All for a Song

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Assistant Professor of Musicianship Benjamin Binder believes that art song is misunderstood. Often sung in a foreign language with lyrics drawn from poetry and accompanied in a Spartan fashion by a lone pianist, art song can seem stilted or esoteric to some listeners—even to classical music lovers.

But Binder, a musicologist and performer with a passion for the music of the nineteenth-century Romantics, particularly the German Romantics, is working diligently to change those perceptions. He is the founder of the Pittsburgh Song Collaborative, a group of musicians that is presenting art song for twenty-first century audiences.

To those who might say that art song is a remnant of the Romantic era, Binder points out that song is a fundamental, universal musical experience, and art song is simply the classical version of that. However, it is not simply the music that Binder and the Song Collaborative are attempting to recreate. They aim to recreate the experience of art song.

He explained that the Collaborative not only organizes musical events where song is central but where the barriers to intimacy posed by stages and stagecraft simply do not exist. This means that audience members will hear art song the way it was meant to be.

Left: Benjamin Binder. On the piano is a copy of the first published edition of Robert Schumann’s song cycle Myrthen, op. 25, dating from 1840, the year of the cycle’s composition. It is the only edition to include Schumann’s specific dedication to his bride-to-be, Clara Wieck.
At its genesis in the nineteenth century, art song was commonly performed in homes, perhaps the homes of wealthy patrons, or the homes of the artists themselves. That was a setting where food and drink might be enjoyed, and conversation, sometimes between the audience and the performer, was not only possible but was common. Such a setting enabled the audience to have a shared, intimate experience of the performance, and in such a setting art song could have real power.

“There is a passionate audience in Pittsburgh that is waiting to be turned on to this,” Binder explained, adding that “we certainly have a passionate audience that is loyal to the symphony, the opera and chamber music, but what we don’t have in Pittsburgh that we do have in other cities with strong cultural traditions of high art is song.”

The School of Music has provided funding as well as administrative support to help launch the Collaborative, a loosely knit association of musicians with Binder as artistic director and, for now, the principal accompanist. The group’s adaptability extends to the choice of venues, and ideally the Collaborative will stage concerts where the room suits the program.

Their first public event, Visions of a Poet’s Love: Schumann’s *Dichterliebe*, took place on November 18, 2010, in the Pittsburgh Opera building in the Strip District. Troy Cook, a baritone with international stage credits, sang with Binder accompanying him. The program included a selection of Schumann songs performed by soprano Shannon Kessler-Dooley, a resident artist with the Pittsburgh Opera, and baritone Daniel Teadt.

*Dichterliebe* was an attempt by the Collaborative to bring Schumann’s world into ours. All the ingredients of an art song performance in the days of Schumann and the other Romantics were there, especially the give-and-take with a relaxed and receptive audience. It also had something that made it unlike a Romantic-era soirée—photography created especially for the event by Tom Persinger.

Binder is open to collaborations involving actors, dancers, writers or visual artists. He believes that that kind of creative teamwork will help performers invigorate well-known works, allowing them to make them their own.

“I think it is always important to keep engaging creatively with the tradition,” Binder said. “That continual creative engagement forms an extra enticement for audiences, who are often eager to experience something new.”

Binder’s other scholarly project involves a similar re-engagement with a standard piece of repertoire, a reworking of Schumann’s *Carnaval*, a musical evocation of a masked ball. Binder commissioned 14 contemporary composers to re-imagine the work’s 22 movements as entirely new music, modern analogs to Schumann’s originals. Binder plans to perform and record the new works alongside Schumann’s original over the next several years.

The *Carnaval* project, like the Song Collaborative, bridges a gulf created by academic specialization that divides the activity of performance from the technical and historical scholarship of the musicologist.

“During my whole career, I’ve been pulled between performance and musicology,” Binder said. “The culture of music as it exists today is very specialized—one is either a performer, or a teacher, or some kind of musicologist. To me it is all one thing.”