

Classical songbooks open path to Mozart, Mendelssohn, Italian songs

by Nora Hamerman

26 Italian Songs and Arias

edited by John Glenn Paton
Alfred Publishing Co., Van Nuys, Calif., 1991
152 pages, paperbound, \$7.95 (medium-high,
medium-low)

24 Songs by Mendelssohn

edited by John Glenn Paton
Alfred Publishing Co., Van Nuys, Calif., 1992
96 pages, paperbound, \$9.95 (high, medium)

12 Songs by Mozart

edited by John Glenn Paton
Alfred Publishing Co., Van Nuys, Calif., 1992
72 pages, paperbound, \$8.95 (high, medium)

Over the past two years, John Glenn Paton, a veteran singing teacher who is now professor emeritus of the University of California at Berkeley, has brought out three new editions of the classic vocal repertoire through the Alfred music publishing company.

In 1991 this reviewer jumped for joy at seeing the first of these, *26 Italian Songs and Arias: An Authoritative Edition Based on Authentic Sources*. The reason was that for years I had been attempting, without success, to track down the original keys and original accompaniments to the popularly available versions of the 17th- and 18th-century Italian songs and arias that are so often taught to beginning voice students in versions that were shellacked with dubious dynamic and tempo markings and romantic, heavy piano accompaniments which clearly had nothing to do with the style desired by composers of the era of Scarlatti and Vivaldi.

Mr. Paton, it turned out, had spent more than 15 years researching in libraries all over Europe to produce his edition, and despite its flaws, some of which I will mention below, the

Alfred book provides the first versions widely available to the music-loving public which allow one to recapture the actual artistry of these beautiful, but often under-estimated works.

During 1992, Mr. Paton followed up with *12 Songs by Mozart and 24 Songs by Felix Mendelssohn and Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel*.

These "Vocal Masterworks" editions, each available in two keys, are well produced, easily readable scores, and in a tradition Alfred has already established in its piano scores, they distinguish between *Urtext* (exactly what was written by the composer, as it is determined from autograph manuscripts or the most reliable early printed versions) and editorial suggestions, by printing the latter in a light gray type (or in the case of suggested ornaments, in smaller notes). And they are all in a modest price range under \$10.

By now, the Paton editions span what academic musicologists call the "baroque," the "classical," and the "romantic" eras in music, as these categories are nonsensically but commonly applied to refer to fixed periods in time. In reality, most of the music in all three Paton books falls within the scope of the classical approach to art—that is, it adheres to notions of proportion and beauty which we trace all the way back to fifth century B.C. Athens.

The Italian songs

Since I have reviewed the *26 Italian Songs* in other locations, suffice it to quickly indicate here Paton's accomplishment. First he identified some of the well-known "ancient airs," like "Se tu m'ami, se sospiri," as mid- to late-19th-century forgeries of the 17th century style, while leaving a question mark over the ugly "Come raggio del sol," attributed without evidence to Antonio Caldara, a prolific operatic composer of the early 18th century. Second, he provided a page of text for each song which gives its context in the opera from which it was taken, a phonetic guide to pronunciation for English-speakers, literal word-for-word translations, and background information on the composer and the manuscripts which were consulted.

In each case he lists the original key, although oddly, he chose not always to print the piece in that key. In a couple of cases, his choice of a key one half-step lower than the original seems to reflect Paton's awareness of the fact that standard pitch in the 18th century was nearly a half-step lower than

today. In others, the decision seems more arbitrary.

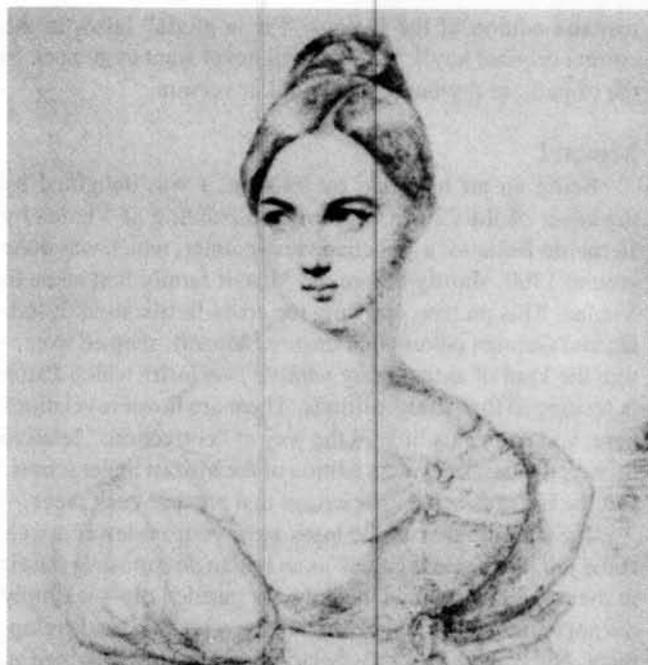
Indeed, all of Paton's new editions beg the question of the urgency of correcting modern trends in tuning. Starting in 1988, the Schiller Institute has campaigned internationally to restore the tuning fork to middle C at 256 Hz (yielding a concert A no higher than 432 Hz, slightly but significantly lower than the arbitrary modern pitch of A=440). This initiative, which was prompted by Lyndon LaRouche on the basis of restoring the lost unity between physical science and art, won the support of an impressive plurality of the world's top professional singers, and even reached the point of having a bill introduced into the Italian Parliament, modeled on an analogous initiative by Giuseppe Verdi in 1884.

Those of us who have tuned our keyboard instruments to that classical pitch, will probably stick to the old Schirmer edition for Caldara's "Alma del core," rather than Paton's transposition to A-flat (in his "medium high" book). Also, the familiar version, in this case, contains the original 16-measure instrumental introduction, which Paton unaccountably omits. On the other hand, it is very valuable to learn that in the original opera, *La Costanza in Amor Vince L'Inganno* of 1711, the aria was repeated with different text by an alto, in the key of D major, which is the key that Paton does use in his "medium low" book.

Some of my acquaintances have also complained that the Paton book's piano accompaniments are infuriatingly "unpianistic." No doubt, many of them can be improved; the most wildly unplayable for amateur pianists is the one for "O del mio dolce ardor" by Glück, which attempts to reproduce very rapid violin playing on the keyboard, and can't be brought off by most of us. I would say in Paton's defense that orchestral reductions are always a bugaboo, and that the "pianistic" accompaniments invented in the 19th century and printed in many familiar editions of these songs, are profoundly alien to the nature of the music itself. Perhaps one of the most legitimate laments for pianists in the Alfred editions, is that they achieve a very readable page at the expense of space, and that there are far too many page-turns as a result!

In the case of the Italian songs, the reason there can be different accompaniments at all, is that most of these composers did not write out a full keyboard score, unlike their later counterparts. They were either writing for a small orchestral ensemble, or in most cases, wrote only the vocal melody and a figured or unfigured bass line. This means that the composer left it to the keyboard performer (in the earlier pieces we are talking about lutes, harpsichords, clavichords, and organs; in the later ones, fortepianos, the "singing" ancestor to our modern pianos) to fill in appropriate harmonies, which he often indicated by numbers (hence, "figured bass"). In modern editions, an editor almost always fills these in ("realizes" the bass line), because pianists are no longer taught figured bass as a standard part of their training (see box, p. 54).

The redeeming virtue of Paton's editions in this regard is that the bass lines he gives are the real ones, and if you have



Fanny Mendelssohn at about 16, in a drawing by her future husband, Wilhelm Hensel, who became Court Painter to the King of Prussia. Her brother Felix was a gifted amateur artist; one of his watercolors is on the cover of "24 Songs."

the necessary skills, you can change the accompaniment to suit your own taste and the demands of the occasion (meaning the instrument you are playing, the type of voice of the singer, and the kind of obbligato instruments that may also be playing).

The greatest genius among the composers represented in Paton's *26 Italian Songs* is Alessandro Scarlatti (1660-1725), the founding spirit of the Naples school of composition, to which all of European music owes an overwhelming debt. In the familiar edition of his song, "O cessate di piagarmi," the 19th-century romantic editor Parisotti actually threw Scarlatti's beautiful bass line out the window, and wrote his own accompaniment. (Parisotti is also the apparent author of the forgery "Se tu m'ami," which he ascribed to Pergolesi, another genius of 18th-century Italian vocal music.) Paton rightly points out that the change "reverses the symbolism" intended by Scarlatti, who played off the repeated tones of the melody against an emotionally restless bass line. I would call such a change immoral.

Other arbitrary, romanticist changes corrected by Paton include his restoration of the original scansion of the poetic text, in which composers of the 1600s often placed a weak syllable on a quick note slurred to a longer note, and also frequently would stretch one syllable over a long melisma with many notes. The 19th-century editors often flattened out the songs by replacing these syncopations and melismas and fitting the words to the notes in a way that suited their jaded modern ears. Just try the sarabande-like lilt of Paton's

restored edition of the famous "Per la gloria" (also, in the correct original key!), and you will never want to go back to the ironed-out rhythms of the familiar version.

Mozart

Being an art historian by training, I was delighted by the cover of the *12 Mozart Songs*, a painting of Vienna by Bernardo Bellotto, a Venetian view-painter, which was done around 1760, shortly before the Mozart family first came to Vienna. This picture, showing the cross-fertilization of Italian and German culture that inspired Mozart, seemed to capture the kind of authenticity *without preciousness* which Paton is seeking in the Alfred editions. There are fewer revelations here, and one gains little in the way of "corrections" relative to, say, the familiar Peters edition of the Mozart lieder scores. But the big plus is the little essays that precede each piece.

The first number in the book gave your reviewer a welcome jolt. "Ridente la calma" is an Italian *da capo aria* (an air in the a-b-a form) which had always puzzled me—it simply did not fit into my notion of Mozart at any point in his development. Not being a Mozart scholar, this misgiving remained an unarticulated "hunch," but I had avoided teaching or singing the piece because it seemed so oddly un-Mozartean, and also, because the text does not fit the notes very well. According to Paton, the opening theme is not by Mozart at all, but is rather his adaption to a different text, of an aria for soprano and orchestra by his good friend, the Czech composer Josef Myslivecek. What is by Mozart, other than the adaptation to piano and the new words, is the middle section, which is audibly the most akin to Mozart's operatic music.

In addition, we learn that the strophic song "Die Zufriedenheit" was originally set to be accompanied by mandolin before Mozart adapted it for piano, that the poem had been published first with music by Neefe (Beethoven's first teacher), and that there is an unfinished sketch for a setting by Beethoven himself. Paton also comments, refreshingly, that the optimism of the poem, written in 1776, expressed the spirit of the times as seen in the events of Philadelphia that year. We learn that the "pp" marking at the end of the sublime "Abendempfindung" is the only pianissimo Mozart ever wrote in a song score. In another celebrated Mozart song, "Das Veilchen," Paton notes that we cannot know whether Mozart himself intended the three tempo changes that are marked in the first printed edition, and also makes the surprising assertion that Mozart may not have known that the poem was by Goethe, since one of the two anthologies in which it was published, did not list the author's name.

In the preface, Paton reports on the guidance for interpretation of the ornaments called *appoggiaturas* which is given in a violin method book written by Mozart's father Leopold in 1757. Paton shows how these ornaments would be written, and on a staff below, how they should be played. Unfortunately the second example is reversed, a proofreader's lapse which should get fixed in future printings.

Handel's way to learn figured bass

Continuo Playing According to Handel: His Figured Bass Exercises

with a commentary by David Ledbetter
Clarendon Press, Oxford, U.K., 1990
106 pages, hardbound, \$44.95;
paperbound, \$24.95

"Nobody who has acquired the ability to accompany baroque music from a figured bass will be satisfied to return to using written-out realizations," remarks David Ledbetter in his introduction to this book. He adds, "The main advantage is in fact one of the reasons why the system of bass figuring was originally devised—it allows flexibility

Mendelssohn

Felix Mendelssohn's Opus 8 and 9, published respectively in 1827 and 1830, each contained 12 songs, but the Paton edition is the first to rectify an injustice done to his gifted older sister Fanny. She was the actual composer of three songs in each set. Born into a wealthy family with a leading social position in Berlin, Fanny Mendelssohn had compliantly accepted her family's decision not to publicize her great talent.

Fanny (1805-47) and Felix (1809-47) were grandchildren of the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. As described by Paton, "Rising from complete poverty, [Moses] was able, as a silk merchant to support his wife and six children and to entertain the frequent visitors who sought him out for his wisdom. Moses was the first Jew who wrote books in German and the first German who translated the first five books of the Bible directly from Hebrew. In a time when most Jews were not accorded civil rights or citizenship, Moses' intellect brought him universal respect. He was often heralded by those who supported full civil rights for the Jewish population." Felix's mother, Lea Solomon Mendelssohn, had studied music with a pupil of J.S. Bach, and numerous unpublished Bach scores were handed down in the family. She gave the children their first piano lessons. Through Karl Zelter, a friend of Goethe, the two youngsters learned to write strophic songs (with the same music repeated for each stanza of text).

When Felix was 12 years old, he was taken by Zelter to Weimar, where he played Bach fugues for the old poet Goethe. In 1822, during a family visit, Goethe indicated his approval of Fanny Mendelssohn's songs to his poems. She

in the choice of accompanying instrument, and the same part can be used for organ, harpsichord, lute, or the oboe, each of which has its own accompaniment style. The texture and tessitura of the accompaniment can also be adjusted to suit the instrument accompanied. In the many baroque sonatas which allow alternative instrumentation the accompaniment will not be the same for the quiet flute or recorder as it is for the more extrovert oboe or violin." By extension, one might assume that in the 17th- and 18th-century Italian songs and arias, a different accompaniment would be used for a light soprano as opposed to a dramatic voice, for example.

This book reproduces the exercises which George Frederick Handel devised between 1724 and the mid-1730s, when he was harpsichord teacher to the Daughters of King George II of England—Princesses Anne, Caroline, Amelia, and Louisa. Princess Anne was a lifelong friend of the composer and a gifted musician, and he took the trouble to devise a comprehensive course for her. This course takes you from simple root-position triads all the

way through exercises in fugue. Handel's exercises are interspersed with brief commentaries by Ledbetter which explain the purpose of each exercise. Since the book was produced in England, some of the terminology takes a bit of getting used to, for example the word crotchets for what are usually called quarter-notes on this side of the Atlantic. At the back of the book there are nearly 40 pages of specimen realizations of the exercises.

In Paton's *26 Italian Songs and Arias*, the bass line is always the original bass line of the composer, whereas the other notes are the editor's realization. Quite a few of these arias are available in facsimile editions of the originals now—some of which are partially reproduced, as illustrations, in the Paton volume. If one takes the trouble to learn bass figuring as taught by Handel, then it will be possible to make one's own accompaniments to the Italian songs, possibly by the expedient of copying out the bass line and vocal line onto a separate score. It's all good exercise for developing a capability for the lost art of classical composition.—*Nora Hamerman*

was then just 17. One of these, the duet "Suleika und Hatem," is published in Opus 8; interestingly, Felix Mendelssohn never dared publish any of his settings of Goethe until after the poet had died. While the Mendelssohn songs are not at the level of the greatest German lieder, they are worthy of being sung much more than they are, and they played a very important role in his development as a composer, along with the influence of J.S. Bach. As Paton points out, they were also very important as the jumping-off point for Robert Schumann's lieder. A good example of the importance of vocal music for Felix Mendelssohn's instrumental composing is Op. 9, No. 1, "Frage" ("Question"). The striking phrase on the three opening words, "Ist es wahr?" ("Is it true?") was used by him several months later as the basis of his A major string quartet. One is reminded of Beethoven's use of the question, "Muss es sein?" ("Must it be?") as the theme for a movement in one of his late string quartets, a theme whose answer, "Es muss sein!" ("It must be!"), he also wrote as a canon. Although Felix and Fanny Mendelssohn were apparently unfamiliar with Schubert's songs when they wrote Op. 8 and 9, Felix was keenly aware of the compositional method of Beethoven.

Paton comments that in Opus 8, Fanny Mendelssohn's songs had an expressiveness that Felix's lacked, and that he took the leap to her level only in Opus 9. If this is right, then the "historical injustice" being rectified here goes well beyond the issue of putting Fanny's name on some songs.

One anecdote recounted in the book underscores Fanny Mendelssohn's achievement. During a visit to Britain's Queen Victoria and her German consort, Prince Albert, in 1842, Mendelssohn played the organ at Buckingham Palace

while Albert and Victoria sang. Felix Mendelssohn found a copy of his Opus 8 songs, and to his embarrassment, the queen chose "Italien," a setting of a poem by Grillparzer. When the queen praised the song, Mendelssohn had to admit that his sister had composed it. Later he wrote to his mother that the queen had the best "long high G" he had ever heard from an amateur. Anglophiles and monarchists should reflect on the following process of degeneration: In the 16th century, English royals (Henry VIII and Elizabeth I) composed polyphonic music; in the 18th, they learned figured bass accompaniment (the daughters of George II); even in the 19th, they mastered bel canto singing. Whereas today. . . .

The issue of keys

The Paton Italian songs come in "medium high" and "medium low" keys, pedagogical categories which have little to do with real tessituras of real singers. As long as A=440 and even higher pitches prevail, and musicians passively accept them, it is hard to argue with these sometimes capricious transpositions. In the Mozart book, the "high" book carries all pieces in the original keys, while in the "medium" book they are transposed down usually by a major or minor third, with the exception of two which are only brought down one whole-step, apparently in the desire—mistaken, in my view—of avoiding the extremes in range. From the standpoint of respecting the composer's intentions of vocal register as an important part of his musical ideas, if a song written for a high voice (soprano or tenor) has a "low" quality, it should have a symmetrically low quality for the low voice (contralto or bass), should it not? These transpositions are

very similar to those in the familiar Peters edition called “low,” but it seems that Paton, an experienced vocal pedagogue, does not think there are many truly “low” voices, especially among student singers.

The Mendelssohn book also comes in “high” and “medium,” and here, in a departure from common music-publishing practice, in which “high” often simply means “original keys,” Paton transposes *both ways*: Two songs in the “high” book are transposed upward, because the original settings appear to be for lower voices. This only works, of course, if you assume that the set is merely a collection of songs, and not a cycle meant to be sung all together. Paton seems ambivalent about this.

There are several references in all of Paton’s editions to the fact that the modern A=440 pitch does not correspond to the tuning used by the Italian baroque composers or Mozart or Mendelssohn. In Mendelssohn’s Opus 8, No. 11, “Im Grünen,” a piece in E major, Paton comments on p. 48, “If the vocal tessitura seems too high in the original key, it is partly because pianos are tuned higher now than in Felix’s time. If the song is performed in E-flat [a half-tone lower], the result will be close to Felix’s expectations.” Indeed, the score provides for a high B-natural, which, as you can discover by consulting the Schiller Institute’s *Manual on the Rudiments of Tuning and Registration* (Washington, D.C.: 1992) is the very top note of a soprano’s (or tenor’s) third

register. In the higher A=440 tuning, this note will be kicked into the fourth, register-like appendage called the “super-high” or “whistle” register, a very different quality of voice. This register appears rarely in lieder, and was not intended by Mendelssohn here. Unfortunately—this is a small editorial lapse—the same comment about singing the piece in E-flat is reprinted verbatim in the “medium” version of the songs, where it does not make sense, since here, the song is printed in C major, and the long high note is a G. Although high G is a very high note for a “medium” mezzo-soprano or baritone voice, especially in the wrong, modern A=440 tuning, it does not imply any shift into a different register.³

What recommends the “Vocal Masterworks” series overall, is that Paton operates from the assumption that singers and singing students are intelligent and that if they know the truth about a song, such as what key it was in, what the character in the opera was doing, the context in which it was written, and so forth, they will sing it better. This accords well with the fundamental principle of bel canto singing, which is that we sing with our heads—both in the technical sense of “placing” the tone in the head, and in the deeper sense, that the brain is the most important organ used for making music of any kind. As long as we continue to use our heads (which includes taking a critical view of Paton’s or his collaborators’ editing suggestions), these are the best editions around, for most of these pieces:

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