

To sing a song

By Jane Foster

How do you sing a song? How does a performer choose which song to sing? For many years I have asked these questions as I studied and performed art songs, and will share what I have learned along the way.

I will answer the second question first: How do you choose which song to sing? Initially, I took a suggestion of repertoire from my voice teacher. Under her direction, one of the first songs that I studied was “Wiegenlied,” by Franz Schubert, one of two Schubert songs with this title. The one she chose starts with the line, “*Schlafe, schlafe, holder süßer Knabe*”; I will use this song to illustrate the method of study I use to prepare for a performance.

To begin, I follow a series of steps which guide me in learning the text and melody. I like to start with the poem. The poem text of “Wiegenlied” is in German. Early in my studies I did not have the language skills to read the poem in German, so, to start, I learned the text syllable by syllable. I relied upon my teacher to guide my pronunciation.

But to develop my understanding, I had to read the whole poem in English, and I was lucky to find a translation in the front section of the edition of Schubert songs I have. I used this as a guide while I consulted my German/English dictionary to construct my own word-by-word version. First of all, it was pretty important to know that “*Wiegenlied*” means “lullaby” and “*schlafe*” means to “sleep.”

After I have an understanding of the text, I ask myself an additional question: Who am I in the context of the poem? Am I the mother, who is singing her baby to sleep, or am I an observer of

this scene? As I read the poem and put it with the melody, I play with each of these characterizations to find the one most meaningful to me.

Next, I begin the study of the melody. Starting with the time signature, key signature and dynamic markings, I explore the music. “Wiegenlied” is in 4/4, a time marking that is regular and has an easy simplicity. The key signature is A-flat major. Because art songs are printed in many different keys to accommodate different voice types, the specific key is not as important as the fact that it is in a major key. This supports the message of the time signature that the song has a comfortable nature. The tempo is marked “*langsam*.” Tempos are marked with words to describe the mood or nature of the song rather than with a specific metronomic number. I will translate “*langsam*” first as “slowly,” but as I study the song I find more specific words to add to the description. Perhaps these will be “slowly, with gentle reassurance” or “slowly, with great love.” Finally in my initial observations, the dynamic marking is “*pianissimo*.” “*Pianissimo*” translates to “very quietly.” But just as there is a range of mood/tempos in “*langsam*,” there are as many possibilities in interpreting the sound/dynamic of “*pianissimo*.” One *pianissimo* could be a floated, whispery tone quality to the voice, and another could be a warm tone with a velvety smoothness.

This song is not long. It covers two pages, making a quick visual overview of the music very easy. Looking at these two pages, I see there is little syncopation and there are few accidentals. So my initial impression is one of regularity. Perhaps in this song Schubert is describing a calm mother singing to a contented child. As I begin to play

the music on the piano, I recognize a gentle movement that brings to mind the motion of a rocking cradle. In the interludes between each verse I see that there is an accent on the first beat. Perhaps this is the baby stirring, or is it the mother's smile? Naming these parts of the music with specific characterizations is important to me in developing my interpretation.

Now I have an understanding of the text and I am familiar with the melody. It is time to put them together. As these are brought together, I



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find where to breathe, I find which words I want to emphasize and I explore variations of the *langsam* mood/tempo and the *pianissimo* sound/dynamic. These do not belong to me alone, but must suit the temperament of the ensemble, which includes the text, melody, singer and pianist.

And, as all of this develops, I listen to recordings of this song, by both men and women. I observe their tempos and phrasing and try them. Some fit me and some do not, but with each exploration I become more specific in my choices and deepen my personal characterization of Schubert's song.

After spending much time by myself and with my teacher in the repetition of the text and music, and many rehearsals with the pianist, my time for preparation for this performance has run its course. The audience has gathered and the lights have dimmed.

How do I sing a song? I sing a song standing in the world that I have built around the song. My memory is not so good and my nerves are not so strong that I can deliver a rote repetition of notes and syllables. But I can share this song as a moment in time expressed through my experience. As I stand by the piano in front of an audience to perform "Wiegenlied," I create within myself the experience of a loving mother rocking her child to sleep. The mood is peaceful, and in this world that I have created for this song, the dishes are done, the clothes are washed and put away, the house is warm and the scene is tender and intimate and perhaps a bit playful. All of this is in place as I breathe in the *langsam, pianissimo* breath and send it out spinning to tell this tale. 🎵