



*Words into Music:*  
*Poets, Composers and Song*  
**Study Day**

Friday 16 October 2015  
9:30am - 5:30pm  
Okinaga Room,  
Wadham College, Oxford

In association with the Open University Literature and Music Research Group, the Faculties of Modern Languages and of Music at Oxford University, and Wadham College



**The Open  
University**



## Schedule

**09.30am - 10.00am: Coffee and Welcome**

**10.00am - 12.15pm: Papers**

Chair: Helen Abbott

*Singing Words*  
Angela Leighton

*Sappho's Russian Voices*  
Philip Ross Bullock

*Pushing the boundaries of the French mélodie:  
20 years of Debussy (1882–1902)*  
Richard Langham Smith

*Music in love with poetry*  
Peter Dayan

**12.15pm – 1pm: Lunch break**

**1.10pm - 2.10pm: Recital, Holywell Music Room**

Music by Debussy and Schumann

**Benjamin Appl** *baritone*  
**Sholto Kynoch** *piano*  
**Richard Wigmore** *speaker*

**2.30pm - 4.30pm: Papers**

Chair: Laura Tunbridge

*Singing Mignon: Goethe versus Beethoven's view of Lyric Song*  
Amanda Glauert

*Song-Cycles for Mignon*  
Terence Cave

*The Poetic Muse: Goethe, Schubert and the Art of Song*  
Lorraine Byrne Bodley

*Words into Music into Words: Singing Tones and Musical Poetry*  
Robert Samuels

**4.30pm: Tea**

**4.40pm Final Round Table and Audience Discussion**

Chair: Delia da Sousa Correa

The Symposium Speakers and Timothy Coombes

**5.30pm: Close**

## Abstracts

### *Singing Words*

Angela Leighton

In this talk I will look at how setting words to music both interprets and alters the original. As the daughter of a composer myself, I was often called upon to suggest poems, or even write poems, that Kenneth could set to music, and I know what an unpredictable business it can be. How a composer chooses a poem is not always obvious, nor is the poetry chosen necessarily the most simply song-full. On the other hand, writing poems to be set can be an equally tricky matter.

In particular, I will focus on the question of rhythm, and the way that musical rhythm differs essentially from speech rhythms. What exactly is rhythm, both in music which is heard and in poetry which is read? I hope to raise some of these questions, while referring to settings of Hopkins and others poets by Kenneth Leighton, as well as to some new settings of Anne Stevenson by Rhian Samuel—to be heard later in the festival.

### *Sappho's Russian Voices*

Philip Ross Bullock

After the discovery of a number of important papyrus sources in the nineteenth century, Sappho's poetry was widely taken up by early twentieth-century composer in a number of national traditions. This paper will look at a number of early twentieth-century Russian settings of the poetry of Sappho, arguing that these songs attest both to an interest in the idea of lyric poetry as an inherently musical genre, and to the importance of embodiment and eroticism as key elements in the song tradition. I will first trace the composition of these songs, suggesting that Sappho's eroticism mapped onto a number of real-life relationships within the tight-knit circles of Petersburg modernism. Then, I will examine what these songs can tell us about the relationship between words and music in the song tradition, especially when the original literary texts may already have a strongly musical element. Finally, I will suggest that these songs help to reveal the importance of translation as a crucial facet of the song tradition.

*Pushing the boundaries of the French mélodie: 20 years of Debussy (1882–1902)*

Richard Langham Smith

Debussy's career as a songwriter began when he was in his early 20s, catalysed by his work with the talented singer Mme. Vasnier, with whom he became sexually involved. He was not well educated in literature, and her influence on his appreciation of modern poets cannot be overestimated. He wrote many songs for her but continually pushed the boundaries of genre. His many abandoned projects show him interested in semi-dramatic forms, faced with complex 'voices' in the texts he set. In the end, the style he developed for his mélodies—moving away from constant lyricism—created a groundbreaking style of opera. There were no other composers whose move into opera came from song—the Lieder or the Mélodie. This presentation will trace that process, moving from the early songs to those of the 1890s, and through his previous, nearly-completed Opera 'Rodrigue et Chimène' and his 'Acte en vers', 'Diane au bois' to his lengthiest setting of poetry: 'Pelléas et Mélisande'.

*Music in love with poetry*

Peter Dayan

I suggested in my blurb for the Festival brochure that the defining characteristic of Lieder (in the English sense of the term) is a charm that the music works on us. In relation to the words of the song, the music is always in reality *belated* (composed afterwards, to words not designed for that musical purpose); yet as we hear it, it manages to seem inseparable from the poem, absolutely right, as if the words had been made for it, and no other music could ever have suited them. How? My answer is: by playing the same trick on us as Romantic love. To show how, I will follow the workings of that trick in the poems by Mallarmé that caught Debussy's eye, and suggest how we can see his music imitating it.

## *Singing Mignon: Goethe versus Beethoven's view of Lyric Song*

Amanda Glauert

Beethoven's setting of Goethe's 'Kennst du das Land' (Do you know the Land) confronts performers and listeners with a difficult conundrum. The poem issues from the mouth of Mignon in Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister*, a character whom the poet called 'the perfect lyricist', yet Beethoven's view of lyricism clashes so directly with the poet's that Mignon herself is in danger of disappearing. Musically the song is so powerful it is sometimes heralded as the beginning of the German Romantic Lied, even though the acknowledged antagonism between poet and composer might seem to undermine the possibility of fusion between words and music. Performers and listeners have to take an active role in seeking out lyrical essences that might bring Mignon to the fore. In this 'back to basics' of lyric song, the poet-philosopher Herder – beloved by both Goethe and Beethoven – offers an important perspective on the 'land' that Mignon was seeking and how it might be realised in song.

## *Song-Cycles for Mignon*

Terence Cave

There are literally hundreds of settings of Mignon's four songs from Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprentice Years*. 'Kennst du das Land' was the most frequently set, but 'Nur wer sie Sehnsucht kennt' is a close rival. All four allude to their narrative contexts in Goethe's novel, following Mignon's life from childhood to death and afterlife. The novel contains other songs, including four sung by the Harpist, who turns out in the end to be Mignon's father. Three nineteenth-century composers (Schumann, Rubinstein, Wolf) produced what can only be described as *Wilhelm Meister* song-cycles. Yet these are seldom if ever performed as such, although their narrative and musical unity is no less striking than that of Schubert's *Winterreise* and Schumann's *Dichterliebe*. This talk will explore the reasons for this neglect; it will also refer briefly to Ambroise Thomas's opera *Mignon* (1866) and to Duparc's subsequent settings of two Mignon songs.

## *The Poetic Muse: Goethe, Schubert and the Art of Song*

Lorraine Byrne Bodley

Despite his legacy in the lied, much musicological and historicist criticism has tended to 'flatten' Goethe by confining him to the thought-clichés of his time. His expressed desire to unify poetry and music has been continuously dismissed as the amusing aberration of a musically conservative poet whose self-declared ignorance of music made the seriousness of his avowed interest highly dubious. This paper will trace the origins of this reception history and outline the reasons for musicologists' failure to give credence to Goethe's musical acuity. The lecture presents a portrait of an artist deeply receptive to music and confounds the longstanding argument that Schubert's songs ran counter to the poet's intent.

Schubert's first Goethe setting, *Gretchen am Spinnrade*, was inspired after several weeks of reading *Faust I*. This paper will unveil who the real Gretchen was and consider the role of song as social document. It will show how the psychological realism of Schubert's Gretchen songs not only unveils a profound understanding of Goethe's heroine, but also the musical forms at the heart of Goethe's drama.

## *Words into Music into Words*

Robert Samuels

Did music begin in vocal or in instrumental sound? Apollo singing to his lyre or Pan blowing upon his pipes? Whichever it may be, music has always been an art of meaning as well as beauty. The Lieder that this festival celebrates exemplify the attempt to create meaning beyond the meaning of words. The wordless, instrumental music of the same period equally shows a yearning to reach the articulacy of language.

This paper explores some of the ways that words and music reach out to each other's sphere of expression. The way that Schubert, the master of the sung Lied, tried to bring speechless singing to his instrumental melodies. The way that Schumann's setting of words can provide a counter-poem rather than a counter-point. The way that Mahler's symphonies set texts that are suppressed, unsung, or heard only as fragments.

The organizers of the day are Delia da Sousa Correa and Robert Samuels (Open University), Philip Bullock (University of Oxford) and Richard Wigmore (writer and broadcaster).

The Conference Administrator is Timothy Coombes (University of Oxford).