

# Sheet music review: *The Language of Song*

reviewed by Ghislaine Morgan

## The Language of Song

Ed Nicola-Jane Kemp & Heidi Pegler

High: ISBN 0-571-53075-3

Medium: ISBN 0-571-53076-1

Low: ISBN 0-571-53077-1

Faber, £16.95 each



*The Language of Song* advanced volumes for high, medium and low voices are the latest in the series aimed at developing the skills needed to sing in a foreign language. Each volume comprises a slightly different collection of 24–26 classical songs in French, German, Italian and Russian, eight songs being common to all three. Each comes with two CDs. They are well presented by Faber apart from the inconvenience of page turns in the middle of some pieces set on two pages and a confusing misprint of one of the French nasalised vowel symbols in the phonetic pronunciation guides.

Most of these songs appear in other compilations already; the vast majority are listed on the ABRSM or Trinity Guildhall Grade 8 syllabuses, with a few Grade 6, 7 and Diploma pieces included. Intended for the ‘young student singer’, established singing teachers will already own most of these popular gems. Further editions will no doubt broaden the repertoire.

In my opinion girls are served better than boys by these compilations, and more mature voices rather than light. It is difficult to meet the different needs of teenage and diploma students, developing girls’ voices and those of young tenors and basses all in one publication. All three volumes include many pieces which demand control over wide vocal ranges for young singers, weighty emotive singing, and a certain experience of life to do justice to serious texts, perhaps issues for discussion with those who set examination repertoire. In each volume there are only two to four pieces of the limited range of a ninth or less. I feel that far more are needed, especially in the low volume, published in keys easy for young basses. Young counter tenors may then be able to dip into this volume also. The low volume does not meet the needs of young low singers, with all of the songs needing D’ or E’ at least and a couple F’s and G’s. Many young tenors would have difficulty negotiating the altitude of some of the songs in the high volume and the depth of many in the medium.

In the French selection Fauré is well represented, ‘Les roses d’Ispahan’ being the only song appearing in all volumes. ‘Les filles de Cadix’ by Viardot (high and medium), and ‘Chanson d’avril by Bizet’ (medium) are delightful songs from the new ABRSM syllabus, the former with a real Spanish flavour. The others range from ‘Villanelle’ by Berlioz and ‘Le colibri’ by Chausson (both high) to the challenging demands of ‘Mandoline’ (high and

medium) and ‘La grotte’ (low) both by Debussy, and ‘Chanson triste’ (high and medium) by Duparc.

Among the German favourites are ‘Du bist die Ruh’ by Schubert, ‘Widmung’ by Schumann and ‘Verborgtheit’ by Wolf (all volumes). Light relief is provided by ‘Wer hat dies Liedlein erdacht?’ by Mahler (medium) and drama by ‘Unglückliche Liebe/Als Luise die Briefe ihres ungetreuen Liebhabers verbrannte’ by Mozart (high), a new piece on the ABRSM syllabus. A selection of Brahms songs, ‘Die Nacht’ (high) and ‘Traum durch die Dämmerung’ (medium) by Strauss provide the challenges for the more mature singer.

The only early music, very useful for young voices, is found in the Italian selection, all refreshingly arranged with optional ornaments by Heidi Pegler. For example the much loved ‘O del mio dolce ardor’ by Gluck (all volumes) is complemented by new pieces from the ABRSM syllabus: ‘Poveri affetti’ by Vivaldi (medium) and ‘Teco si’ by Vinci (low). The 19th century ‘bel canto school’ is represented by the expressive ‘Per pietà’ (high) and a charming coloratura song ‘Il fervido’ (medium) both by Bellini, songs by Donizetti, and the yodelling ‘La pastorella’ by Rossini (high). The selection is completed by weighty representatives of the Romantic school: ‘Deh, pietoso’ by Verdi (low), and one new to the ABRSM syllabus – ‘Mattinata’ by Leoncavallo (all volumes) with its large range of two octaves.

The Russian songs have an immediate appeal and wide sweeping romantic phrases with obvious direction, leaving the singer free to focus on unfamiliar texts in the least commonly-known language of the four. The short, emotive phrases of the Tchaikovsky are well within the capacity of young singers; their range however is demanding and provides challenges in all three volumes. ‘Spring Waters’ by Rachmaninov is the only really high song in the high volume and being typical of his huge, emotionally intense style, is only suitable for very mature voices with accomplished pianists. ‘The soldier’s wife’ (medium) is less strenuous. The latter together with ‘None but the lonely’ (high, medium and low), ‘Believe it not’ (high and low), ‘At the ball’ (low) all by Tchaikovsky are all on the new ABRSM syllabus. ‘Oh stay my love’ by Rachmaninov and ‘The stars look tenderly upon us’ by Tchaikovsky are the only songs in these volumes that do not appear on any syllabus.

The Russian language is the most difficult to grasp, there being only the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) guide and no familiar, if inaccurate, transliteration. By way of compensation, Ludmilla Andrew’s recitation is slow. For information about the changing use of French liaisons, as in the Russian notes, further

sources could have been recommended, for example *The Interpretation of French Song* by Pierre Bernac. The recitations generally clarify many details in the languages, two of the vocal consultants reciting the text as the underlay appears in the music. Franziska Roth, the German coach, recites in the exact rhythm of the song (a most helpful way for students to hear the text), using expressive phrasing as if she were actually singing; the various moods of the songs are communicated instantly. In future recordings perhaps all of the language consultants could do this. It clarifies certain issues such as the singing of syllables normally silent in spoken French, and the balancing of conflicting textural and musical stresses. It makes it much easier to fit the text to the melody and the accompaniment, and to benefit fully from silently mouthing the words to the recorded texts. All the recitations establish the basic principles of the languages and capture their different flavours in a way that should inspire.

The very practical format of these books has been used before, the difference here being the variety of languages covered in one publication. Each piece is supported with notes on context, an idiomatic translation and phonetic pronunciation, the IPA for each language being provided, a literal word-for-word English translation underneath the text in the manuscript, which is exactly where singers need it most, a recitation of the text, and a recording of the accompaniment. However, the editorial introduction suggests only limited ways of mastering the text before adding the rhythm and the melody, an opportunity being missed to provide extra ideas for establishing new automatic muscular memory vital for fluency of delivery, for example students’ recordings, ‘mirening’ (a term used to describe the open-mouthed humming of a tune while chewing to keep the jaw loose, and also open-mouthed humming of a tune while miming the words. It’s used to develop independence of the jaw from the control of pitch and breathing, as the jaw often tightens to help both, the diction becoming unclear as a result), Brain Gym, or physical exercises to help ‘feel’ the languages.

A lot of work has gone into compiling these volumes. Hopefully more are in preparation, which with certain improvements and careful song choices will realise thoroughly the potential of this much-needed series. I am sure that it will continue to inspire a love of foreign song and the desire to sing it.

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