

Book Review: "Singing in Style: A Guide to Vocal Performance Practices." by Martha Elliott.

Margaret Murata

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Book review: Elliott, Martha. *Singing in Style: A Guide to Vocal Performance Practices*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006. ISBN 0-300-10932-6.

Margaret Murata

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If you go to <http://www.marthaelliott.net/bio.html>, you will see that Martha Elliott is a singer of some accomplishment, as well as a teacher of voice. Like many non-operatic sopranos, she appears to have specialized in Baroque and twentieth-century repertoires. *Singing in Style* is not a textbook, handbook, or reference work, but rather a kind of ready consultant for singers whose technique and languages are already in place, preparing music from 1600 to the present and looking for suggestions and recommendations about articulation, ornamentation, alternative editions, and necessary degrees of fidelity to or freedom from a notated score. It is not a sourcebook for repertory (in fact few specific works are discussed). It focuses on church and chamber music, not opera. It aims, as its title states, to help the non-specialist sing stylishly with his or her individual instrument, not to set up plausible historical models for imitation. None of the chapters is intended to be a comprehensive survey of practices for any period, and so it would seem that a singer would go to this volume with specific compositions in hand, seeking some general advice and possibly be moved to find further information or guidance. Elliott does not presume to reinterpret known historical treatises, but typically refers the reader to more recent and specialized publications, such as the Norton-Grove *Performance Practice: Music after 1600*^[1]; the Schirmer *Performer's Guide to Seventeenth-Century Music* (soon to appear in a second edition)^[2]; Julianne Baird's edition of Agricola's *Anleitung zur Singkunst*^[3]; Clive Brown's *Classical and Romantic Performing Practice, 1750-1900*^[4]; Arthur Weisberg's

¹ Howard Mayer Brown and Stanley Sadie, eds., *Performance Practice: Music after 1600* (New York: Norton, 1989).

² Stewart Carter, ed., *A Performer's Guide to Seventeenth-Century Music* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1997).

³ Julianne Baird, *Johann Friederich Agricola's Introduction to the Art of Singing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁴ Clive Brown, *Classical and Romantic Performing Practice, 1750-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Performing Twentieth-Century Music^[5]; and Sharon Mabry's *Exploring Twentieth-Century Vocal Music*^[6].

The volume proceeds historically from early and late Baroque (chapters 1-2, with subsections for Italy, England, France, Germany), through the classical and *bel canto* eras (chaps. 3-4). Separate chapters for the *Lied* and *mélodie* (chaps. 5-6) proceed to the "Second Viennese School," "Early Twentieth-Century Nationalism," and "Working with Living Composers" (chaps. 7-9). Generally, each chapter gives a brief historical context, a discussion of editions, and contemporary descriptions of singers' voices where possible, before addressing more specific issues, such as continuo instruments, transposition, tempo, vibrato, *portamento*, and *Sprechstimme*. Chapter 8, on nationalism in the last century, departs from this, devoting subsections to specific composers (e.g., Mussorgsky, Prokofief, De Falla, Britten, Ives, Copland, and Barber). Some topics appear consistently. For example, ornamentation is discussed in the first six chapters, tempo and articulation in chapters 2-7. To cover four centuries of singing in about 300 pages, the discussions are of necessity more illustrative than definitive; the topics most likely reflect issues that Elliott has encountered in preparation for her own performances and in coaching more advanced students.

The book aims to introduce "issues of historical performance practice" and is not intended to be a stand-alone problem solver; it seems to assume access to academic libraries (which not all serious singers have) for editions and other books and articles, though some scores that are frequently referred to are available in Dover editions and even G. Schirmer reprints. Performance-practice experts, then, are likely only to ask whether they will refer their students to the book. Voice teachers may assign readings from it; sections will be cribbed for program notes. There will be studio teachers and singers who will try to turn its information into application.

Every singer works on *Lieder*, with a historical consciousness or without one. What new practical ideas does Elliot's chapter on German song suggest the singer consider?

- Which composers preferred that their songs be sung in their original keys
- That men sang *Frauenliebe und Leben* and women *An die ferne Geliebte*
- That there was criticism of overly dramatic performances of Schubert songs
- The ambiguity of the > marks in the *Neue Schubert Ausgabe*
- The affective use of *portamento* and vibrato

⁵ Arthur Weisberg, *Performing Twentieth-Century Music: A Handbook for Conductors and Instrumentalists* (New Haven: Yale University, 1993).

⁶ Sharon Mabry, *Exploring 20th-century Vocal Music: A Practical Guide to Innovations in Performance and Repertoire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

In addition, there are useful illustrations of possible executions of appoggiaturas and grace notes in Schubert and of the reconciliation of simultaneous dotted and triplet figures in voice and piano. (Here and in the other musical examples, measure numbers are lacking.) The tempo and rhythm section selectively documents the tempo fluctuations that have remained an aspect of singing *Lieder*.

This chapter—like the others—cites specific singers when they can be associated with performance of the music of specific composers, for example, the opera singer Johann Vogl who turned to Schubert late in his career. Indeed, due to the fact that development of a vocal technique for opera that differed from other kinds of trained singing does not become obvious until the middle of the nineteenth century, Elliott's theoretical sources, from Caccini's preface to *Le nuove musiche* (1602) to Manuel Garcia's 1841 *Traité ... du l'art du chant*, are of necessity mixed, despite her focus on church and chamber repertory. It would have been better to tell singers outright that from at least the mid-seventeenth century opera singers and operatic style set vocal standards and that the research task for a guide such as this is to discover the exceptions where they existed. Tosi, for example, advises that solo motets should not be sung like opera arias (think of the Vivaldi motets). But would Verdi baritone Charles Santley (misspelled as Santly on p. 130) have sung salon songs any differently from an opera aria, especially in an era in which much salon entertainment consisted of opera arias? In reverse, we can ask the question, "Does the predominantly amateur performance of the early *Lied* give us license to emulate historical amateurs?" This question, however, also points out that the legitimate "style" of singing that we today call "Broadway" (which is not "amateur" even when six-year olds do it) is also not broached here.

We might have expected each chapter to have some discussion of the changes in the normative sound of trained voices, in the sections on voice types and registers. But in both the Baroque and Classic chapters, it is only the blending of vocal registers that is emphasized (pp. 20-21, 106). Not ventured are straightforward descriptions of the kind given, for example, by John Potter in *A Performer's Guide to Music of the Baroque Period* (Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music)^[7]: "Voices were small, light and nimble," or by Richard Wigmore, who describes "singing on the breath ... 'in the mask'" according to G.B. Mancini, in the corresponding *Guide to Music of the Classical Period*^[8]. Elliott's chapter on Italian *bel canto* singing is, not surprisingly, dominated by opera and opera singers, which makes the musical examples from chamber airs somewhat artificial. Whether the canzonettas and chamber arias by Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti differ at all in poetry or expression from operatic music is not considered.

⁷ Anthony Burton, ed., *A Performer's Guide to the Music of the Baroque Period* (London: Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, 2002), 105.

⁸ Anthony Burton, ed., *A Performer's Guide to the Music of the Classical Period* (London: Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, 2002), 79.

Singers who do not specialize in Baroque music are often soloists for Bach cantatas and Handel oratorios; there are excellent students learning from bad editions and/or seriously preparing degree recitals. In this repertory, Elliott emphasizes ornamentation—an issue that prompts many singers to seek out help—but she does not specifically try to help them improvise their own. Rather she usefully urges singers to learn what the ornaments are, in order to recognize them when they are “written out” by composers and sing them as such. She points out the distinction between local “graces” (or *accenti*) and divisions (or *passaggi*). For embellishments, however, the volume provides an odd mix of illustrations from Adrian Petit Coclico in 1552 (improvisational figures mostly no longer appropriate in the seventeenth century); samples of cadences by the American countertenor Drew Minter; English examples from 1660 to 1676 from Robert Toft's publications; late French illustrations from Bacilly to Bérard (1755); trills from Julianne Baird's edition of Agricola; and an excerpt from *Three Ornamented Arias* by Handel, published by Winton Dean.^[9] In short, there is no systematic set of illustrations that could reasonably be matched up with a specific piece a singer might want advice about, say, a cantata by Giacomo Carissimi. For late arias, there are also some puzzling statements, such as “An appoggiatura is made by leaning on an auxiliary note” (p. 71).

In terms of vocal production, Elliott sensibly discusses vibrato as an ornament and as an element of articulation, but she does not talk about techniques of vocal intensification that are related to its presence or suppression—such as diction or breath speed (the initial discussion about vibrato in fact talks about “pressure of the airflow” which is something entirely different). Elliott points out that singing is more legato in the eighteenth than in the seventeenth century, but has no advice on a question that singers ask all the time—how legato to sing *passaggi*, or how to articulate them, both in terms of individual tones and in terms of sub-groupings. This question continues to apply to vocal music well into the nineteenth century. I recently heard a terrific Georgian bass singing *passaggi* in Verdi with huffy H's between sixteenth notes—with no loss of line. Elliott's chapter on “classical” singing reiterates the notion that singing became increasingly legato in the course of the eighteenth century, but it fails to point out the importance of articulating subphrases, the *incises* out of which many eighteenth-century melodies are built, which are so emphatically illustrated by Domenico Corri, and which can so animate otherwise conventionally tonal phrases.

Baroque rhythmic styles are only minimally discussed, especially in terms of triple meters before ca. 1680 (which are all “in one”), and Elliott gives no alerts for hemiola patterns. The range and possible meanings of Baroque meters at differing levels of note values—*e.g.*, 3/1, 3/2, 3/4, 3/8—are nowhere in sight. *Notes inégales* are mentioned for French or French-style airs, but Elliott neglects to specify their common application in triple meters. There are no illustrations of French inequality, so the very general set of principles given here could lead to a

⁹ George Frideric Handel, *Three Ornamented Arias*, ed. Winton Dean (London: Oxford University Press, 1976).

fine mess. Along more subtle lines, Elliott gives an extensive summary of Bacilly's discussion of long and short vowels in French, but a singer who does not know French except to pronounce it would be unable to apply it. (In the later chapter on the *mélodie*, Elliott reports how she was encouraged in a master class to "vary the length and weight of all the sixteenth notes in [a song by Fauré] ... to try to approximate a more natural spoken rhythm." Excellent advice but, again, one needs to know some French to apply it.) The detailed presentation of Bacilly on French vowels and consonants, furthermore, does not take into consideration the sounds of pre-Revolutionary French.

Possibly the most serious muddle-by-omission is a clear discussion of Baroque recitative and aria styles. A statement such as "Recitatives may be *secco* or dry ..." (p. 32) could lead to believing that those are two categories or that recitative in the Baroque is "dry," which it rarely is. No distinctions are made between declamation in early Baroque monody, *recitativo semplice* for the stage, and affective recitative. The definition of *arioso* is outdated and defective ("a lyrical version of recitative," p. 32). These are not academic distinctions, but expressive ones that create the formal sections that shape Baroque monodies, cantatas, and oratorios. Singing stylishly in these genres means being responsive to musical shifts between kinds of recitative and arias—the shifts are not always determined by the text, although they will always cast light on it. Although the *Guide* recommends that singers seek out facsimile editions, one wonders what population of singers the book is meant to help most, since the examples offered to illustrate *da capo* arias are from Parisotti editions given in the old 1894 G. Schirmer volumes (not reliable guides to their original forms). Among other omissions is any discussion of singing in unequal temperaments, the inclusion of harp as an increasingly common continuo instrument, and of Spanish songs or German repertory before J.S. Bach (*e.g.*, Schütz or Buxtehude, who are not that uncommon).

Up to the twentieth century, Elliott gives a good amount of detail, loosely organized and in the guise of general advice. What could have strengthened the practicality of the book would have been at least one discussion in each chapter of what it is that singers sing—not words, but poems. It is the poem that determines both the general grounds of "singing in style" and inspires specific techniques that can create an illusion of style, whether the poem is a witty satire by a Venetian nobleman, a folk ballad by Goethe, or an ironic lyric by Verlaine. It is the systematic, prosodic analysis of poems that makes *Poetry into Song: Performance and Analysis of Lieder* by Deborah Stein and Robert Spillman such a successful (self-)teaching tool.^[10] After they have presented a poem, with all of its verbal musicality, colors, and psychological drama, the *Lied* almost sings itself; (and then, what the composer does with it often comes as a revelation).

The three chapters on twentieth-century song and chamber music confront different issues, and often present anecdotal snippets about composers and their singers. They make good

¹⁰ Deborah Stein and Robert Spillman, *Poetry into Song: Performance and Analysis of Lieder* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

reading; but Phyllis Bryn-Julson's observation that Boulez's *Pli selon pli* "must be performed with the delicacy and transparency that is reflected in the appearance of the [autograph] score" does not help you to sing it or to imagine what is meant by "singing in style" in any post-1950's repertory. We learn, for example, that Elliott worked on *Singin' Sepia* with its composer, Tania León, but that to perform it with the necessary jazz and gospel elements to her own satisfaction, she needed a live demonstration. Unfortunately, the author gives no further description of how she did that or with what vocal techniques. Indeed, there is little acknowledgment that "vocal style" since Cathy Berberian does includes jazz, rock, and ethnic modes of vocal production, improvisation, and rhythmic "freedom," in addition to the kind of singing appropriate for Boulez or Babbitt. Since, however, Elliott's book is not a manual to learn extended vocal techniques, it is difficult to grasp what "historical performance practices" beyond those might be unwritten and desirable in, say, Berio's *Sequenza III*, which one hears more and more on college vocal recitals. In the case of Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire*, Elliott does not give instructions so much as describe various ways singers have executed the score, as well as Schoenberg's admonishments to do just what the score says. (All expression of the text, according to him, is in the music--don't be dramatic; effectively, don't do anything that's not there.) The discussion of *Sprechstimme* and *Pierrot* gets eight pages; no other effects, techniques, or modern works are treated at such length. I would consider giving these last three chapters to singers as a friendly, interesting, and possibly anxiety-reducing read.