

Clytus Gottwald's Vocal Transcriptions

Sebastian Herrmann, Conductor & Singer, Stuttgart, Germany

Clytus Gottwald's transcriptions for a cappella choir have, over the years, acquired high esteem on the scene of European vocal music, and they are being enthusiastically performed by choirs. Gottwald transcribes instrumental, orchestral and chamber music works, primarily from the late romantic and the impressionist periods, for a cappella choir, thus creating a new approach to this music.

Well-known transcriptions of a cappella choir are e. g. Gustav Mahler's *Urlicht* from his second symphony, the orchestral song *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen* or the 5th movement *Louange à l'Éternité de Jésus* from Olivier Messiaen's quartet *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*.

In the 19th century the concept of "transcription" was dominated above all by Franz Liszt who provided, for piano, a wide variety of arrangements of *Lied*, orchestral and operatic literature. The singers' and the orchestral parts are transferred to the piano and the sound characteristics of the various orchestral instruments and above all the texts are lost. Gottwald's transcriptions now tread a new path by transferring instrumental music to choirs in several parts, also losing the sound of the orchestral instruments, but in return adding words to the music. Several of the transcriptions were first recorded on CD by German ensembles like the Stuttgart Chamber Choir (Frieder Bernius), ChamberChoir Saarbrücken (Georg Grün) and the Vocal Ensemble of South-West German Radio (Marcus Creed) [SWR Vokalensemble Stuttgart], and in light of the high demands on vocal technique these works make, these recordings set impressive yardsticks.

History of Transcriptions

“Utopia takes for granted that there will be a future”.^[1] This saying by Clytus Gottwald from a contribution to the annual programme booklet for the season 2004/2005 of the SWR Vokalensemble Stuttgart, describes the intention behind the transcriptions: we must create a future for choral music. The basis on which to found a more-or-less new genre of choral music is supplied by Gottwald’s historical view of choral music from the end of the 18th century. In the 19th century, within the movement of historicism, a cappella choral music reached its zenith with, among others, Johannes Brahms. Otherwise, choirs were deployed, as e.g. frequently done in England, primarily for the performances of oratorios.^[2] In this respect, Richard Strauss’s *Gesänge* op. 34 *Der Abend* and *Hymne* (1897) were a real innovation, as here was a composer attempting to transfer orchestral instrumentation onto the choir. However, according to Gottwald, these works did not find any echo within the output of composers in the decades that followed, and it was only with Ligeti’s *Lux aeterna* (1966) that this method of composing was applied again. The Renaissance era also fits into this context, because Gottwald discovered the lost skill of treating voice parts as if they were orchestral parts as early as in the time of the standard-setting vocal polyphony of the French composer Antoine Brunel, in the 12-part a-cappella mass, *Et ecce terrae motus*, which he describes as “symphonic”.^[3] He also ranks Thomas Tallis’s 40-part motet *Spem in alium* (ca 1570) among this type of sonority.^[4]

Gottwald now tries to continue Richard Strauss’s suggestion of releasing the choir from the dependency of the orchestra^[5] and to develop further the musical and technical standard of professional but also of ambitious amateur choirs, as well as putting them in touch with literature from the late Romantic

era and from Impressionism.^[6] The initial spark for the transcriptions was set alight in 1976 when Gottwald, editor at the then South German Radio, produced a broadcast about Pierre Boulez.^[7] Boulez brought a few works with him for one of the workshops, among them Maurice Ravel's cycle *Poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé*, from which he heard the first piece, *Soupir*, upon which it occurred to him to rework this piece into a choral composition. Gottwald describes the start of his activity as "more or less [...] a matter of serendipity".^[8] Summing things up: it is the following aspects that drive Clytus Gottwald's work forwards: extending the choral repertoire by adding late Romantic German literature, which in a cappella choral music is represented only sporadically, and the pedagogical mission of teaching singers to re-learn the ability of hearing complex chords and to intone them correctly. According to Gottwald, the "symphonic differentiation of the sound must not stop at the boundary to the instrumental, but should be pushed further in the choir, towards its own beauty".^[9] Over and above this mission the works also intend to encourage composers "to write for choir again – under the motto created by Hans Holliger *Utopie Chorklang* [The Utopia of the Choral Sound] which – if translated into musical notation – would assure the future of choral music".^[10]

The Technique of Transcribing

Similar to the transcriptions for piano by Liszt which have already been mentioned, Gottwald did not slavishly transcribe note by note for choir, but his transcriptions should really be perceived as paraphrases or fantasias.^[11] The instrumental original is transferred into a new sound world, and Gottwald also has to adapt it to this new sound world, as a choir possesses a considerably smaller range than do orchestras or

pianos. The choir usually splits into sixteen parts, but in Gottwald's work we find a manifold range of castings from four to nineteen parts. Over and above this, there are also castings for double choir, male voice choir with alto, and women's choir. For his transcriptions Gottwald prefers primarily slow works, the music of which already displays certain *cantabile* qualities. A calm speed is, however, not a precondition, and in his output we also find very lively arrangements, like the one of Beethoven's *Lied* op. 75 No 2 *Neue Liebe, neues Leben*, or that of the fifth movement of Mahler's third symphony, *Es sungen drei Engel*.

Pierre Boulez's question to Gottwald, "What are you instrumentating just now?"^[12], in reference to his vocal transcriptions, might at first glance be understood in a contradictory way, and he chose this wording because there is no relevant term for the choir. When transcribing an instrumental original into the vocal world, certain questions pose themselves that mirror *instrumentation* or *orchestration*. As the most natural of all "instruments", the voice possesses a large capacity for variety and an individuality, as well as a huge abundance of various tone colours. However, the voice also supplies one of the main difficulties when transcribing instrumental music for choir, namely the question of how to deal with its limited range of pitch. The situation is similar to that when transcribing a piano piece for orchestra, when e. g. we must ask ourselves whether a line is represented better by a violin or by a cello, or whether maybe the instruments can be combined. We must take note of the fact that extreme ranges like Contra-C and f^3 must be employed only rarely, as particularly the extreme height is very taxing even for professionally trained singers. In rehearsals this should be called upon only to a limited degree, as voices are subject to constant deterioration if strained too much. As far as the extreme low ranges go, there are only very few bass singers who can provide this convincingly and at an appropriate

volume.

According to his expressed aim of “leading the instrument “choir” forwards not only technically, but also musically”^[13], Gottwald, when shaping his parts, always takes great care that each individual choral part has some independence and autonomy. This adds colour to the choral texture, and everybody sings his or her “part with a certain independence, contributing to the whole”.^[14] In order to keep the sound colourful and also mobile, he pays attention “not, in passages with a collective [fortissimo] outburst, to supply a sonority note-against-note, but to give the sound a specific colouring by movement in the middle parts”.^[15] Occasionally Gottwald also makes use of certain special effects, in order to make up for the comparative paucity of overtones of the human voice^[16], as in the vocal transcription of Ravel’s *Soupir*, in which he has the tenors whistle the final chord two octaves lower, so that it sounds as if sung in a high falsetto. This sort of special effect is, however, more the exception than the rule. A practice more regularly employed consists of structurally providing the series of overtones, in order to allow low basic notes to appear as combination notes. Gottwald developed this technique further and writes, e g in his arrangement of Messiaen’s *Louange à l’Éternité de Jésus*, chords in their second inversions, consisting of the 2nd, 3rd and 4th overtone, in order to let the tonic appear as a combination note.

Adding Texts

As far as the selection of texts goes, Gottwald takes care to select these as to suit the character of the music, and with them, he tries to offer a new approach to the music. In his choices he does not restrict himself totally to single texts, but he is quite happy to combine these with other literary

sources. For example, when arranging Mahler's *Urlicht*, by adding to the textless, chorale-like start two lines from a poem by Annette von Droste-Hülshoff "Selig sind, die Trauer leiden. Und ihr Brot mit Tränen tränken" [Blessed are those who sorrow. And who soak their bread with tears] Gottwald shapes an entrance to the music and to the text from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* [The Boy's Horn of Wonder: a landmark collection of German poetry from the early 1800s, poems from which have been set by numerous composers, including Mahler – translator]. With this texting Gottwald opens up further levels which are connected to the music and to the text from the *Wunderhorn*. He also justifies this with the formal bracket thus created, consisting of "Selig sind ... " and " ... selig Leben" ["blessed are" and " ... blessed life"].^[17] A further example of a successful texting is the one for the *Adagietto* from Mahler's fifth symphony, which was texted with the poem *Im Abendrot* [In the Red Sunset] by Joseph von Eichendorff.

Performance Practice

When considering the huge technical and musical challenges of Gottwald's transcriptions, we must ask ourselves what a group of musicians has to be able to offer in order to perform these transcriptions. Asking the conductors Frieder Bernius, Michael Alber and Manfred Schreier led to the conclusion that the works can indeed be sung by a semi-professional choir. However, apart from the extreme ranges, the ability of a voice to sing solo within a highly polyphonic texture is very important. In the usually very long pieces, there are often extended phrases in which the breath of a professional singer lasts longer than that of an amateur. Given these preconditions, essential for a performance of quality, the vocal transcriptions are not immediately suitable for purely amateur choirs. Disregarding the precise constitution of the

ensemble and the training of the individual singers, Professor Frieder Bernius, director of the Stuttgart Chamber Choir, describes the conditions a choir must fulfil in a very pithy manner: “The ensemble must know a thing or two about singing. It can’t be done without singing technique”.

The past and the future

Clytus Gottwald is a universal musician who, alongside music, has always been interested in its backgrounds, as well as in musicological, theological and sociological topics. During his many years of activity he occupied himself with the entire range of vocal music, starting from the Renaissance right to numerous first performances of contemporary works with the *Schola Cantorum Stuttgart*, under his direction. With his transcriptions he has more or less created a new genre in choral literature and enabled the choral music scene to enter into an area of the 19th and 20th century, without which there would otherwise not have been any adequate literature with the sound language of the late Romantic period and of Impressionism, at such a challenging level. It remains to be hoped that even more choirs will dare tackle these works, in order to grant an even larger audience access to this varied sound world. Whatever: whether we are singers, choir directors or composers, we should take Clytus Gottwald’s awareness of the combination of tradition, with an insatiable curiosity and the courage to explore sound worlds hitherto unknown, as an example.



© Beate Armbruster

Sebastian Herrmann lives in Stuttgart, working as choir conductor and singer. He is the artistic director of the choir of the University Stuttgart-Hohenheim, of the Oberaspach Chamber Choir, and musical assistant to the Stuttgart Boys' Choir collegium iuvenum. Further engagements as a choir conductor led him i. a. to the Young Opera of Stuttgart State Opera. He initially studied church music at the University of Church Music Tübingen and is currently continuing his training within a master's course in choral conducting at the State University of Music Trossingen, with Professor Michael Alber. Over and above that he is on a course at the State University of Music and Performing Arts Stuttgart leading to qualification as a music teacher in secondary schools. As a tenor he sings in a number of choirs like the Stuttgart Chamber Choir and the German Federal Youth Choir. He also pulls his weight as a member of the Federal Special Committee Workshop of the Future within the German Music Council.
www.sebastianherrmann.org

Translated from German by Irene Auerbach, UK

[1] Liska, Ewald and Aurbacher, Hanna (editors), *Hommage à Clytus Gottwald. Erinnerungen, Briefe, Kompositionen zum 80. Geburtstag*, Carus-Verlag, Stuttgart 2005, p. 61

[2] Gottwald, Clytus, "Transkriptionen als neue Chormusik", in: Günter Graulich. *Chorleiter und Musikverleger. Festschrift*

zum 90. Geburtstag, edited by Marja von Barga, Johannes Graulich, Barbara Mohn, Hans Ryschawy and Uwe Wolf, Carus-Verlag, Stuttgart 2016, p. 25

[3] Gottwald, Clytus, *Hörgeschichte der Chormusik im 20. Jahrhundert*, Carus-Verlag, Stuttgart 2009, p. 35

[4] *ibid.*

[5] Gottwald, Clytus, "Transkriptionen als neue Chormusik", p. 25

[6] Gottwald, Clytus, *Hörgeschichte*. p. 35

[7] Gottwald, Clytus, Interview in the CD booklet for *Clytus Gottwald. Alma and Gustav Mahler, SWR Vokalensemble, Marcus Creed*, Carus-Verlag 83.370/00, Stuttgart 2012

[8] see Gottwald, Clytus, CD booklet for *Clytus Gottwald. Alma and Gustav Mahler*.

[9] Gottwald, Clytus, *Hörgeschichte*, p. 35

[10] Gottwald, Clytus, *Rückblick auf den Fortschritt. Eine Autobiographie*, Carus-Verlag, Stuttgart 2009, p. 68

[11] Gottwald, Clytus, "Transkriptionen als neue Chormusik", p. 25

[12] Gottwald, Clytus, *Hörgeschichte*, p. 35

[13] Gottwald, Clytus, *Hörgeschichte*, p. 35

[14] Gottwald, Clytus, "Transkriptionen als neue Chormusik", p. 26

[15] *ibid.*

[16] see Gottwald, Clytus, Introduction in the CD booklet for *Clytus Gottwald. Vocal arrangements, ChamberChoir Saarbrücken, Georg Grün*, Carus-Verlag 83.182, Stuttgart 2005

[17] see Gottwald, Clytus, Further Remarks to *Urlicht*, choral score, Carus-Verlag, Stuttgart 2009

Im Abendrot

Georg Meißner (1860-1941)
 von J. Hubert Vogeler
 Musikverlag C. F. Peters, Leipzig 1900
 First Edition by Schott Music, 1977

Solo Singers **4 Voices (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass)**

Soprano

Alto

Tenor

Bass

Functions for additional voices

Wir sind dankbar, dankbar sind wir dir, dankbar sind wir dir, dankbar sind wir dir.

