Grim Reapings Theorizing Untheory

Jonathan Dunsby

I

Any kind of journey through the following pages will reveal the grim reaper as a topos, continually if not continuously, starting with Seth Monahan's research on the first of Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder*.[1] It is no accident that the work is usually referred to in the English-speaking world by its—for us—somewhat sanitizing German title ("The Song of the Earth" quite often appears innocuously for *Das Lied von der Erde*, but how often do you see in English the shudder-inducing title "Songs on the Death of Children," or worse?). What is the last line of "Cruda Amarilli," a focus of Gregory J. Decker's article, but "I shall die in silence"? What is Schoenberg's "Warnung," Op. 3, No. 3, about, via Dehmel's poem, but a death-threat from the fanatical protagonist who figures in Julie Pedneault-Deslauriers's study? Even in Justin Lavacek's exploration of medieval contrapuntal ingenuity, the topos looms, as a glance at Machaut's madrigal texts in the works analyzed will gruesomely confirm; death is rarely absent from the imagery of courtly love. Turning to Christopher M. Barry's Webern analysis, it will come as no surprise to encounter his very first four words, "The specter of death…," as he opens discussion of what Adorno regarded as the inherent fatality of twelve-tone composition. For good measure, take account also our two book-reviewers, Kofi Agawu and William M. Marvin. As if by design, their spotlights are on *Winterreise* (through Lauri Suurpää's new book) and *Parsifal* (through William Kinderman's) respectively, each work a totem of morbidity.

By "untheory," which is not a recognized word, I have sought before in print, and seek again, to dramatize how the lack of a coherent thread about "music and words," as the great William

[1] I am grateful to Steve Laitz for his invaluable advice in the preparation of this essay, and to Michael Anderson and Henry Klumpenhouwer for sharing their expertise on specific aspects, all remaining errors of fact and opinion being my responsibility alone.

Austin called this phenomenon,[2] is a curious feature in the history of theory. You would think that music theory in Western art music might be more or less as colonized by music and words as the repertory is. Given that "music alone," as philosopher Peter Kivy calls it, that is, purely instrumental music, has had a certain hegemony in the last few centuries, interest in music and words might have declined; but still, this was also the age of Verdi and the anti-"absolute" Wagner, and then Popular Music, from Al Jolson to rap, so far, and Western art music composers to this day are as likely to turn to words—to texts, to their singers—as they ever were before. Perhaps Mark Evan Bonds has been right recently to point to "the period between roughly 1945 and 1970" when "absolute music…enjoyed its greatest prestige" which "began to decline…with the turn towards postmodernism," so that "the idea of a wholly autonomous art, free from all contingencies, finds relatively few adherents today."[3] However that may be, we see in this volume theorizing across a really broad range of issues, centered though on the process of words and music being—in Thomas Campion's phrase—"coupled lovingly together,"[4] albeit in a decidedly chthonic ethos.

II

Monahan considers Mahler, a composer who has been said to use texts as "pretexts for musical structures," which Monahan quotes from Hans Mayer. He analyzes "Nun will die Sonn' so hell aufgeh'n," the first of the *Kindertotenlieder*, in which there may be obvious excuses for adopting that slur, but Monahan sets out to destroy their credibility in a reading which aims to show in meticulous detail how, in the bigger picture, Mahler has forged the musical essence here of "bereavement itself" (41). That might

---

[2] "Words and Music: Theory and Practice of 20th-Century Composers," in *Words and Music: The Composer's View*, ed. Lawrence Berman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), 1.

[3] *Absolute Music: The History of an Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 297–98.

[4] See, for example, Christopher R. Wilson, *Words and Notes Coupled Lovingly Together: Thomas Campion, A Critical Study* (New York: Garland, 1989).

suggest that Schoenberg, in his much-cited essay on "The Relationship to the Text,"[5] was conceivably serious in wanting us to believe that—as readers will likely know—he had understood Schubert's songs in essence from the music before figuring out how Schubert had actually set the words or indeed what the words truly were about. There was a distinguished pedigree for that line of argument; it is easy to feel one thus understands something of what Schumann had meant, several generations earlier, by calling song a higher sphere of art. Yet Monahan is suspicious of pushing the argument to the point, usually ascribed above all to Edward Cone, of seeing the composer as poet. Monahan prefers to "imagine both music and poetry as emanating from the consciousness of a more abstract fictional character, one who is neither poet nor composer and who…'knows' neither that he is singing nor uttering verse" (16, note 8).[6]

You will probably be curious to ask, then, what it is that this abstract fictional character does indeed 'know.' It is a big question, one that also gave the late David Lewin considerable pause for thought. Previously, Monahan has speculated that there might be "an agential intermediary between…vocal personas and the fictional composer comparable to the work-persona in instrumental music."[7] There is a Lewinesque turn to that formulation made by Monahan some two years before his "Nun will…" analysis. It is probably fair to say that the "bereavement itself" quiddity he finds in Mahler's composition here relies on a music-analytical style which does seem to reflect Lewin's foundational, somewhat impenetrable idea of understanding a 'song': "as a poetic 'reading' of the poem-on-X that is its text, a

---

[5] Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg* (New York: Faber, 1975), 141–5.

[6] The 'he' referred to is the singer of *Kindertotenlieder*, a parent known to be the fictional father by implication, not least for example in that he directly observes the mother in the third song; but obviously I find Monahan's idea of a song's emanating consciousness to be widely applicable.

[7] "Action and Agency Revisited," *Journal of Music Theory* 57, no. 2 (Fall 2013), 361.

reading which employs a particular mimesis of X as a representational means."[8]

There is something strangely comforting in Monahan's idea of a consciousness, an abstract fictional character behind a song who, far from being anthropomorphized in Cone's manner, is rather stripped of self-consciousness; who is said not to be singing or declaiming, but who is, I suppose, among other things, just composing. This entity is common enough in music-analytical research whether of music and words or music alone. Often it may be only implicit, and the explicitness which Monahan's output has been bringing to issues of agency is undoubtedly valuable, particularly so, one may feel, when it comes to the agential intermediary between vocal personas. Sometimes this intermediary is cast as a dialogue, for instance between a putative poet, represented by the piano, and the maid who is the song's main character, in Lewin's account of "Morgengruss."[9] This homunculus ought to be entirely dispensable, if as listeners—and of course as

---

[8] David Lewin, "*Auf dem Flusse*: Image and Background in a Schubert Song," in his *Studies in Music with Text* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 110; Lewin's "Auf dem Flusse" article was originally published in 1982.

[9] See *David Lewin's* Morgengruß*: Text, Context, Commentary*, ed. David Bard-Schwarz and Richard Cohn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 18–20. I have cited elsewhere Dai Griffiths, "So Who Are You? Webern's Op. 3 No. 1," in *Analytical Strategies and Musical Interpretation: Essays on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Music*, edited by Craig Ayrey and Mark Everist, 301–14 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), as an 'innovative study' in which the singer is imagined to be recollecting something for a piano-analyst and, in my words, "internalizing and responding to the pitches of the piano part"; see 'The Lied Itself,' in "Colloquy: Studying the Lied," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 67, no. 2 (Summer 2014), 575. Griffiths acknowledges a certain indebtedness to Lewin, although he had not necessarily seen the latter's "Morgengruss" analysis, which by 1996 had been in private circulation for some two decades. That Lewin was thinking there, in 1974, about agential intermediaries is glaringly apparent at one point, where he allowed the melody to have its own agency independently of other factors: "*the melody is not aware* of the 'V-arrival' at measure 9: *as far as it is concerned, it has been elaborating V* from the beginning of the strophe….," 80 (my emphasis); and that kind of multivalent atmosphere is typical of Lewin's appeal to the "ambivalence," "ambiguity," and what he also calls "alternate hearings" that are inevitable in genuinely perceived individual readings from different music analysts, a situation which he does not associate particularly strongly with music and words, but with all analysis.

music analysts—we are truly concentrating, totally involved in the act of artistic appreciation, absorbing rather than observing. Yet the prevailing aesthetic view is that passive reception is not a good description of how we engage with Western art music anyway. On the contrary, as Nicholas Cook once put it so elegantly, musical works can be seen "as the mere traces of historical processes, empty shells into which life can be breathed only through an imaginative reconstruction of the musical experiences that once gave them meaning…. When we study music, we aren't just studying something separate from us…we are studying ourselves, too."[10]

III

Now this sense of contemplation, or what might be called possession of a musical work, about which most readers will doubtless have their own views but which is surely a common experience of being a musician, has consequences, some of which have been discussed at length, but others of which rarely get an airing. An example of the latter, pertinent here, is the aesthetic awareness which goes with listening (or contemplation, or possession). Kofi Agawu, reviewing Suurpää's book on *Winterreise* in this volume, expresses a certain skepticism about Suurpää's claim that Schubert's singer—or perhaps it is really the homunculus—is cyclically heading for death from bar 1. The atmosphere of the poems is bleak, Agawu agrees, and "the prospect of death is never far away"; yet "what death actually means remains ambiguous," and Agawu welcomes those moments where Suurpää discourages "reductionist readings…or the drawing of facile correlations between musical signifiers and death" (227). Agawu is reminding us that listening is an act of aesthetic awareness to which "facile correlations," as he calls them pointedly, are so inimical. An example of such a misleading correlation might be the typical critical interpretation of "Der Leiermann"—the numinous close of the wanderer's journey in *Winterreise*—as being death-oriented. Suurpää, while reassuring his reader that "any unequivocal

[10] *Music: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 74.

assessment of the precise meaning of death in *Winterreise* is, in the end, impossible," nevertheless associates "Der Leiermann" with a state of numbness; he writes that the "speaker" is "ready to accept all loss of humanity, a totally numb state devoid of any emotions."[11] Yet there must be a question whether that is somehow what the song 'means' to us in the experience of such exquisite composition, such mimetic transformation of the piano into a hurdy-gurdy (of a kind), such—as we shall see shortly—grammatical drama in the swerve from narration to dialogue.

Can the site of so much action be the site of death also? We might want to call this the *Liebestod* question, a question formulated from one point of view philosophically by Stephen Davies as "Why Listen to Sad Music If It Makes One Feel Sad?".[12] Is not the worst of all possible times, according to the story, also the best of all possible times for us aesthetically, the *more* we are engaged in the music, not partaking of numbness, or explicitly of death? Equally to the point aesthetically, in exploring the idea of a consciousness behind the song, and in the case of "Der Leiermann" in particular, is the interrogative, which suddenly invades Schubert's fifth, final stanza ("Wunderlicher Alter, Soll ich mit dir gehn?"). There, the narrative voice of the song—whatever kind of homunculus we may consider has been generating the description of a hurdy-gurdy man, with numb fingers, barefoot on the ice, and so on—swerves from actant to actor. The impact of such a swerve must always be in some sense dramatic, vividly so, as we are pitched unexpectedly from scenario into dialogue.[13]

Yet Suurpää seems unimpressed by the remarkable introduction of dialogue into *Winterreise*'s last moment, merely

---

[11] *Death in* Winterreise*: Musico-Poetic Associations in Schubert's Song Cycle* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 195.

[12] *Music, Meaning and Expression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 307–19.

[13] Elsewhere Suurpää refers to this "speaker," the wanderer, also as the cycle's "protagonist" or its "narrator," for example pp. 12–13—a decidedly casual attitude towards the agency in what I call "vocality" (see *Making Words Sing: Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Song* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004], *passim*). The "ich" in *Winterreise* addresses various animate and inanimate objects throughout the cycle, so contextually the swerve is not wholly unexpected, but it is nevertheless focal in this song itself.

logging that "the speaker becomes active" (153). This is in line with Suurpää's apparent lack of interest also in Adorno's memorable take, in his 1928 memorial essay, on where Schubert's winter wanderer ends up. Even if the critic Kevin Kopelson must be allowed to regard Adorno's essay as "almost completely incomprehensible," he grants that Adorno begins to make sense in his "last several lines." Kopelson considers those to be "somewhat sentimental,"[14] although the undoubted sentimentality surely reflects Adorno's insistence that our winter journey with Schubert has been heading not for the numb fact of death, but for an engagement with—an aesthetic awareness of—the human condition: "We cry, knowing in untold happiness that this music is as it is in the promise of what one day we ourselves will be. This is music we cannot decipher, but it holds up to our blurred, over-brimming eyes the secret of *reconciliation* at long last."[15]

IV.

That said, any swerve from description to dialogue in a song text is likely to be "dramatic." Such a swerve is, after all, a common enough device in poetic rhetoric, and this observation can lead us to a second consequence of the sense of contemplation, as it is called above, which marks us as active participants in those "empty shells" we call songs: to the fact that often in song analysis what the abstract fictional character knows is, as it were, too much, in that the homunculus is a guardian of the history of music; which is an elaborate way of saying that the homunculus represents in us musically something probably akin to what linguists call "competence" in respect to verbal language.[16] The sheer complexity of what the homunculus has to marshal may even be

---

[14] Kevin Kopelson, *Adorno and the Showgirl, or Late Style*, 2015, http://uiowa.academia.edu/KevinKopelson/Books, consulted 9 December 2015, 46–7.

[15] T.W. Adorno, "Schubert (1928)," *19th-Century Music* 29, no. 1 (summer 2005), 14, my emphasis.

[16] The term "competence" is traditionally ascribed to Noam Chomsky, in *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1965). My word "akin" here is barely defensible, but it does seem to represent what kind of idea musicians have about the nature of understanding Western art music.

the central psychological impulse for us to wonder, as we certainly do, if it knows "too much." Pedneault-Deslauriers, for example, identifies a particular pc collection (016) that, from the off in "Warnung," carries multiple narrative threads, the multiplicity being both synchronic ("the association of the *dog* and the *beloved* with a single, obsessively recurring pitch-class set is indicative of the *speaker*'s state of mind"; my emphasis) and, it will turn out, diachronic ("as the song accumulates injunctive 'du's'…it becomes apparent that he…desires to control, not protect," 60). The issues Christopher M. Barry addresses can probably be seen in similar terms, though more to do with musical "language" than particular dramatic challenges. He too appears to posit an entity which is, or represents, the song itself, and the question of semantic abundance is one way of assimilating his network of questions about what we as analysts know. Webern's "Wie bin ich froh!" is not, as he wryly observes, ostensibly about death at all, yet Adorno, as Barry argues out in enticing detail, would have us believe that its twelve-tone relationships somehow are infernal. The sense of fatality—signaled by lack of structural drive or continuity—that Adorno reads in to all twelve-tone relationships is a serious proposition in line with his general, gnomic position about the inherent sterility of mainstream post-tonal musical languages (Stravinsky's also, for example). Yet what Adorno contested seems unsatisfactory, not least because such a song as this Webern, according to Barry, "generates itself *beyond* the concept of 'ending' with pitch-class succession and aggregation in the twelve-tone row" (119); and also because Adorno's idea of fatality appears to be rather perfunctory when understood through Barry's two-pronged context of invoking Bergson thinking about time and Heidegger thinking about being.

Barry is quick to acknowledge that identifying human ideas with musical processes is always likely to be questionable—after all, he argues, "it is difficult to imagine a musical work, twelve-tone or not, that does *not* materially-become in such a way as to broadly deny the true first-person enactment of death—for it is an uncommon piece of music that, before or after Schoenberg, does not recursively draw from within, from its own immediate past as a work, to generate its continuing present" (83). This is exactly the kind of counter-evidence that tends to undermine many sensational

claims for music analysis conducted—as Joseph Kerman would have said—positivistically.[17] William M. Marvin's review identifies a classic example, the assertion of associative tonality in *Parsifal*. Marvin offers counter-examples to seriously undermine Kinderman's readings: such as the Flower-maidens' "Komm! Holder Knabe" being incongruously in the alleged "Grail" tonality of A-flat major; or Act II ending in B minor, the supposed Klingsor tonality, despite our knowledge that Klingsor's kingdom has been grimly reaped by being destroyed 33 measures earlier, "and he is never heard of again"; or the equally challenging fact that *Leitmotive* such as Klingsor's and Parsifal's also appear in multiple tonalities other than their putative referential ones (239).

Nevertheless, Barry offers a strong case for, and demonstration of, the central relationship of what were called above the homunculus and the active participants, or the song and the analyst: "song analysis is a series of reciprocal identifications, an interweaving of 'just-as' similes between analyst and song, and always there remains the impossibility of grasping the other's experience" (121). That is what it might mean to wonder, as earlier here, if the homunculus may be thought of as knowing "too much." For example, the discontinuity Barry reveals for us between twelve-tone musical structures and what might be called the ancillary musical structures in "Wie bin ich froh!" would have been, as it were, too much for Adorno, who doggedly theorized about dodecaphonic music as if its dodecaphony alone were its truth content. Perhaps not only is the surplus of meaning in vocality, when deeply explained, basically reflexive (Barry says for example that "like a poem's reading, a song's reading is double in nature: not only does a reader outside of the work recite and thus revive its subject, but the content of the work tends to *read itself* in the process of progressively generating the rest of the work—referring recursively to poetic and songful moments already past, at its basis the essence of becoming" [96]); but also, there may be an

[17] In *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), Kerman used the word "positivist" more than fifty times, mostly pejoratively, and at one point summarizes "the classic positivistic dilemma" as involving "more and more facts, and less and less confidence in interpreting them," 54.

imbalance, to the point of there being things to explain in vocal music that are beyond analysis—as well as, presumably, there being vocal music that it is possible also to over-analyze. Lewin would certainly have treated such comments dismissively, if they claimed to entail music-analytical relevance, consigning them to the realm not of analysis but of theory, as would be apparent to any reader familiar with his now nearly semicentennial essay "Behind the Beyond: A Response to Edward T. Cone."[18] Yet sometimes we might consider that the mental state of the "I" in a song is so super-complex that there may be no plausible musical corollary to analyze. Barry's discussion of "extended conscious," when the singer is evidently expressing not a feeling, but the "feeling of a feeling," suggests that there is a level of verbal semantic abundance—simply lacking in music, not dissimilarly to its lack of any "interrogative" mood—which can create in song a genuine zone of what Cone felt to be "beyond analysis," a zone that even Lewin might have acknowledged.[19]

V.

There seems to be no danger, though, of over-analyzing music of some earlier eras. This may be particularly so regarding works from the *seconda pratica* when composers were pursuing, as Gregory J. Decker notes, "new techniques to achieve expression of deeper textual meaning" (187), although the *seconda pratica* was to some extent an age of new simplicity, not least compared with the ars nova. Reviewing the Artusi-Monteverdi controversy, it can be arresting to be reminded how deeply the debate, clothed in potential outcomes for vocal music and apparently intimately linked to the sacred/secular tension that is essentially about words and ideas, rather than words and sounds, nevertheless seems to have hinged on feelings about the musical fabric, about dissonance treatment, harmony, indeed tonality—an impression newly

[18] *Perspectives of New Music* 7, no. 2 (Spring–Summer, 1969), 59–69.

[19] On the super-complex, poetic "I," see also Christopher M. Barry's Ph.D. dissertation, "Song as Self: Music and Subjectivity in the Early Twentieth-Century Lyric Lied," University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2013, 17–24.

strengthened by Tim Carter's recent research.[20] Decker, however, joins Susan McClary in insisting that, in his words, "a close reading of the musical and poetic texts by Monteverdi and other composers in his milieu reveals that the connection between words and music in these works runs deeper: strategic oppositions (and sometimes ambiguities) of mode, counterpoint, and style interact to create rich poetic interpretations in which dualities of emotion, characterization, affect, and symbolism often played a great role" (182). The implication is that the structural impact of extending textual considerations to deeper compositional levels than previously was integral to *seconda pratica* modernism. At one point Decker tells us explicitly that "the idea of word painting was expanded to include musical depictions of broader themes and ideas within a poem" (185); although word-painting remains characteristic of the musical surface, more penetrating analysis of text/music relations will represent more historically-informed theory in this repertoire. In the course of his analysis of Marenzio's "Cruda Amarilli," for example, he extends this to textural contrast, speculating that contemporaneous listeners' (or at least singers') understanding was being directly accessed by the composer at this remote text/music level, when "the textural shift from contrapuntal to declamatory voicing may have *signaled the listener to shift his or her expectations* for text expression and meaning" (201; my emphasis).

If we can see the early seventeenth-century homunculus balancing poietic and esthesic factors in a way that makes intuitive sense to the analyst more familiar with assessing vocality in tonal and post-tonal music, there can be ways in which one might feel even more kinship with medieval composition in which the question of, as it was put earlier, what the homunculus "knows" has obvious contemporary resonances. Rather as with the dodecaphony discussed by Barry—where the issues of musical "language" brought to bear on verbal language are unavoidable, unless one were to claim, in music-analytical defeat, that

[20] "Cerberus Barks in Vain: Poetic Asides in the Artusi–Monteverdi Controversy," *The Journal of Musicology* 29, no. 4 (Fall 2012), 461–76.

twelve-tone music may as well not be twelve-tone in respect of its vocality—the medieval motet, according to Lavacek, "uniquely provided the opportunity for glossing both text and music by grafting new poetry and vocal lines onto canonical ones" (127), and clearly the issues at stake can be highly intricate, without the stability of a single, poetic focus, and given, also, the interaction between upper voices and the tenor.

What is so notable, to this reader at least, is the high level of poietic intent where that is known, reasonably reliably. Lavacek reports on Machaut's "modification and subversion of borrowed text so as to voice his own ideas through another poet's words, while retaining enough of his source to make it recognizable" (127), hardly a situation one is likely to over-analyze, considering its implied sophistication. If we are to take Machaut at his word, a majestic thought about music and text in Western art music was on offer seven centuries ago and makes a resounding closing statement, here, about the trust placed by the composer in those "active participants," or possessors of a musical work, mentioned earlier: "Machaut himself, presenting a cohesive overlook of his complete work in the *Prologue,* explicitly invites his audience to draw connections through which new meanings may emerge. Machaut writes that 'meaning [*senz*] will shape for your imagination whatever you might wish to bring into harmony'" (127).[21]

[21]"Harmony" is used here in its symbolic sense, not as a technical musical term. For extensive discussion of Machaut's compositional ideas, see Anne Walters Robertson, *Guillaume de Machaut and Reims: Context and Meaning in His Musical Works* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), including specific comment on this quotation from the beginning of Machaut's "Prologue," 4–8 and 276–77.