Can You Hear What the Elf King Is Whispering in My Ear?

Singing characters and conveying emotions in Baroque and Romantic songs and arias

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The human voice, produced entirely by the body, is arguably the first musical instrument and remains one of the most direct and powerful vehicles for emotional expression. Unlike external instruments, the voice is inseparable from the physical and psychological state of the performer: it is shaped by breath, posture, muscle coordination, imagination, and emotion in real time. This intimate connection gives vocal sound a uniquely immediate impact on listeners, allowing emotions to be communicated with urgency and authenticity. Across cultures and historical periods, the voice has functioned not only as a carrier of language but as a primary means of expressing feeling, identity, and social connection. Its importance predates formal music-making and even spoken language, suggesting that vocal sound lies at the foundation of human communication.

Long before the emergence of complex speech, vocalisation played a crucial role in human survival. Early humans relied on sounds to signal danger, coordinate group activity, and maintain social bonds. High-pitched vocalisations in particular are known to trigger strong emotional responses linked to care, protection, or alarm, as exemplified by infant crying. Such responses appear to be deeply biological, bypassing rational thought and acting directly on the nervous system. This may explain why high voices are often associated with vulnerability, innocence, or supernatural beings in music and drama, from Baroque angels to Romantic children and spirits.

As a singer with experience in a boy soprano register, I have developed my vocal practice through opera, musical theatre, and choral work. These genres situate the voice within a dramatic framework shaped by conductors, directors, staging, costumes, and narrative. Emotional expression is supported and intensified by text, action, and visual elements, aligning with Richard Wagner's concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total artwork, in which multiple art forms combine to convey maximum meaning and emotional impact.

By contrast, performing art songs and operatic arias in recital or audition settings removes much of this external dramatic support. The singer stands still, often in concert dress, with minimal gesture and no interaction with other characters. In this context, the full responsibility for emotional communication rests on the voice alone, supported only by the piano. The Lied is often described as "singing an opera in three minutes," which gives an idea of the concentration of narrative, character, and emotion required. In preparation for auditions to UK conservatoires, I therefore constructed a programme of contrasting pieces chosen for their theatrical potential and suitability to my voice. Through musical, textual, and historical analysis, guided by a music coach, I aimed to maximise expressive impact. This essay draws on that analytical process, elements of which will be presented in the school pre-baccalaureate concert.

Audition requirements vary significantly between conservatoires, with some insisting on Italian opera, others on English repertoire, and most requiring stylistic and emotional contrast. In all cases, candidates must demonstrate versatility in mood, tempo, language, and historical period. I therefore explored a wide range of repertoire, including Baroque arias, Romantic Lieder, French opera, and contemporary works, many of them written for young characters or high voices, or able to be sung in multiple registers.

I selected four contrasting pieces: Purcell's *Music for a While*, Schubert's *Erlkönig*, Stéphano's aria *« Que fais-tu, blanche tourterelle ? »* from Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette*, and Oscar's aria *« Saper vorreste »* from Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera*. Together, these works span over two centuries, four languages, and a wide emotional range, while for the most part sharing a common focus on youth, innocence, and heightened emotional states. In this essay, I will focus primarily on *Music for a While*, *Erlkönig*, and *Que fais-tu, blanche tourterelle ?*, as these pieces illustrate most clearly the challenges of characterisation and emotional communication in non-staged vocal music.

Henry Purcell's *Music for a While* occupies a unique position in the English Baroque repertoire. Originally composed as incidental music for John Dryden's play *Oedipus, King of Thebes*, it functions dramatically as a lullaby sung to pacify Alecto, one of the Furies, so that the dead king Laius may be summoned back to life. The paradox of soothing a violent, supernatural creature through gentle music lies at the heart of the piece's potential in expressiveness.

Musically, the song is built over a basso ostinato - a repeating bass line that ascends step by step, often interpreted as symbolising the gradual ascent of the dead from the underworld. Above this hypnotic foundation, the vocal line unfolds in long, irregular phrases, with frequent chromaticisms and subtle dissonances. Purcell makes extensive use of word painting, a characteristic Baroque technique, most famously on the word "drop," where descending intervals illustrate the snakes falling from Alecto's head. The result is music that feels both calm and uncanny, suspended between sleep and danger.

One remarkable aspect of *Music for a While* is its adaptability to different voice types. Originally intended for a high male voice (countertenor or boy treble), it has been performed and recorded in at least nine different keys, ranging from low baritone versions to very high soprano interpretations. This flexibility reflects historical performance practice, in which transposition was common to suit available singers. After listening to numerous recordings, I chose to perform the piece in G minor (despite the most common soprano register being Am), a key that allows me to sustain the long legato phrases without too much trouble while preserving the intimacy and darkness of the original.

Interpretatively, the main challenge lies in maintaining a seamless vocal line over the repetitive bass, without becoming static or monotonous. Breath control is crucial, as phrases often extend beyond the natural breathing points suggested by the harmony. Stylistically, the piece demands restraint, elegance, and clarity of English diction. Emotionally, the singer must convey calm authority and hypnotic persuasion rather than overt drama. The goal is not to express personal emotion, but to embody the power of music itself as a force capable of taming chaos. For me,

this piece represents a neutral emotional starting point in the programme: serene on the surface, yet charged with underlying tension.

My favourite interpretation of Music for a While - and the excerpt I chose for it - is that of Andreas Scholl, a countertenor who specialises in baroque music. He performs the piece like how it would have been sung and orchestrated when it was written and has a clarity and purity to his voice that i find necessary to truly get across the soothing nature of the piece, while maintaining a lightheartedness and airiness, notably in the “drop drop drop” section, with his rolled Rs and short notes.

If *Music for a While* demonstrates the Baroque ideal of controlled affect, Schubert’s *Erlkönig* represents the Romantic fascination with psychological drama, nature, and the supernatural. Composed in 1815 when Schubert was only seventeen or eighteen, this setting of Goethe’s poem was his first published work and remains one of the most demanding and dramatic songs in the repertoire.

The poem tells the story of a father riding through the night with his feverish child, who is tormented by visions of the Erlking (elf king), a supernatural figure who lures and ultimately kills him. Uniquely, the song requires a single singer to portray four distinct characters: the narrator, the father, the child, and the Erlking. A fifth “character,” the galloping horse, is vividly depicted in the piano accompaniment through relentless, fast triplets that persist almost uninterrupted until the final bars.

Although often performed by baritones, *Erlkönig* was originally written for a high voice, which is particularly effective in conveying the child’s terror. For me, the greatest challenge of the piece lies in rapid character changes, sometimes within a single phrase, while maintaining musical accuracy at a fast tempo. Each character requires a distinct vocal colour: the narrator neutral and detached, the father low, calm, and authoritative, the child increasingly high and agitated, and the Erlking seductive, smooth, and sinister.

Language and diction play a crucial role. German consonants and vowels must be clear enough for the audience to follow the narrative, especially in a concert setting without subtitles. Facial expression and minimal gesture also become essential tools for differentiating characters. Emotionally, the singer must balance technical control with raw intensity. The child’s repeated cries of “Mein Vater!” should sound genuinely panicked, while the Erlking’s promises must initially appear gentle and alluring before revealing their violent intent.

The title question of this essay—“Can you hear what the Elf King is whispering in my ear?”—comes directly from the child’s perspective in the poem. In performance, my aim is to make the audience experience the story through the child’s ears and fear, even if they cannot see the supernatural threat. When the final line reveals that the child is dead, the emotional impact depends entirely on the singer’s ability to sustain tension until the very end.

I’ve chosen three extracts of *Erlkönig* to cover, each from the singer i believe suits each of the characters the best. That is - Hermann Prey’s Father, Dietrich Fischer Deskau’s Elf King, and Jessye Norman’s Son and Narrator.

Dietrich Fischer Deskau's performance of the piece in its entirety is my favourite overall, but i think his voice and manner are best suited to his portrayal of the Erlking in particular. When he first "morphs" into the character, he appears to unfocus his gaze and ever so subtly maintain a grin on his and a twinkle in his eye, making the Erlking's first words sound like somewhat subdued musings through a nearly blank stare. Halfway through this first intervention however, Fischer Deskau suddenly shifts his wideeyed gaze in the direction of the audience, displaying a much more intense, and intentional look, accompanied by a now less hidden grin . Throughout the rest of the section he holds 'eye contact' as the Erlking presumably with the boy, and in watching, the viewer truly feels the eeriness of the character and how creepy the monster is. This agility in facial expression accompanied by Fischer Deskau's clarity of voice, and mastery of nuances creates in the audience that same sense of muddled fear and fascination that the boy would be feeling in that very moment.

Hermann Prey's interpretation of the father feels particularly adequate due to his bass-baritone register, and the deep, grounded colour of his voice. He performs the father's sections with heavy - and appropriate - contrast to his interpretations of the other characters, displaying him as authoritative but caring for his child. Visually, he sustains a mainly neutral expression, but always tilts his head downward and looks up through his eyebrows, and keeps his hands raised reassuringly, ready to hold his child closer. After the boy's section, when the father reassures him there are no monsters, Prey also slightly takes his time on those words, for the father to appear calmer for his child.

For the child, I felt Jessye Norman's performance was the most fitting, thanks to her high voice which most accurately portrays the cries of a scared child. Norman maintains an exaggerated but adequately intense look of pure fear throughout her sections as the son, especially in his last intervention, right before his death (which is part of the excerpt i chose), and she uses a lot of body language such a shaking and swaying, and leaning iver before the narrator's conclusion to the piece, which she delivers more coldly, getting across the weight and finality of the kids death, most apparent in her delivery of the last line ("was dead"), which she almost whispers.

In contrast to the dark intensity of *Erlkönig*, Stéphano's aria from Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette* offers a playful yet provocative portrayal of youthful bravado. Stéphano, Romeo's page, is a "trouser role," traditionally sung by a mezzo-soprano or soprano. Although the character does not appear in Shakespeare's original play, he serves an important dramatic function in the opera by provoking the Capulets and escalating the conflict.

The aria alternates between a recitative and a lively, mocking song. Stéphano compares Juliet to a white dove trapped among vultures and teases the Capulets with ironic warnings that she will escape them. Musically, the piece requires agility, clear French diction, and a bright, youthful tone. Rapid changes of tempo and character mirror the shifting emotions of the text, from lyrical description to sarcastic challenge.

For me, the challenge lies in balancing vocal brilliance with characterisation. The aria must sound light and spontaneous, never heavy or aggressive. High notes and quick passages should convey confidence and youthful insolence rather than technical effort. Emotionally, the

piece introduces humour and irony into the programme, demonstrating a different kind of expressive skill: the ability to communicate joy, mischief, and provocation with clarity and charm.

The excerpt I chose for this piece, and my favorite performance of it is Anat Czarny's. I find that she portrays the character with a playful dignity that is sometimes lost in interpretations of him, and her vocal technique is flawless, perfectly executing the contrasts between stern and lighthearted sections. I also particularly like how she's staged in this production, with her looking in one direction for the Capulets, and in another for the Montagues.

The primary objective of this audition programme was to gain acceptance into one of the highly competitive conservatoires in London, which admit only a small percentage of applicants. As a singer several years younger than the average candidate, with a voice still in development, I could not rely solely on vocal power or maturity. Instead, I aimed to demonstrate musicality, stylistic awareness, linguistic accuracy, and, above all, the ability to convey emotion and character.

Detailed knowledge of the historical and musical context of each piece proved essential, both for performance and for responding to questions from audition panels. Careful repertoire selection, combined with intensive coaching and close collaboration with a pianist, allowed me to present pieces that suited my voice and highlighted my strengths. Starting the audition with the most challenging piece rather than following chronological order also proved to be an effective strategy.

Ultimately, my goal as a singer is to move an audience. Whether through the hypnotic calm of Purcell, the terror of Schubert's child, or the playful provocation of Gounod's Stéphano, I aim to make listeners feel what the characters feel. Can you hear what the Elf King is whispering in my ear? Can you sense the child's fear, the father's desperation, the dove's longing for freedom? If the answer is yes, then the voice has fulfilled its most ancient and powerful function: to communicate emotion directly, across time, language, and style.