

Song Got Wrong

Aaron Ridley

One of the commonest ways of going wrong in philosophy is to assume that the consequences of a statement that is obviously true must themselves be obvious. So, for instance, from the obviously true statement that the mind is not the same as the body, it can seem to follow directly that the mind and the body must be distinct kinds of *thing*. But that conclusion, although it may look like an obvious consequence of the obvious truth that minds and bodies are different, is almost certainly false. Or, to take another example, from the obviously true statement that human beings tend to prefer pleasurable experiences to painful ones, it can seem to follow directly that all issues of value must be reducible to questions about the pleasurableness or painfulness of experiences.

But again, and however obvious-looking it may seem, the inference is bad and the conclusion is false. These two mistakes – known respectively, of course, as dualism and utilitarianism – show how powerful the seductions of expecting obvious consequences from obviously true statements can be. The examples I have given are well known ones from the philosophy of mind and ethics. But the same sort of error crops up throughout philosophy, not least, as I hope to show, in aesthetics.

I

Here's an obviously true statement: songs are a combination of music and words. Franz Schubert's song *Erlkönig*, for instance, is clearly a combination of Schubert's music and the words of the poem by Goethe that Schubert sets. So far, so obvious. But it can *seem* to follow from this, and to follow obviously, that the text of Schubert's song must be Goethe's poem. And it can seem to follow obviously from *that* that an appreciation of Schubert's song must, at the very least, involve an appreciation of Schubert's music, an appreciation of Goethe's poem, and an appreciation of the relation between the two. Certainly these are the conclusions that contemporary philosophers of music have drawn, and have thought to follow obviously from the obvious truth that songs are a combination of words and music.¹ But both conclusions are false, however intuitively compelling they might appear. And both have seriously impeded the attempt to say anything philosophically sensible about song – one of the most important kinds of music there is.

II

To see what's wrong with the first of these seemingly obvious inferences, we need to think for a moment about poems. Consider rhyme, alliteration, intonation and metre. All of these are sound-effects, factors which make a poem sound one way rather than another. They are, in an altogether unmetaphorical sense, *musical* qualities. They are also, of course, part of what makes a poem mean what it does, or have the expressive effect that it does. The difference in meaning between Coleridge's line 'In Xanadu did Kubla Khan a stately pleasure-dome decree' and a perfectly good paraphrase of it – for example, 'Kubla Khan ordered that a pleasure-dome of elegant but substantial

proportions be erected or built in Xanadu' – is due, at least in part, to the fact that the paraphrase entirely lacks the musical qualities of the original.

A poem is to be appreciated as the poem it is, in other words, at least partly in virtue of its musical qualities. I don't think that this is controversial. But as soon as a poem is set to music, it is precisely its musical qualities that change, and more or less inevitably so. The metre of the resultant song is likely to be altogether different from that of the original poem; rhyme and alliteration may be softened, highlighted, eliminated or even created in the setting; and the music may impart to the words an entirely new style of intonation. The musical qualities of the *words of the song*, that is, may be completely different from the musical qualities of the words of that song when read *as a poem*. And since its musical qualities are part of what makes a poem the poem that it is, this means that the text of a song is *not* the poem that it sets. The poem may have one set of qualities, the text of the song another. The text of a song is therefore the words of the poem it sets *as sung* in that song; and, as such, the text of a song cannot be fully specified without reference to the song itself, which is to say, without reference to the *music* of the song. The first apparently obvious consequence of the obvious truth that songs are a combination of music and words is therefore false. It is not the case that the text of, say, Schubert's *Erlkönig* is Goethe's poem of the same name, which Schubert has set. Rather, the song's text consists of the same words in the same order as Goethe's poem, but of those words as *sung* to Schubert's music.

III

What of the second apparently obvious consequence – that an appreciation of Schubert's song must involve an appreciation of Schubert's music, of Goethe's poem and of the relation between them? Well, we can already see that this can't quite be right. Goethe's poem is not, after all, the text of Schubert's song, so there is no longer any reason to think that an independent appreciation of that poem must be part of what an appreciation of Schubert's song involves. One must appreciate the text, to be sure: but the text and the poem are not, as we have seen, the same thing. Nor, for reasons that shadow the ones given above, are there any grounds to think that an appreciation of Schubert's song must involve an *independent* appreciation of its 'music' – that is, of its music considered in isolation from its words.

For the music of Schubert's song is no more to be divorced from its words than those words are to be divorced from its music. The sound of a voice is shaped by the words that it sings: the timbre of a high note sung to the word 'chalk', for instance, is entirely different to that of one sung to the word 'cheese', as a moment's experimentation (at home) will confirm. And since the sound or timbre of a piece of music is a musically important quality of it, and since the timbre of a song's leading instrument, the voice, is decisively affected by the words that it sings, the music of a song cannot, in the end, be specified independently of its text. The appreciation of Schubert's *Erlkönig*, that is, cannot involve an appreciation of its 'music' in isolation from its text, since its text is partly what makes its music the music that it is. Songs may indeed be a combination of music and words. But that doesn't mean that the music and the text that it sets can be got at separately; and it therefore certainly doesn't mean that an appreciation of a song must involve appreciating its

'components' in isolation from one another, and then appreciating the 'relation' between them. The second obvious-seeming consequence is therefore also false.

IV

Once one sees that the obvious truth that songs are a combination of music and words doesn't entail that any given song is to be regarded as a *hybrid* of a piece of music and a poem, both specifiable independently of the song itself, some other things become clearer, or at least acquire a clearer context.² Here I have space to highlight just one of these. There is a near-ubiquitous thought that the quality of a song is a function, primarily, of the quality of its 'music' – that is, of its music considered independently of its words, as a piece of purely instrumental music (that just so happens, as it were, to be sung).

Partly, I suspect, the motivation for this thought lies in the fact that most of the people writing about musical aesthetics are native English-speakers, while most of the songs that they admire are in German, French or Italian. One can see why, from this perspective, it would be nice if the words didn't matter too much. But there is another, more principled-seeming, reason to think that the music must be in the driving seat; and this lies in the observation, often made, that great songs sometimes have rotten words, an observation customarily rounded out or off with a reference to Schubert (who frequently set poets of infinitely lesser stature than Goethe).

Now this point is made often enough to be worth pausing over. What – exactly – is it meant to show? One can see how it fits with the hybrid picture of song. Spelled out, the fit comes to this: viewed purely as a poem – i.e. as a poem in its own right – the words to such and such a song are no good. The song itself, however, is felt to be first rate. Therefore the quality of the song must derive solely from its music (specified independently of its words), that is, from its music conceived as purely instrumental. Thus the observation both exploits the strictly bipartite picture encouraged by the hybrid model *and* offers a reason to suppose that the real point and value of a song – any song – must reside in its qualities as an autonomous musical artefact.

To point out that Schubert's songs sometimes have rotten words, then, is, in this context, simultaneously to presuppose and to reinforce the idea that what is properly to be thought of as essential to song is the music without the words. It is no surprise, in light of this, that philosophers of music never point out the equally true and equally misleading fact that great songs often have lousy music. Here Schubert makes way for, e.g., Bob Dylan: lousy music, badly sung, but great songs. What do 'lousy music' and 'badly sung' mean in this case? They mean 'would be lousy and bad if the music were to be judged by the standards appropriate to a piece of purely instrumental music.'

The conclusion? By parity of reasoning, that the quality of a Dylan song must derive solely from its words (as specified independently of its music), that is, from its words conceived as purely poetic, so that we now have an observation that both exploits the strictly bipartite character of the hybrid model *and* offers a reason to suppose that the real point and value of a song – any song – must reside in its qualities as an autonomous piece of poetry. And this, in effect, is simultaneously to presuppose and

to reinforce the idea that what is properly to be thought of as essential to song is the words without the music.

Silly. But the Dylan and Schubert cases are mirror-images of one another, and both flow directly from the (mis)understanding of song as a hybrid art form, and of songs as a more or less unequal combination of independently specifiable pieces of poetry and independently specifiable pieces of music. So the greatness of Schubert and Dylan songs needs to be understood in a different way. Specifically, the greatness of those songs needs to be understood in a way that recognises the transformative effect that words and music can have on one another. Thus, while Schubert transforms and galvanises his words in setting them, and produces great songs in virtue of that, we should want to say, Dylan transforms and galvanises his music through the words that he sets – points that the hybrid model not only fails to capture, but is bound to misrepresent.

V

Much more needs to be said, of course.³ But it should be clear that the error that I have been trying to expose – the error of thinking that the consequences of the obvious truth that songs are a combination of music and words must themselves be obvious – is a serious one. It pushes those who perpetrate it into an entirely false dichotomy – here, Schubert *or* Dylan: Schubert if you think that the greatness of his songs, in light of the weakness of the poems that he sets, must be due to the fact that the (allegedly independently specifiable) ‘music’ of a song is the chief source of its value; Dylan if you think that the greatness of *his* songs, in light of their weakness when construed as pieces of purely instrumental music, must derive from their (allegedly independently specifiable) ‘texts’.

Neither alternative, for the reasons that I have given, is correct, and neither captures the value of the kind of song that it sets out to champion. That is already a major failing. But there are knock-on effects, too, at least one of which is actively pernicious. This is that, with song got wrong in the way that I have described, the appearance can be generated of a theoretically respectable reason for dismissing so-called popular music out of hand. For if, as most philosophers of music have rightly thought, Schubert’s songs are indeed and undeniably great; and if, in the grip of the hybrid model, it is concluded that their greatness must derive from their purely ‘musical’ qualities, since the poems they set are often so bad; and if, as a result of that, it is concluded that the value of any song must be a function of its ‘music’ construed as purely instrumental; then, since more or less no popular music can survive being so construed, it follows, to this way of thinking, that popular songs are simply, and pretty well by definition, *worse* than classical ones.

If one takes a composer such as Schubert as one’s paradigm, that is, and as most philosophers of music have, and if one mistakenly endorses the hybrid model of song, then what is, essentially, a piece of silly snobbery can find itself elevated to the status of a philosophical finding.⁴ And this, while not perhaps as calamitous as the misunderstandings engendered by either dualism or utilitarianism, is nevertheless regrettable, and certainly constitutes something of a black mark against recent musical aesthetics. Song has deserved better from its attendant philosophers than this.

Page 4 of 5 Song Got Wrong Richmond Journal of Philosophy 1 (June 2002) Aaron Ridley Page 5 of 5

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1 Examples of distinguished contemporary philosophers of music drawing precisely these conclusions are to be found in, e.g., Peter Kivy, *The Corded Shell* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), chapter 10, and Jerrold Levinson, 'Song and Music Drama', in his *The Pleasures of Aesthetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp.42-59.

2 I take the term 'hybrid' from Jerrold Levinson's essay, 'Hybrid Art Forms', in his *Music, Art, and Metaphysics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp.26-36. Levinson regards song as a 'hybrid' art form in precisely the sense that I have rejected.

3 I try to say some of it in my forthcoming book, *The Philosophy of Music: Theme and Variations* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), chapter 3.

4 For a particularly uncompromising example, see Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), chapter 15.