in spoken word diction due to the voice ranges and melismatic devices employed. Not all composers take this route however. The American opera composer Sondheim reduces the ranges and complexity of his vocal lines to a complete minimum so as to preserve the clarity of meaning and delivery of the words. This is true in the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan, too.

I take the opposite view. Whilst I will strive to preserve the clarity of meaning in the words I set I also wish to integrate those words into the musical tapestry that I create bringing to bear the same processes of composition and structure that I use for the music onto the words. It's important for me to create a fabric of words and music that I feel is totally interrelated. Part of this process involves exaggerating and distorting syllables, attacks, word lengths, syntax delivery and expression as well as choosing the best range for the voice to deliver the words in. In some cases, especially because of high tessitura, natural vocal sound production is restricted and the delivery of words, vowels and consonants becomes distorted. This is often the reason why much grand opera is incomprehensible without a libretto to read; the composer has chosen to emphasize the emotional content of the words by setting them especially high (or low) and in so doing, sacrificed the clarity of delivery in terms of the spoken word.

Composers always have to make these choices as they are not only composing with the music but also with the voice. The words *become* music. At the same time, they need to be mindful of telling the story or delivering a narrative, gauging the 'action' and giving the plot or content a living and coherent structure across time. When a librettist gives over their words to a composer like me, they need to be mindful that their words will be subjugated to the needs of the music and this will change their concept of pacing and delivery dramatically.

Other considerations at play are concerned with the number of instruments a voice or voices are set with. There are issues of balance that need to be considered. Sound production in my music is not amplified, so any singing or word production needs to be audible against different arrays of instruments. This is relatively straightforward if setting a voice with a handful of instruments but when the forces become orchestral, greater heed needs to be paid to the audibility of the voice above the instruments.

In 2008 I was commissioned to write a work for the Hallé Orchestra setting one of a series of poems written by Jackie Kay to mark World Aids Day 2008. This is not opera, but it is a setting for two voices and chorus with orchestra. Here I set the words of a very disturbing text and had to write suitable music to articulate the rapidly changing scenes and emotions of the poem. It was a great challenge. Jackie was brilliant to work with and together we arrived at a text I could successfully set. This text setting was unusual for me as to date I had not set any words that were a narrative plot or part of a larger overall structure.

<http://marc-yeats.co.uk/2011/12/my-blood-is-as-red-as-yours-2008/>

Finding suitable writers, poets and librettists to work with is also key. Not all writing is suitable for setting to music – far from it. Writing words that are to be set to music is a particular skill. In my experience, less is more; for words to exist meaningfully with music there needs to be lots of space for the music to breathe and articulate the words. I know some

composers who have been faced with books of prose to set as operas and have had to ask for a re-write or have gone ahead and set all the words to disastrous consequence. The skill of a librettist is a very particular thing.

Unfortunately, history has shown that the librettist often becomes a forgotten part of the opera. We all know the names of some of the greatest operas in the public psyche; works such as the Magic Flute, The Barber of Seville, Die Fledermaus, Aida, Madame Butterfly, there are many more, and a great many will know who the composers are; Mozart, Rossini, Strauss, Verdi, Puccini, but who remembers the names of the librettist, as important as they are? Operas are usually referred to as 'The Magic Flute by Mozart', for instance. The librettist is forgotten. What does this tell us about how we view the words in opera? They are obviously important; an opera cannot exist without them, but why is the music remembered over and above the words even though people may well sing the words as they sing along with the opera?

I can't answer this question and won't attempt to, as I'm sure there are scholars and musicologists who have tackled the issue.

Finding the right poet, writer or librettist to work with is an issue for a composer as you need to find another who thinks and feels in similar ways about how music and words can work and how structures, linear or non linear can work to the benefit of both art forms.

I would not call myself a poet but in the past I had such difficulties in finding a sympathetic writer who was sufficiently flexible and able to hand ownership of the treatment of their work over to me that I wrote words to set myself. Most notable of these were eight very short poems written in 2003 that I set as a series of songs called 'My Songs' <http://marc-yeats.co.uk/2011/12/my-songs-2003/>

These songs demonstrate that less is more. The words become haunting because of the spacious treatment I could offer them with the rather sparse music. Of course, the other great advantage of writing your own words is that you can chop and change them as you see fit to fulfil the requirements of the music. If you work with a writer there is a lot of toing and froing around cuts, additions and deletions that can be very difficult to accommodate if your writer is understandably extremely precious about their words.

Around this time I also experimented with using non word-based text at all and just explored phonics, consonant and vowels using the International Phonetic Alphabet. What is interesting here is that even though there is no word content at all in the conventional sense, the 'foreign language' that is produced has a meaning and communicates that meaning, but what that meaning is can be hard to define, especially as no two people may deduce the same meaning. I also ask myself if this same interface between unknown language and music exists for listeners to opera in a foreign language they do not understand. Whilst understanding the language and thus the plot and characters enhances the experience, there is still a strong residual experience that is carried by the music and vocal sounds alone. With so many of the 'great' operas being written in Italian and German, and so many listeners in the UK for instance, not understanding these languages, it is perhaps surprising that opera continues to grow in popularity and esteem. Perhaps this is the underlying communicative power (resonance – I shall return to this later) of *music and voice* as opposed to music and word taken to an understated and very un-operatic extreme in my ASCII Dialogues? <http://marc-yeats.co.uk/2011/12/ascii-dialogues-2003/>

It is clear to me that a composer can communicate through the voice and to great effect either with or without words and familiar languages. There is something inherent in the nature of the human voice (unsurprisingly) that communicates to all of us above and beyond the confines of localised languages. Perhaps this can be referred to as resonance? It is the range of human vocal expression in its most fundamental levels that communicates behind the delivery and

comprehension of words and it is this universal connection that drives vocal communication be it sung or spoken.

“As a poet I have always considered ‘poetry’ as being more closely related to ‘music’ than to ‘literature’. Poetry must be heard – whether it is recited or declaimed, or whether it is simply heard inside the head of someone reading it from the page. So ‘poetry’ is word-music. Now, the interesting question is, at what point do ‘words’ become ‘music’? At what point does ‘music’, if some or all of the music is vocalized, become ‘words’? As a poet I don’t go much for ‘meaning’, but more for ‘resonance’ (‘meaning’, in any case, is not integral, but culturally assembled from words’ resonances). So maybe I should be a sound-poet - forget conventional ‘meaning’, just go for the sound! Then I’m, surely, a musician. But I’m a poet. So, currently, and especially through SATSYMPH compositional processes, I’m really delving into word-music, or is that music-word - or womusic or muwordic – experimentations.”

Ralph Hoyte <https://ralphhoyte.org/>

From Ralph’s quote above it is clear that he thinks musically and does not have fixed ideas about the role of words in relation to themselves or music. It is this flexibility and willingness to experiment that has enabled us to work together over a range of projects.

Most recently we have set up SATSYMPH LLP that brings together our talents along with creative coder and programmer Phill Phelps. We compose ‘context-aware soundworlds’ – located high quality contemporary soundscape experiences outside in the real world triggered by GPS (satellite) signals. These ‘immersive soundworlds’ (*or you can think of them as ‘virtual auditoria’*) can be invested with contemporary music content, contemporary music/word fusions, poetry, heritage interpretive content, or with any desired audio content. Read more here: <http://satsymph.co.uk/>

Our latest project, ‘On a Theme of Hermes’ is an original full-scale contemporary work for large-scale ensemble and voices which fuses contemporary music and contemporary poetry in an entirely new and innovative way, and, moreover, one which has a truly unique method of delivery. ‘On a Theme of Hermes’ is user-directed and geo-located. It responds to location, to where the user is. It morphs, changes, according to what the user does. This is an entirely new music/poetry paradigm. You can hear extracts from the work here: <http://marc-yeats.co.uk/2012/01/‘on-a-theme-of-hermes’-2011/>

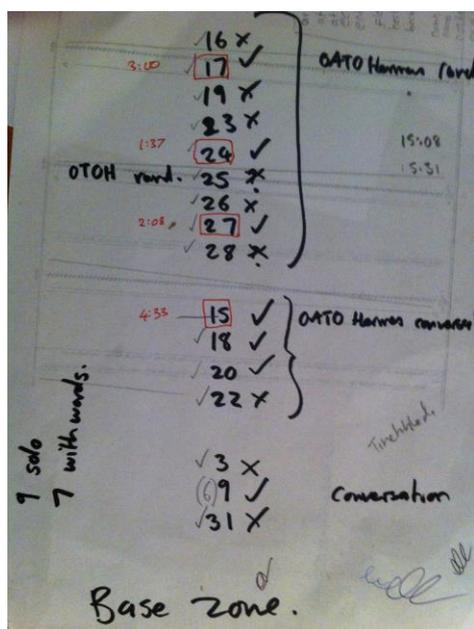
We have chosen the theme of the Greek god ‘Hermes’ as he is, traditionally, messenger of the gods, guide to the Underworld, patron of thieves, liars, of literature and poets, as well as of boundaries (and those who, as in this project, “travel across them”). These attributes of his quicksilver nature give us massive scope for weaving symphonic stories around him and for integrating classical and contemporary allusions and illusions, words and music. More here: <http://satsymph.co.uk/projects-and-events/musicwordscapes-2/musicwordscapes>

Both Ralph and I have written extensively about working together in this way. Our blogs can be found here: <http://satsymphonathemeofhermes.posterous.com/> and <http://onathemeofhermes.posterous.com/>

Interestingly, we created the work for Hermes in isolation from one another. Of course, we spoke about themes and impressions of the work but essentially collaborated at a distance to create the raw materials. Once the materials were created we shared them with the SATSYMPH team and decided which pieces of work to take forward into the project, which work to combine word and music, and which to be stand alone word or music and so on. There is much more to the scope of this project and these matters are best articulated in our corresponding blogs, above.

Essentially, and going back to the ideas originally mentioned at the top of this article, context is everything. It remains startling how music and word, when overlain, cut and spliced together, or arbitrarily combined, effects the nature of both; the happy coincidences of timing and spontaneous bringing together brought new energy and revelation to both our work. Because we were thematically consistent in the creation of our work we were able to combine and layer word and music together in a whole manner of ways *we had not previously conceived*. And this is the point. Context changes everything.

These combined layers of work were counterpointed by word compositions that explored the musical qualities of speech and speech rhythm and music standalones. Part of the skill in judging what was standalone for word and music and what was for combination treatment was gauging when material was 'full' in its own capacity and the addition of music or word to it would ultimately weaken and detract from what it was, and at the same time identifying work that would be enhanced by the addition of word or music.



In general terms, the above considerations are the same when selecting any words to go with music. The words need to have the scope to embrace and envelop the music in time and space. Words that are written to be utterly complete in their own right will seldom work well with music unless they are very spare. You can't make an opera from a book anymore than you can make a television series from a book. You need a screen-play to bridge the completeness of the book and adapt the text to incorporate what the screen can bring. For opera, you need a libretto. This isn't necessarily an adaptation of a book but can be a narrative in its own right in the same way as a screen-play isn't a book, but *is* a narrative – the libretto is mindful of the role it will play and the treatment it can provoke and receive as part of the compositional process of the composer.

We have many more exciting projects in the pipeline that will see further and deepening relationships between word and music.

And finally, a mention about my most recent commission for the voice that is forming part of the opening ceremony of the Olympic Sailing Events at Weymouth and Portland, Dorset 2012.

'**sturzsstrom**' has been composed as 'a landslide event for voices' meaning the work attempts to depict landmass movement and geological process as found along the 'Jurassic Coast' of

East Devon and Dorset. Naturally, this depiction is not a scientific reconstruction of these processes in sound; rather, an imaginative response to these forces and outcomes as contrived in the composer's imagination and amplified by the individual contributions of the performers.

‘**sturzstrom**’ has been designed to utilise the voice rather than singing ability and is conceived and notated in such a way as to enable maximum participation from individuals with little or no experience of singing or reading conventional music notation. Inevitably, this involves some new learning to understand and interpret the signs and symbols used in this score as well as the general concept and approach used by the composer to articulate his ideas. Both the composer and conductor will be responsible for explaining, shaping and guiding the choir's responses to the notation, graphics and text. Along with the massed voices there are three strands of pebble percussion for younger performers; the first two strands deal with a more advanced interpretation followed by a third strand, a pebble chorus, performed by children of primary school age adding a further layer of mass percussive activity. As in the voice-work, the various strands of the percussion section are designed to be performable by the widest range of young people with interpretation of the various notations being facilitated by the conductor and composer. For authenticity, it is also desirable that each participant in the percussion section has found his or her own performance instrument (stones and pebbles) from the stretch of coastline featured in this work.

‘**sturzstrom**’ is designed for massed choirs and will work best with large numbers of individuals, employing as it does flocking and 'crowd sourcing' techniques to initiate complex textures, harmonies and articulations of its material, be they sung or spoken. The structure of the score leads to an intense climax (the landslide event) but along the way, geological text from scientific papers is used to add vocal content to the music; this content is articulated in a variety of ways using non-conventional notation and graphic notation (explained below). The work covers the Mesozoic geological time period and includes the layers of strata found in this time period between Exmouth in East Devon and Lyme Regis in West Dorset. The successions of strata are documented through sound in the piece and culminate in an imaginary journey along the coast, traveling east to west, before the landslide event occurs, setting the scene as it were for the catastrophic landslide (blockslide) that occurred at Bindon on Christmas Eve, 1839. Read by the Orator and bookending this scientific data is the wonderful 'Petition of the Mayor and Burgesses of Lyme Regis, County Dorset, 20 August, 1533', where the people of 'King's Lyme' express their fears for the town as coastal erosion and landslides threaten its very existence. This letter brings an human perspective and cost to these processes of coastal movement and remind us that the situation described in 1533 has not changed or been remedied in our own day but, is at best, temporarily contained.

You can read more about ‘**sturzstrom**’ here: <http://sturzstromcoastalvoices.posterous.com/>