

SAPPHISCHE ODE

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Abstract: This analysis of the song „Saphische Ode“ elaborates the poetic style in which poetry was written and problems as well as reasons – why a certain language may be more suitable for writing poetry than another language, personal experience with the song „Saphische Ode“ and personal opinion from a performer’s point of view regarding the song, as well as personal opinion about the performer.

Keywords: Johannes Brahms, Saphische Ode.

Резюме: В този анализ на песента „Ода на Сафо“ се разглеждат както поетичният стил на текста и проблемите, така и причините защо даден език може да е по-подходящ за писане на поезия от друг език. Това е личният ми опит с песента „Ода на Сафо“ и личното ми мнение като изпълнител на песента.

Ключови думи: Йоханес Брамс, „Ода на Сафо“.

Sapphische Ode (Op. 94, No.4) is one of the five songs composed by the composer Johannes Brahms. This cycle of songs is called „Fuenf Lieder fuer eine tiefe Singstimme und Klavier“. The author Kristoffer Brinch Kjeldby among other things talks about the friendship between

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Hans Schmidt (1854-1923) and Johannes Brahms and that Brahms was in his fifty's when he composed the music for this song based on the poem „Sapphische Ode”. Like many of Brahms's songs „Sapphische Ode” is a song composed in the verse form and it has two verses which from the musical aspect are almost the same. (1 Example) In the beginning it starts with the piano, the right hand with syncopated chords, (2 Example) then the vocal line starts with the one-beat of quarter notes where through syncopated the character of accompaniment it becomes stronger. (3 Example) The first verse has three lines with eleven syllables, the second verse is almost the same with a very small change³. The author Erik Eriksson among other things in his explanation about the part very nicely explains how the accompaniment initially falls, not on the principal of its 4/4 meter, but it falls on the offbeat, launched by an eighth-note rest. Also the vocal line which at the same time begins in even quarter notes, stands an undisturbed oneness and a great calm. As the singer recalls the movement of the rose branches and the spattering of dew, the meter changes to 3/2 and the accompaniment crisply plays the right hand against the left in alternate staccato pulsations. The device is repeated in the second stanza to underscore the plucking of kisses. When we talk about dynamics, in this case the singer is instructed to move within the same dynamic range, making his points confidentially with perfect legats. Although seemingly simple the details are numerous in this song. The tonality of the original song is in D-Dur. The tempo of the song is *Zimmlich langsam* (rather slow). Musical meter is *allabreve* but it changes from time to time in the 3/2 time signature⁴.

THE POEM

„Sapphische Ode” is a poem written in the style of Quantitative Verse, a metrical system which is made up of long and short syllables and its duration is determined by the amount of time needed for pronunciation. Which language is more suitable for poetry? In the analysis that the author Harvey S. Gross made, we see that the Greek

³ www.musikvidenskab.dk/2009/10/22/brahms-sapphische-ode/

⁴ www.allmusic.com/composition/sapphische-ode-rosen-brach-ich-nachts-miram-dunklen-hage-song-for-voice-piano-op-94-4-mc000247875

language is one of the most suitable languages for writing poetry, because the talking part appears in a variety of different forms. This way of writing was used mainly by classic Greeks and Romans. This way of writing poetry has been used in the English language but it rarely succeeded because of word stress in the English language. Contrary to English language we see that German language was more suitable for this way of writing poetry in the Quantitative Verse style and Quantitative metres, because English language has lost the form of inflection in the 15 century, therefore is a weakly inflected language. „Sapphische“ was also written in English language by the English poet Algernon Charles Swinburne, but the ‘Sapphische Ode’ written in German language by the German poet Hans Schmidt had the success, because it was crowned with the beautiful music composed by Johannes Brahms⁵.

In his description of the analysis the author Erik Erikson among other things says that the song „Sapphische Ode“ is borrowed only as a form but not in content of „Sappho of Lesbos“. The singer informs the listener that he picked roses by night from lowering hedgerows.

(4 Example) „Rosen brach ich nachts mir am dunklen Hage“
„*Roses from the dark hedge I plucked at night*“ They betrayed a sweeter fragrance than by day and, in motion, showered him with dew. In the second verse he describes the aroma of his lover’s kisses that he took in the evening from the roses of her lips. (5 Exempel) „Auch der Kuesse Duft mich wie nie berueckte, die ich nachts vom Strauch deiner Lippen pflueckte“ „Thus your kisses’ fragrance enticed me as never before, as at night I plucked the flower of your lips“. When she was provoked by her deepest feelings she, like a ros, was bedewed with tears. This song has become a favorite of audiences as well as a test of the singer’s ability to maintain a poised vocal line, especially through the slow turns that conclude both stanzas. The accompaniment on the piano starts with a marked accompaniment while raising the volume in a discreet way through the piano or double piano. Even though this song at first looks simple it contains a lot of details. Details abound in this seemingly simple song. The accompaniment initially falls, not on the principal beats of its 4/4 meter, but on the offbeat, launched by an eighth-note rest.

⁵ www.britannica.com/art/prosody/Quantitative-metres

Under the vocal line, which begins in even quarter notes, the effect is of an undisturbed evenness and great calm. In the moment when the singer remembers the way the rose branches moved and the spattering of the dew, the meter changes to 3|2, and the accompaniment in the crisply way plays the right hand against the left in alternate staccato pulsations. The device is repeated in the second stanza to underscore the plucking of kisses⁶.

Translation of the lyrics of the song „Sapphische Ode”⁷.

Rosen brach ich nachts mir am dunklen Hage;	<i>Roses from the dark hedge I plucked at night;</i>
Süßer hauchten Duft sie als je am Tage;	<i>They breathed sweeter fragrance than ever during the day;</i>
Doch verstreuten reich die bewegten Äste	<i>But the moving branches abundantly shed</i>
Tau, der mich näßte	<i>The dew that showered me.</i>
Auch der Küsse Duft mich wie nie berückte,	<i>Thus your kisses' fragrance enticed me as never before,</i>
Die ich nachts vom Strauch deiner Lippen pflückte:	<i>As at night I plucked the flower of your lips:</i>
Doch auch dir, bewegt im Gemüt gleich jenen,	<i>But you too, moved in spirit as they were,</i>
Tauten die Tränen.	<i>Shed a dew of tears</i>

PERSONAL PERCEPTION OF THE SONG

From the performer's point of the view I can say that the song „Sapphische Ode” although small in appearance, for me as a performer is one of the most beautiful songs of the composer Brahms. From the experience I have with the interpretation of the song „Sapphische Ode” I

⁶ www.allmusic.com/composition/sapphische-ode-rosen-brach-ich-nachts-mir-am-dunklen-hage-song-for-voice-piano-op-94-4-mc0002478785

⁷ www.omsmodel.com/music-theory/discussion-brahms-sappische-ode/

think that it is a song with very high interpretive requirements, because from the beginning of the song there are syncopes which can easily disorient rhythmically, then the presentation of long phrases which must be sung legato and also the frequent change of times, all these must be very well planned in order to sound as a whole. Every time I sing this song I feel it inside, it gives me very strong emotions which are as strong as they are spiritual and intimate.

PERSONAL OPINION ABOUT THE PERFORMERS

Thomas Quastoff

When I listen to the song „Sapphische Ode” interpreted by Thomas Quastoff I am impressed by how he treats the phrase in this song, with a legato which within has one piano that sounds very nice, then the way he does the breath control which is accompanied by a very good diction. When we talk about dynamics such as crescendo and decrescendo are realized in a very natural way. The interpretation of the song „Sapphische Ode” by Thomas Quasthoff is an interpretation which even some time after listening gives you the feeling that for a while you are fulfilled.

Christa Ludwig

The song „Sapphische Ode” interpreted by Christa Ludwig, in my opinion is an interpretation that leaves much space to dismiss a lot of things.

The way in which the singer Christa Ludwig performs the song „Sapphische Ode” I think is the cause of the problems that she encounters during her performance. The breathing plan is not very good, the use of portamento in some parts in my opinion is the cause of slow tempo and it does not suit the songs of Johannes Brahms.

In general, I think that the song should be performed with much more ease from the singer Christa Ludwig.

Jassy Norman

Where as for the singer Jassy Norman, I can say that the timber of her voice suits more to the nature of the song „Sapphische Ode”. Jassy Norman gives to „Sapphische Ode” the right character, but because of

overpronunciation of consonants the balance between vowels and consonants is not right and it causes a problem in achieving a good legato.

Differently from Jassy Norman, the singer Thomas Quasthoff achieves the right balance of vocals and does it the right way (the reason might be that his native tongue is German language).

Consonants merge with the vowels and this makes it possible to achieve a very good legato, especially in this song legato is a necessity because through a good legato we create the atmosphere that is desired for the song „Sapphische Ode”.

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Sapphische Ode.

(Haus Schmidt.)

(Orig. D dur.)

2 example

Op. 94. N^o 4.

Ziemlich langsam.

1 example 3 example Ro-sen brach ich nachts mir am dunklen Ha - ge;

33. *p mezza voce*

sü - sser hauchten Duft sie als je - am Ta - ge, doch ver -

streu - ten reich die be - weg - ten Ä - ste Tau, - - - - der mich

näss - - - - te.

Edition Peters. 9813

Analysis of the song „Sapphische Ode”⁸.

⁸ BRAHMS, Johannes. Brahms-Album. Band 1, Mittel. Ausgewählte Lieder für eine Singstimme mit Klavierbegleitung. Leipzig: C. F. PETERS, S.106

4 example Auch der Küss-se Duft mich wie nie be - rück - te,

die ich nachts vom Strauch deiner Lip - pen pflück - te: doch auch

dir, be - wegt im Ge - müt - gleich je - nen, tau - - - tendie

Trä - - - nen.

Edition Peters. 9813

Analysis of the song „Sapphische Ode”⁹

⁹ BRAHMS, Johannes. Brahms-Album. Band 1, Mittel. Ausgewählte Lieder für eine Singstimme mit Klavierbegleitung. Leipzig: C. F. PETERS, S.107