

Prosody in Friedrich Von Flotow's "The Last Rose of Summer"

Historical Context

Irish poet Thomas Moore first penned the words to the poem "The Last Rose of Summer" in 1805, while in Kilkenny, Ireland. He was lodging at Jenkinstown Castle and may have been inspired by the sight of pink China roses on the castle grounds.¹ The tune to which the poem is set is a traditional Irish melody titled "Aisling an Óigfhear" (The Young Man's Dream).² Folk music collector and publisher Edward Bunting transcribed the melody during the Belfast Harp Festival in 1792, derived from a performance by Donnchadh Ó hAmhsaigh (Denis Hempson), a well-known Irish harpist.³

The original text of the poem had an additional stanza, as follows:

*So soon may I follow when friendships decay
And from love's shining circle the gems drop away
When true hearts lie withered and fond ones are flown
Oh who would inhabit this bleak world alone?
This bleak world alone*

While some arrangements for solo voice (including those by John Andrew Stevenson and Benjamin Britten) do include the final stanza, the arrangement featured today, with a text setting by Friedrich von Flotow, does not. Flotow, born in 1812, was a leading German opera composer who frequently wrote in the style of French *opéra comique*.⁴ These stylistic characteristics can be seen in his setting of Moore's poem in his romantic comic opera, *Martha*. Written in four acts

¹ Some have speculated that Moore's reference to the rose's blushes in his poem ("... no rosebud is nigh to reflect back her blushes or give sigh for sigh. . ."") may indicate the species of rose was "Old Blush" or "Old Blush China."

² *Ireland: The Songs, Book 4* (Dublin: Walton's Irish Music, 1993), n.p.

³ Edward Bunting, *The Ancient Music of Ireland* (Dublin: W. Power & Co., 1796), n.p.

⁴ *Opéra comique* is a genre of French opera which includes spoken dialogue as well as arias. It originated in the 18th century during the reign of King Louis XIV.

and set to a German libretto by Friedrich Wilhelm Riese, *Martha* was originally adapted from a French ballet composed by Flotow.

Prosody in Flotow's Setting

The term *prosody* refers to the use of diction, including the rhythmic timing of syllables, to support the textual theme of a song. The goal of prosody is singing that occurs “in the pocket.” While this phrase has been used more frequently in contemporary contexts, it can also refer to the timing of text relative to overall tempo and rhythmic patterns in any song. Consonants should briefly precede each beat (especially for longer consonants/consonant combinations such as *st*, *f*, *m*, or *sc*) so that the vowel sound is expressed immediately on beat. The way that words fall into a musical line (or phrase) should mirror the rhythms and syllabic emphases of natural speech. The musical setting of a piece can make this goal somewhat difficult to achieve, depending on the way the composer or arranger sets words within a melodic line. For instance, to mirror speech in the phrase, “all her lovely companions,” the emphasized syllables should occur as follows: “**all her lovely companions.**” The melodic contour puts the highest note of the word *lovely* on the syllable *ly*, rather than on the naturally stressed first syllable, *love*. This requires the singer to approach the high note very gently, maintaining vocal emphasis on the first part of the word rather than the second. The scenario repeats with the same word later in the piece (“since the **lovely** are sleeping”). Care must be taken to maintain expressive integrity as the primary concern, however, meaning that vocal emphasis may sometimes need to be sacrificed. One example occurs near the end of the piece in the high note on the word *of*. While *of* is not a stressed word in the sentence, the sweeping high note does mark the climax of the song. In cases such as this, the singer must make appropriate stylistic decisions based on performance practice and individual artistic interpretation.

Bibliography

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