

Choral music and false consciousness

By Henrik Palsmar

Introductory lecture for a concert given by the Esrum-Hellerup Choir at the Theodor W. Adorno Centenary Conference at the Danish University of Education on October 22nd 2003.

The programme consisted of

Arnold Schönberg:

*Es gingen zwei Gespielen gut
Der Mai tritt ein mit Freuden*
from *Drei Volkslieder*, op. 49

Robert Schumann:

Romanzen und Balladen op. 67 & 75

Kurt Weil:

Lasst euch nicht verführen
from the opera *Mahagonny*

The ideology of choral singing

Nothing is harmless anymore. This realization from *Minima moralia* also applies to choral music. In 1968 Adorno published a short newspaper paragraph entitled *Choral music and false consciousness*¹, in which he reflects on the ideological aspects of choral singing. Adorno is not talking of the political workers choral societies that play only a marginal role today but of the wide spread bourgeois choral societies like the one represented here tonight where amateurs get together for the pure fun of singing. This may seem harmless enough but, since it often has the character of an escapist hobby, it is in fact a form of opium for the people. In Adorno's youth many texts from the choral repertory proclaimed nationalistic ideologies. For the most part this is no longer the case, and most choral societies are in their self-knowledge apolitical, but because of that they take part in the general cultural depoliticization simply because they divert people from their real interests.

The mere sound of a chorus has an illusory character, Adorno says; it seems to create a well-ordered, sound and secure world in the midst of the antagonistic reality. It lets the singers believe that they are raised to a state of understanding and harmony from man to man which actually does

¹ *Chormusik und falsches Bewußtsein*, Gesammelte Schriften 18, 813

not exist in the present society. The fun and entertainment of an evening with the choir creates artificial warmth.

Adorno's relationship towards singing was ambiguous. On the one hand he shared the romanticist E.T.A. Hoffman's view of the Beethovenian autonomous instrumental music as the purest form of art. On the other hand his own compositional oeuvre consists mostly of 'lieder' and his most ambitious work – which admittedly remained for the most part unrealised - was a 'Singspiel' on Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. Singing was part of his family background - his mother had been a professional singer - but he did not think that singing was a natural human instinct. He relates that he found it very embarrassing when his father encouraged his mother and his aunt, an accomplished pianist, to sing to the family.

In his article on music education he concedes that singing is capable of every spiritualization and differentiation imaginable, but like Thomas Mann's fictitious composer Adrian Leverkühn he is critical of the 'heat of the stables', the un-spiritualised, animalistic warmth connected with the human voice. He traces the popularity of singing to the fact that whereas to the instrumentalist there is obviously an object – the instrument - between the musical conception and its realisation to the singer there seems to be none. Singing seems to be an unmediated activity, a spontaneous attitude that can restore some of that state of being a subject that is cut off in the present society. He calls an educational strategy which ignores this understandable urge towards spontaneity foolish. To a critical analysis singing on the other hand turns out to be just as mediated as all other human activity. In art music the singing voice is as much a means or a tool as a violin and requires the most sophisticated technical development. The indisputable differences between the trained voice and an instrument are, he claims, something extremely delicate that eludes definition.

To the professional singer the vocal technique often becomes a goal in itself rather than the means to interpret vocal works of art. Likewise the repertory of most choral societies shows that choral works usually are appreciated more as an excuse for using one's voice rather than as objects of artistic interpretation.

Adorno also criticizes the quality of the works in the standard repertory of most choirs. Generally they do not live up to emphatic compositional criteria. They exploit the achievements of musical romanticism in a sentimental idiom of calculated effects only in order to satisfy the demands of petty bourgeois entertainment. His description of the repertory is outdated - very few choral societies today limit themselves to artificial folksongs and folksong arrangements

from the 19th century. But even though most contemporary conductors insist on putting their singers through the trials of performing contemporary choral pieces, the majority of these new pieces are kept in only moderately modern styles which Adorno made it his lifelong task to criticize as being reactionary both technically and socially. That truly modern works are normally absent from the programmes of amateur choral societies is understandable given the extreme difficulties of performing radically modern vocal works. The present choir must admit that the difficulties of atonal works by Schönberg or György Ligeti - this year's recipient of the Adorno Prize of the city of Frankfurt - are far beyond us.

Adorno of course understood this. But he says that the legitimacy of choral music today - at whatever level of difficulty - depends on whether one succeeds in working against the net weight of choral sound and social situation with critical consciousness and productive ability. Through its almost automatic gesture, through second hand feeling, forced exaltation and collective complacency, normal choral music belongs to false consciousness and threatens to reproduce it.

Tonight's programme has been put together in an attempt to show that choral music - even relatively traditional music like Robert Schumann's - can be more than false consciousness even though it takes its departure from folk songs.

Schönberg's Volkslieder

As was to be expected Adorno had a high opinion of Schönberg's choral music, both his original compositions and his arrangements. Among the latter are the 3 Folksongs opus 49. In 1928 Schönberg contributed to a mixed publication of folksong arrangements with 4 folk song settings for voice and piano. In 1948 he reworked 3 of these, setting them for mixed chorus a cappella. Like his *Suite in old style* for string orchestra and the *Variations for wind orchestra* these folksongs are written with an outspoken educational purpose, which Schönberg formulated in an introduction to the suite in his usual sarcastic manner: Through these pieces, he said, *the students should be prepared for modern playing techniques* (and singing ditto, we may add) *in a harmonic language, which leads to modern feelings without prematurely exposing them to harm from "the poison of atonality"*. By demonstrating *modern compositional techniques, counterpoint and phrasing* they should help the student acquire the understanding that other things may be regarded as melody and music, that one need not be content with *the primitive symmetrical structure, the lack*

of variation and deficient development, which make up the pleasures of the mediocrity of all nations and people.

Schönberg's folk song settings take their model from Brahms but, although they are of medium difficulty and kept in a tonal idiom, they do demonstrate all of the intricacies of Schönberg's ripe compositional technique.

The second *Der Mai tritt ein mit Freuden* is conventional in that it treats all four stanzas identically with the melody in the upper voice. But the accompanying parts are only an accompaniment by name. They make up an intricate polyphonic structure, which so to speak brushes the melody the wrong way. Neither in themselves nor together with the melody do the parts form a harmonious whole in which the singer or listener may comfortably enjoy the pleasures of spring and love which are extolled in the text. In stead, the antagonisms in the setting seem to point to the fact that the harmony of love and spring and choral singing is not to be had at present. But there is of course a traditional aspect of the tonal idiom. The three first stanzas end on a minor triad, but the last ends in the major. This is hardly revolutionary, but it does shed a new light on the nostalgic expression of tonality. In the last stanza the subject of the text declares her (or his) love, the rose of her heart, to be the epitome of spring; he is all the flowers of nature, including a forget-me-not. It is exactly on the last syllable of forget-me-not that Schönberg makes the traditional swing into the major. A little musical figure that says a lot about his relationship to the tonal idiom he had abandoned 20 years earlier.

The first song makes this point even more directly: The melody is in a modal tonality and the first two stanzas are set in a polyphonic, somewhat archaic modal idiom. As the action gathers momentum in the following stanzas, the harmonies become more and more expressedly major-minor tonal. And in the last stanza the phrase *Sieh da mein feins brauns Mägdelein*, look my fine, brown maiden, ends on a diminished seventh chord. To both Schönberg and Adorno this chord was a symbol of the expressive and structural powers of tonality, which had been irretrievably lost. Schönberg in his *Treaty on harmony* (1911), Ernst Bloch in his *Geist der Utopie* (1918) and Adorno in *The Philosophy of new music* (1941) stated that it was impossible to use this chord any more. In Thomas Mann's novel *Dr. Faustus* the Devil himself laid claim to this observation. Yet here it is, the dead chord, as a picture of the lovely maiden. It is not there by chance but set as an ironic comment that surprises attentive singers and listeners alike. It is an emphatic breach of style and works as a kind of 'Verfremdungs'-effect. I will not speculate more precisely about what it means, but after it comes the last sentence of the song, which goes: I will never turn away from you.

Schumann's Romances and Ballads

1848 and 49 were the years of failed revolutions in Germany and France and according to Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* the years when the moment of turning philosophy into reality was missed. In 1848 Robert Schumann founded a choral society in Dresden. The repertory of the society consisted chiefly of larger choral works with orchestra, like Schumann's oratorio *Das Paradies und die Peri*, Bach's *St. John's Passion* and Handel's *Jephtah*. Contemporary a cappella choral music hardly ever appeared in the concert programmes. At this time it was not regarded as a serious form of artistic expression but was cultivated chiefly for social reasons. The editor of the new edition of Schumann's *Romances and Ballads* conjectures that he wrote them in order to supply his singers with material to sing at social gatherings. Indeed the songs were not performed in public during Schumann's lifetime, they were only sung at rehearsals.

Schumann published four instalments of *Romances and Ballads*, in addition to opus 67 and 75 opus 145 and 146. This has led to the general notion that they all form a large repertoire from which single pieces may be picked at random. This is a pity, because many of them make little sense when performed separately, while on the other hand the songs of op. 67 and 75 actually form a close-knit cycle, which as one of the very few collections of a cappella choral works measure up to the great tradition of 'Lieder'-cycles represented in Schubert's *Winterreise* and *Die schöne Müllerin* and Schumann's own *Dichterliebe* and *Liederkreis* op. 39.

In the mid 1840ies Schumann came to revise the concepts of his art. He became severely critical of his own earlier works, which he considered to be too obscure, subjective, or egocentric. He revised several of his piano works in a way that most commentators find ruin their most original traits, but which Schumann made because he wanted to give them greater clarity. In his new approach he wanted his music to be more popular, to be, as he said, understandable to both citizen and peasant. With his fellow-townsmen Richard Wagner he shared the opinion that art should be morally edifying and thus lead mankind to a higher state; this was of course an echo of Schiller's ideas of the aesthetic education of mankind but more directly an artistic reply to the contemporary national-liberal movements with their ideas of realizing political freedom for the people. To achieve this music should speak in the 'tone' of the people. Schumann therefore turned from the introvert and highly subjective genres of lyrical piano music and solo song to the more extrovert and popular of orchestral and choral music.

From Herder came the notion that popular poetry was a main source of art, and that especially the poetic genre of the ballad was the highest expression of the popular spirit. Goethe called the ballad *the living original egg of poetry*. In the 1830ies and 40ies the ballad became one of the central genres of bourgeois-liberal singing and Schumann was therefore in full accordance with his time when he composed his choral ballads.

A contemporary review praised Schumann for having found an expression of a national, German popular tone in these works, and doubtless they must be heard as political statements, although they are not as unequivocal as his *3 Songs of Freedom* for male chorus from 1848. The male choral societies, one of which Schumann led in the late 40ies, were to a high degree a forum for the expression of liberal and to a certain extent even rebellious views, whereas the mixed choral societies were less outwardly political.

Schumann's choral works are generally not highly regarded. They are simpler in style than his earlier solo songs, the harmonies are less daring, they make almost no use of polyphony and thematic-motivic development, they are 'just' homophonic 4-part settings of simple melodies. This is seen as concessions to their political function and to the low technical abilities of amateur singers, all of which lessen their artistic value. Schumann himself did not institute a tradition of performing them as a cycle, - at their first public performances in the 1860ies they were sung separately, and this has not added to their appreciation.

But Schumann himself thought highly of his romances and ballads: *I have with passion begun to write a collection of ballads for a choir; something that, I believe, does not yet exist. It seems to me that through this kind of treatment the essence of the ballad is expressed more effectually than through single voices*. This quotation from one of his letters might be construed as evidence that he did actually conceive the *Romances and Ballads* as an artistic whole. He certainly took meticulous care in selecting the texts. At the outset he had planned a collection of 16 songs, which were gradually reduced to the published 10. And from the list he wrote on his manuscript we can see that he changed his mind about which texts to include several times. They are all major texts by major poets, Goethe, Mörike, Chamisso and Eichendorff. The exceptions are the two texts by Robert Burns, which stand out against the others and are included for obvious reasons of romantic irony.

If Schumann did not make use of his rich polyphonic technique in these songs, he used all the more energy on achieving a perfect declamation of the texts. His ballads, he said, should not only be written in an uncomplicated, natural style, they should express the texts through

the power of melody and rhythm. The 4th song *Ungewitter* in particular is a masterpiece of declamation through quick and subtle changes of rhythm and tempo that are by no means easy to execute. Just ask the singers.

Although Schumann is generally thought to be a poor orchestrator, he had a highly developed sense of the colour of sound, which is exploited very imaginatively here in the limited medium of an a cappella choir. One particular that is often noted is his use of octave doublings between male and female voices. In the first song for instance, a solo tenor is doubled an octave above by the sopranos. This technique - which is at odds with the normal rules of good choral setting - is Schumann's way of underscoring the collective expression of the song, it adds to the objectivity of the actions narrated and is thus a specific aspect of Schumann's ballad tone. At the same time it gives a new and unprecedented colour to the sound picture, which Schumann exploits with great subtlety. In the second part of the last song, a lamento worthy of Gustav Mahler, the tenors and basses form a drone that depicts the tolling of the funeral bells. To this accompaniment the alto sings a simple melody that is echoed at the octave by the sopranos. This then represents the objective narration - as opposed to the subjective expression - of the sorrow of the song's protagonist. The subjective expression is laid in a 5th part which Schumann pushes in between the two unison parts. This 5th part contains all the daring dissonances of the piece, and it represents both the subjective expression of the girl in the song and the artist's reflection of it. In this way three subjects express themselves in the song: The girl, the objective narrator of the tale, and the reflecting artist. And all to the accompaniment of the bells. I know of few composers who with such small means have realized so many different layers in a choral composition.

That the harmonies are generally simpler in these choral works than in his song cycles with piano is indisputably a concession to the abilities of the amateur singers: Schumann wrote: *In complex ensembles the quick, artistically woven, often enharmonic change of chords can for the most part be used. But the choir does not want too many sharps and flats. Then it sings unwillingly and even out of tune.* But the ten songs also form a cycle in that they are all related to the key of a minor, which is the key of both the first and last song and thereby frames the collection. And Schumann does not refrain from harsh dissonant chords when the expression calls for them. The 8th song tells of a hunter who watches the funeral of his beloved from afar. He plays *eine irre Weise* on his horn, a melody so mad as to tear the heart apart. Schumann does not depict this melody by imitating a horn idiom. Instead he paints the madness through a series of rocking, dissonant chords that may be analysed as an e flat major seventh chord with a diminished ninth. The dissonant notes

belong to the top part, but they are not notated as f-flat and d-flat as they could and should if they were indeed the ninth and seventh of the e-flat chord. They are notated as e and c-sharp as if they belonged to a different chord, probably A major. In a way this passage is bitonal as a musical picture of the ripping apart of the heart. This ripping is underscored when on the syllable *ent-zwei*, a-part, the tenors go from e-flat to e natural thus leaving the e-flat chord and joining the a-major of the top part and thereby tearing the sound picture even more in two. This passage is extremely difficult to sing in tune and it is quite as harmonically expressive, daring and ambiguous as anything found in Schumann's earlier individualistic works.

As they stand, the texts of the romances and ballads of op. 67 and 75 all have a common theme: love and death, and they mark out a progression from a secure world of fulfilled love to a world of endless catastrophe and no love at all. In the first song, Goethe's *Der König in Thule*, we hear of the old king who clings to the golden cup that his beloved gave him as she died. He divides his belongings between his heirs but the cup he throws into the sea, and having seen it sink out of sight, he dies. This is a scene from the old, whole, safe world of once upon a time. The king dies naturally of old age in contentment and in memory of a love fulfilled. The second song, Mörikes *Schön Rohtraut*, also belongs to the old world. It tells how the pageboy gets one kiss from the fresh and boyish princess and is content. I will not venture into an interpretation of the incalculable nut of Goethe's *Heidenröslein*. Once one leaves the trivial boys-will-be-boys-interpretation, the text is deeply disturbing especially when one reflects the meaningless breaking of the rose in connection with the cycle's overall theme of love and death.

The fourth song is shocking. It came in for criticism at the time of its publication; a reviewer felt it necessary to remind the composer *that he should respect the limits which nature has set for the execution of a song with several parts*. He would not say that Schumann had overstepped the boundaries in this song, but *he was only a hair's breadth away from doing so*. Indeed the song is of an extremely violent expression and very exhausting to execute. Schumann spares neither singers nor listeners in his depiction of the gathering storm. The text by the strange and socially committed poet Adelbert von Chamisso again tells of an old king. But he is no longer content or feeling safe. He looks sombrely out from his castle at the upcoming storm. When his mistress tucks his sleeve (composed ever so charmingly by Schumann) and whispers: what's the matter, don't you love me anymore? he answers: Go away with your love and passion. Look at the tempest. I am no longer the ruler; I am the scared and impotent son of the raging times. Let go of love and passion, the tempest is coming up with violence of storm.

The storm that blows away kings, castles, fairy tales, love, passion and all the attributes of the old, safe world is the new dynamic of the industrial, capitalist society, which was developing rapidly in the 1830ies and 40ies in Germany. It not only rocked the established structures of society but also threatened peasants, craftsmen, and even more prosperous citizens with proletarianization. The result was a widespread feeling of loss and insecurity. A member of Schumann's choir later recalled the rehearsals of his *Scenes from Goethe's Faust*. 'At the study of this wonderful music we forgot the dark outside world', she said. This statement is a key to the understanding of the function of choral societies. It is exactly as Adorno claimed a place where you take refuge from the antagonisms of reality and imagine that the world is still whole and safe and harmonious. Schumann agreed with a critic mind like Heinrich Heine that the modern world was *zerrissen*, torn apart, but he insisted that in art the antagonisms could be made transparent and reconciled. The interesting thing is then that he at the core of this song cycle, which was written so much in accordance with the artistic-political ideas of his time, set a text, which by no means soothes or reconciles reality, but reflects and gives expression to the fears of the individual in the face of overwhelming social change. *Ungewitter* is not a song for those who wish to hide away from worldly troubles.

After this dramatic farewell to love and harmony the 5th song *John Anderson* with its praise of bourgeois matrimonial love seems like sarcasm. The reviewer mentioned earlier was very dissatisfied with the extremely simple setting that he found could only satisfy the most unenlightened circle of music lovers. He obviously did not hear it as a comment on the former song. After the tragic d-minor - the key of Mozarts Don Giovanni - follows the light and unpretentious setting in mild G major, which like an ironic smile comforts the old loving couple who even in the face of death have not grasped the depth of the trouble.

Then a sort of rebellion follows. The folk song *Schnitter Tod*, The Grim Reaper, tells us that all living things, here symbolised by flowers, must die, so beware, little flower. The last stanza then says that we do not have to fear death, because we know that we shall bloom eternally in the heavenly garden. Two things seem to have interested Schumann in this text: the depiction of the hewing schythe, which dominates the first four stanzas, and the call to defiance against death in the last stanza. He does not paint out the joys of the heavenly garden in any kind of detail, thus heeding the taboo on depicting utopia that Adorno held to be a central to art and philosophy. But one suspects that Schumann really is not interested in Paradise at this point. What concerns him is the defiance. Not that he depicts that. He just sets the word *Trotz*, defiance, apart from the rest of

the text and has it wailed out in a long chord in double forte. This is the most political moment of the cycle, a call to resistance not only against the dark times of *Ungewitter* but also against the resignation in the bourgeois family of the *John Anderson* song.

The 7th song is a text, which Schumann had set earlier in *Liederkreis* op. 39. There are many similarities of idiom between the two settings. The second stanza of the choral version is not by Eichendorff but probably by Schumann himself and probably added to make an unambiguous connection between the text and the cycle's overall theme. The scene with the pale bride married against her will and the boisterous hunting party turns Eichendorff's vague fears and loneliness into a more concrete lament over the impossibility of love in bourgeois society.

The 8th song of which I have already talked in some detail also laments a disappearing love. The ninth song on the other hand puts love at risk. A girl foolishly sends her young lover off to war to show off his Davy Crocket cap. She excites him to idiotic bravado by telling him that the more scars he gets the more she will love him. The setting is the simplest possible, another piece of romantic irony meaningful only when heard in contrast to the heartbreaking sadness of the song that went before.

In the last song, a folk song in a refined version by Herder, we meet the result of the girl's thoughtless warmongery. Another girl gets up early and goes into the woods where she comes upon a wounded young man. He bleeds to death before they can get acquainted. In the second part of the song the girl then sings out her sorrow over her dead lover. There is no longer any thought of a fulfilled or consummated love as in the first two songs, in this song the girl didn't even get to know the guy before he was gone. Where shall I find men to carry my lover to the grave? she asks. How long shall I bear sorrow? Until all waters come together, she answers herself. But as this will never happen, so her sorrow will have no end. And to underscore the endless sorrow Schumann asks that the first part of the song be given da capo. The catastrophic end of love is itself without end; it begins over and over again.

I have talked about the many layers of this lamento. Here I should like to point out a few other aspects. At the words *zu Grabe tragn*, carry to the grave, the music comes to a halt on a suspended dissonant chord. This dissonance is not dissolved in the traditional way. Instead the tension is carried on in new dissonances until Schumann symbolizes the coming together of the waters by having the voices come together in perfect unison. At the word *nicht*, not, the parts again spread out in a dissonant chord to symbolise that the waters do not, in fact, come together. This way of not dissolving the dissonances in consonances but only in new dissonances and eventually in

harmonically neutral unison part leading, was to become a characteristic trait of the harmony of the late operas of Wagner and later lead to the total emancipation of the dissonance in Schönberg's atonal music. So we may say that Schumann in these allegedly simple part songs was technically far ahead of his time.

In the *Nach Auschwitz*-section of the *Negative Dialectics* Adorno writes: *The perennial suffering has the same right to express itself, as the tortured man has to roar.* This to Adorno is the legitimacy of art. Schumann's *Liederkreis* op. 39 ends with consummated love. The last jubilant song *Frühlingsnacht*, Spring Night, extols the fact that 'she is yours, she is yours'. *Dichterliebe* ends in resignation and has an epilogue where the poet speaks and to some extent comforts. In the *Romances and Ballads* there is no affirmative ending. The last song is a shocking expression of perennial suffering.

The cycle of op. 67 and 75 is a negation of Schumann's own artistic views. In 1828 he wrote: *Pains in life are like dissonances in music: they have great attraction, but one longs for their dissolution.* In these songs neither pains nor dissonances are permanently dissolved or reconciled. They were written for exactly that social function of choral music that Adorno criticized: for petty bourgeois entertainment and one should expect them to be deeply ideological. But like all great art they have, as Adorno would say, denounced their social contract. They are neither entertaining nor edifying but simply true! And that is deeply disturbing. Enjoy!

(At this point the works by Schönberg and Schumann were performed)

Epilogue

Anyone who criticizes something popular becomes the object of a certain contrary criticism: If you, as Adorno did, go out to say that hit parade music is shit, few people will counter this with a defence of its quality, but many will say: People like it, and who are you to take away from them something which gives them happiness and pleasure. Adorno met this argument many times, and already in the section on the cultural industry of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* he and Horkheimer formulated a riposte, which with slight changes he repeats in the article on *Choral music and false consciousness*: *That you must not take that away from people which gives them pleasure, has always belonged to the proverbs of exactly those who make their living from taking it away from people.* Meaning that society which refuses people a fulfilled, good and happy life and sells them

cultural surrogates instead to keep them happy and able to work. The argument itself therefore is a piece of ideology. To be critical of the system of choral societies although it gives pleasure to many people, Adorno concludes, shows more confidence in the human possibilities of the choral singers than the cheap humanity, which wants to leave them as they are.

And now we should like to conclude this concert with the singing of a hymn. Please feel free to join us in a rendering of Bert Brecht's warning against seduction: *Lasst euch nicht verführen*, which Adorno in his lectures on the terminology of philosophy cited as the most beautiful poetic expression of materialistic philosophy he knew. Thank you.

Lasst euch nicht verführen!
Es gibt keine Wiederkehr.
Der Tag steht in den Türen;
Ihr könnt schon Nachtwind spüren:
Es kommt kein Morgen mehr.

Lasst euch nicht betrügen!
Das Leben wenig ist.
Schlürft es in schnellen Zügen!
Es wird euch nicht genügen
Wenn ihr es lassen müsst.

Lasst euch nicht vertrösten!
Ihr habt nicht zu viel Zeit!
Lasst Moder den Erlösten!
Das Leben ist am grössten:
Es steht nichts mehr bereit.

Lasst euch nicht verführen
Zu Fron und Ausgezehr!
Was kann euch Angst noch rühren?
Ihr sterbt mit allen Tieren
Und es kommt nichts nachher