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Yearning for the Unattainable: A Comparison of Jussi Björling's Four Recorded Performances of Beethoven's "Adelaide"

By Carla Ramsey

If you want a lifetime companion of the feathered variety, all you have to do is show up when a duckling hatches. By a neural process known as "imprinting," the baby bird will bond to and faithfully follow the first object it sees—whether it's mama duck, a human, or even the family dog—upon emerging from its shell. Perhaps you have had a similar experience with a favorite piece of music: you became "imprinted" by the first performance you were exposed to, to such an extent that it subconsciously became the standard by which you judge all others. In my case, a first exposure to Beethoven's "Adelaide" (and to JB) was via a CD of his 1958 Carnegie Hall concert. Having fallen in love with this miraculous voice, I soon thereafter purchased the four-CD EMI set through which I discovered JB's 1939 version of the song. But what a difference! Compared to the 1958 performance, this rendition sounded to my ears somewhat sentimental and overwrought. Had I, like the baby duckling, simply become "imprinted" by the first version I was exposed to, irrationally preferring it to all others? Or was my musical intuition correct in telling me that the 1958 performance was, indeed, superior? Were there intermediary interpretations in the years between the two performances? These were the questions I decided to explore by investigating the four extant versions of the song in JB's recorded legacy.

The Composer

One of Beethoven's early publications (Opus 46), "Adelaide" was written in 1795–96 during the composer's "Vienna Period." Interestingly, the song was on the program of the composer's last public appearance as a pianist (due to increasing deafness) which took place on January 15, 1815, when he accompanied the singer Fritz Wild in a performance for the Russian empress. (*Beethoven*, by Maynard Solomon, pp. 59–60).

Yearning for the unattainable, exaltation of nature and glorification of death—recurring themes of "Adelaide" that also typify the Romantic Period—pervade many of Beethoven's other Lieder. He composed six songs all entitled "Sehnsucht" ("Yearning"), including five set to two poems by Goethe. Additionally, yearning was the subject of Beethoven's song cycle, "An die ferne Geliebte" ("To the far-off beloved"), Op. 96. Indeed, unrequited love seems to have characterized Beethoven's life, most notably seen in his famous letter to the "Immortal Beloved" which voices sentiments similar to those found in "Adelaide": "Oh God, look out into the beauties of nature and comfort your heart with that which must be . . ."

The Text

The text of the song is the poem, "Adelaide," by Friedrich von Matthison:

Einsam wandelt dein Freund im Frühlingsgarten,
mild vom lieblichen Zauberlicht umflossen,
das durch wankende Blüthenzweige zittert,
Adelaide! Adelaide!

In der spiegelnden Fluth, im Schnee der Alpen,
in des sinkenden Tages Goldgewölke,
im Gefilde der Sterne
strahlt dein Bildniss, dein Bildniss,
Adelaide!

Abendlüftchen im zarten Laube flüstern,
 Silberglöckchen des Mais im Grase säuseln,
 Wellen rauschen und Nachtigallen flöten,
 Adelaide! Adelaide!

Einst, O Wunder! O Wunder! entblüht auf meinem Grabe,
 O Wunder! entblüht auf meinem Grabe,
 eine Blume der Asche meines Herzens;
 deutlich schimmert, deutlich schimmert auf jedem Purpurblättchen,
 Adelaide! Adelaide! Adelaide.

(translation)

Your friend walks alone in the springtime garden
 which is gently bathed in the lovely magical light
 that glitters through the swaying flowered branches. Adelaide!

In the reflecting stream, in the snow of the Alps,
 in gold clouds of the fading day,
 in the fields of stars, shines your image, your image. Adelaide!

Evening breezes whisper among the soft leaves,
 Silver bellflowers of May rustle in the grass,
 Waves roar and nightingales pipe: Adelaide!

Some day—oh marvel, oh marvel!—on my grave will bloom
 Oh marvel! will bloom on my grave,
 a flower from the ashes of my heart;
 and on every purple petal will clearly shine, clearly shine: Adelaide!

Matthison's poem portrays the heartsick yearning of one whose love either has been rejected (he "walks alone in the springtime garden") or is for someone unattainable. The lover envisions Adelaide's elusive image in waving flowered branches, a reflecting stream, alpine snow, golden clouds and the starry heavens. He hears her voice in the evening breezes, the rustling of springtime flowers, the rushing of a brook and in the nightingales' song. Mournfully, wistfully, and at times passionately, the distraught lover obsessively returns to the name of his beloved, perhaps hoping that his mantra-like invocation of its magical syllables will bring Adelaide herself into his presence. The fulfillment of his yearning, however, will be brought about only in death, when purple blossoms miraculously springing from his grave will symbolize the young poet's mystical union with his beloved.

The Setting

The poem might easily have lent itself to a traditional ABA or verse and refrain format, but Beethoven's setting is far more adventurous, almost constituting, in its breadth, a recitative and aria or "mini-cantata" in two movements for solo voice and piano.

Larghetto

The opening movement, marked *Larghetto*, is characterized by a restless, searching quality, as evidenced, for example, by the setting of "Frühlingsgarten," where eighth notes in the vocal line are pitted against ceaselessly moving triplets in the accompaniment. Beginning with "In der spiegelnden Fluth," intensity is heightened by shortened, overlapping phrase lengths and condensation of the opening upward fourth motif of the song, which first appears as two quarters and a half note, to a dotted eighth and sixteenth.

The text is dramatized by such tone painting techniques as the octave leap on "im Schnee der Alpen," symbolizing an upward journey to lofty alpine peaks, and the falling melodic line on "in des sinkenden Tages Goldgewölke," the setting sun. Intensity is heightened by unexpected phrasal extensions (such as the repetition of "in des sinkenden Tages Goldgewölke, im Gefilde der Sterne") until

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the melodic line finally crests on the phrase “strahlt dein Bildniss, dein Bildniss,” made all the more striking by Beethoven’s indication that the phrase be sung “piano.” After moving to the dominant, F major, the next four measures take the listener to the relatively remote key of D flat major, and a section which continues to develop the upward fourth motif of the opening. There is additional tone painting: a dramatic downward seventh leap on “Wellen rauschen” (marked *forte*) depicts a rushing brook, contrasted in the succeeding phrase by high triplets (marked *piano*) in the accompaniment representing the trilling of nightingales. With two impassioned outcries of “Adelaide! Adelaide!” the movement builds to a climax on a dominant seventh chord preparatory to the final *Allegro molto*.

Allegro Molto

With its 2/2 time signature, regular phrase lengths and stepwise melodies, the *Allegro molto* contrasts strongly with the triplets, overlapping and irregular phrase lengths and craggy melodic leaps of the preceding *Larghetto* movement. A culmination of the yearnings expressed in the earlier part of the song, the *Allegro molto* might be viewed as a kind of triumphal march in which the young lover exults in a death and a transfiguration whereby he is symbolically united with his beloved. After building to a dominant seventh chord and dramatic pause on “blättchen,” the march crescendos and culminates on F above middle C with an impassioned outcry of the beloved’s name. The final eleven measures, marked *calando*, musically portray an almost post-coital relaxation of the exhausted lover into his lover’s arms with a dying, prayer-like exhalation: “Adelaide.”

The Four Versions

July 13, 1939

Henrysson Phonography (HHP) 124

Time: 6:46

The only studio performance of the four, this version was recorded in Stockholm with accompanist Harry Ebert when JB was only 27. A tender interpretation, employing much use of *mezza voce*, this rendition takes most literally Beethoven’s *dolce* marking at the beginning of the song. In this version, JB chooses to linger lovingly and almost languidly on phrases such as “lieblichen Zauberlicht umflossen” and “strahlt dein Bildniss,” and takes his time on descending sixteenth note and triplet phrases such as “Tages Goldgewölke” and “zarten Laube,” as contrasted with the gradual *accelerandi* which build intensity towards climaxes in the 1955 and 1958 versions.

To my ears, this performance, although exquisitely sung by a sweet-voiced youthful JB, presents a lover who is more lovesick than impassioned. The urgency and sense of longing called for by both the text and music are sacrificed for the sake of stretching out certain high notes and phrases which, while they may be dramatically effective individually, cause the song as a whole to die on its feet. Overall, I found my first impressions valid: this interpretation sounds a bit too precious, overwrought and sentimentalized.

August 23, 1949

HHP 4904

Time: 7:00

The only performance with orchestral accompaniment, this version was performed at a Hollywood Bowl Concert Under the Stars under the baton of Izler Solomon. The overall length of the performance (at 7:00, it is the longest) is an indication not of expressive lingering, as in the 1939 version, but of lack of connection between singer and orchestra, resulting in a somewhat wooden performance by JB, virtually devoid of the subtle metric and dynamic contrasts which characterize the three other recorded performances. Accompaniment and performer are so at odds that by the *Allegro* movement it is almost painful to listen to the soloist’s attempts to drag along an orchestra which, under Solomon’s insensitive direction, lags behind—sometimes by as much as half a beat. One suspects that this is the first time tenor and conductor have performed this *Lied* together (perhaps due to JB’s dislike of rehearsals), resulting in a musical mismatch that our champion arm wrestler is destined to lose.

Because of its unique orchestral accompaniment, it is difficult to compare this performance with the other three. More telling would have been an example from this period with piano accompaniment; but, alas, we must content ourselves with the snapshots that these four recordings afford as a record of JB's developing interpretation of the Beethoven song. Overall, I conclude that the comparative stodginess of this version is due to the setting and adverse circumstances of its performance. But even in spite of these considerations, one can hear a change in interpretation from the 1939 version: JB is desperately trying, despite orchestral sluggishness, to move the song forward, rather than languishing on each phrase. Had the orchestra complied, I believe we would have a performance not so different from the two later versions.

September 24, 1955

HHP 5501

Time: 6:08

To my ears, this performance, the shortest of the four, retains the best features of JB's earliest interpretation (especially touching is his use of *mezza voce* in the phrase "strahlt dein Bildniss") while still achieving the forward impetus called for by both text and music. *Ritardandi* are employed effectively in phrases such as "im Gefilde der Sterne," for example, but not to the point of allowing the melodic line to stagnate.

Especially exciting to me in this version is the musical unanimity displayed by JB and Schauwecker in building towards the climaxes of the two sections. Starting with "Silberglöckchen," there is a subtle but gradual quickening of the beat building up to almost unbearable intensity in the two impassioned cries of "Adelaide" that end this movement. Likewise, in the *Allegro*, the two performers begin a gradual *accelerando* at the second "Einst, O Wunder!" moving together with increasing urgency towards the climactic "blättchen" on the dominant of the home key, B flat. The conclusion of this movement is a marvel: starting slowly, softly and deliberately, singer and accompanist ceaselessly build in both dynamic and metric intensity towards the exultant *fortissimo* on the penultimate "Adelaide." With a palpable synergy between performers, this rendition, even more than the 1958 recording, really "cooks"!

March 2, 1958

HHP 5802

Time: 6:25

This version, originally my favorite, bears many similarities to the 1955 recording, indicating that JB had by now settled on his interpretation. As in the 1955 version, he incorporates lovely *ritardandi*, *fermati* and *mezza voce* on high notes with impeccable breath control and phrasal shaping, but without sacrificing forward impetus. The difference in overall time (6:25 here vs. 6:08 in the 1955 version) is accounted for by a somewhat slower *Allegro molto* which, though it accelerates at appropriate points, does not reach the same level of intensity as that produced by the extraordinary melding of spirit and intention achieved by recitalist and accompanist in the 1955 performance.

Conclusion

Although a singer's slowest rendition of an aria or song (e.g., JB's famed 1944 broadcast version of "Nessun dorma," Tor Mann cond.) is often acclaimed for its greater emotional intensity, such is not the case, in my opinion, with these four recordings. Rather than the more leisurely, but somewhat mannered 1939 performance, I feel it is the musically "tighter" 1955 and 1958 renditions (the high-powered 1955 version being my favorite) which better express the restless yearning for the unattainable inherent in both the text and music of "Adelaide." Perhaps by the time he had reached his late 30's—and certainly by his mid-40's—JB had discovered that in lieder singing, "less is more", a philosophy expressed by Cheryl Studer in a recent *Opera News* interview (December 2000): "Thoughts are energy, and as soon as you think something, the energy of that thought exists. When you 'do' the thought, it becomes mannerism. If you think the thought, that's art. That's the key to the simplicity and deeper meaning of lieder singing."

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SPOTLIGHT ON CARLA RAMSEY



Carla Ramsey, the author of the "Adelaide" comparison appearing in this issue, was born and raised in San Antonio, where she began studying piano at age six and trombone at eleven. "I wish I had taken up cello instead," she says, "but Texas was band country back in the '50s." Why trombone, instead of clarinet or flute like the other girls? "I can't remember

why I found this instrument so fascinating, but it might have had something to do with the fact that I enjoyed hanging out with and competing with the guys," admits the self-described "aging tomboy." "Later, in my 20s and 30s, I studied cello for several years, but by then it was too late to master it."

After frequently soloing on both trombone and piano during high school, Carla attended the University of Chicago, majoring in music theory and history. During those years she studied trombone with members of the Chicago Symphony and began playing professionally in the Chicago area. "I've been pretty much a dyed-in-the-wool instrumentalist most of my life," she confesses. Her first real appreciation of vocal music came in the '60s via the lieder singing of Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. "I didn't listen to any 'heavy duty' opera back then," she admits. "Mozart was as far as it went for me."

After earning an M.A.T. in Music Education at Harvard, Carla moved to the Bay Area, where she started free-lancing and eventually won a chair in the San Francisco Opera Orchestra. "It took a lot of chutzpah to audition for Kurt Herbert Adler—he was a real tyrant," she recalls. "I remember the terror of my first performance in the pit (it was *Parsifal*) with him glaring down at me (or so it seemed) from one of the front balconies during a brief second trombone solo in the Prelude."

"Being part of huge operatic productions of this caliber was a powerful experience," Carla reminisces. "The sheer volume of sound coming from the orchestra and singers was overwhelming. I remember thinking how lucky I was to be getting paid to participate in these productions nightly, while seated

only a few feet away were patrons who had to shell out \$75 or more for the privilege." The performances she remembers most vividly were by Beverly Sills in *La Fille du Regiment* and Joan Sutherland in *Il Trovatore*. "Both Domingo and Pavarotti were also in their heyday in the '70s. I, along with the other pit musicians, definitely preferred Domingo," she recalls.

After her stint with the San Francisco Opera, Carla says she must have "reverted to my instrumentalist roots." After listening mainly to chamber music for almost twenty years she took up where she left off, purchasing some CD's of Sills and Sutherland. Coloratura sopranos became her favorites. "I wasn't very familiar with the other voice types, hardly knowing they existed," she says, "and tenors were definitely not high on my list. I gradually expanded my appreciation of opera from Mozart to bel canto, but only in the last couple of years have been able to 'get into' the dramatic intensity of Verdi and the verismo composers."

So how did this late-blooming opera fan and soprano-lover arrive at her recent infatuation with JB? "About a year ago, while browsing the Prima Voce website, I stumbled upon JB's 'La fleur que tu m'avais jeté,' and was immediately enthralled. The first note seemed to materialize from nowhere, like the shimmering of the aurora borealis or the rising of the evening star (celestial metaphors keep coming to mind)," Carla rhapsodizes. As described in the "Adelaide" article, her first purchases were JB's 1958 Carnegie Hall Concert and the 4-CD EMI set. "It was a true conversion experience. I couldn't get enough of him; he seemed to be singing just to me," Carla says. A search on the Internet turned up the JBS website and Björling List, followed by more CD, book, video and record purchases (she bought a turntable in order to hear JB's unadulterated LP sound). "There is still so much I haven't heard, but I'm adding steadily to my JB collection, as finances allow," Carla reports. Although she loves any and everything by JB, her favorite so far is probably his Swedish repertory. "Those Swedish vowel sounds really send me: that's the 'real' Jussi coming out," Carla enthuses. "The Diamond on the March Snow' makes me cry every time, especially the final line ('Oh happy lot thus to love the best thing that life can give, to shine in its radiance and die at the height of beauty'), which to me epitomizes JB's life and voice."

"As a baby Jussiphile, I am so grateful to have discovered the marvelous world of JB. Reading the *JBS Journal* and getting to know JBS members through the Björling List have contributed immensely to my knowledge and appreciation not only of JB but of opera and vocal music in general," Carla concludes.