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## COVER SHEET

### Found in Translation: *The Poet's Love(r)*

Chanda VanderHart, Rebecca Babb-Nelsen, Eric StokloBa

#### Abstract:

The impossibility of perfect translation is a widely acknowledged trope, yet translation remains a powerful act of meaning-making. This research-creation project investigates not what is lost, but what is gained through translation, by presenting and reflecting on our artistic re-interpretation of *Dichterliebe*, Robert Schumann's nineteenth-century song cycle on texts by Heinrich Heine. Drawing on theories of translation by Walter Benjamin, Umberto Eco, and Hans Vermeer, we approach art song translation beyond its conventional linguistic scope, exploring it as a mode of modernization and gendered recontextualization. Our project, *The Poet's Love(r)*, features a new, singable English translation, alongside newly composed spoken poetry that gives voice to the song cycle's historically silent female protagonist.

In our methodological approach, we consider translation as a generative act within a broader artistic assemblage, incorporating artificial intelligence (AI)-generated images derived from the translated texts. These visuals, created with minimal textual prompts, offer a 'post-human' reflection on our hybrid nineteenth-century/twenty-first-century intervention, illuminating both the creative potential and the inherent biases of AI-generated art. Through an iterative process of artistic experimentation, pedagogical engagement with students at the mdw — University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna — and comparative analysis of contemporary *Dichterliebe* adaptations, we examine the strengths, limitations, and ethical considerations of translation as artistic research. accessibility, deepens emotional resonance, and enriches the afterlife of canonical works.

Ultimately, we argue that translation — understood both linguistically and as creative transformation — can enhance access to art song's multiple communicative layers (music, text, subtext), expanding its interpretative possibilities. By embracing a translational methodology, we advocate for a shift away from rigid notions of fidelity to historical works and toward a more dynamic, pluralistic engagement with musical tradition, informed by feminist, posthumanist, and experimental artistic perspectives. By situating *The Poet's Love(r)* within a broader assemblage of interpretations — drawing on Paulo de Assis's concept of musical works as decentralized, evolving entities — the project challenges traditional notions of fidelity and authorship in art song. It argues for translation as a vital creative practice that expands

Keywords:

Dichterliebe, Schumann, translation, gender studies, art song, reflective practice, post-human, the poet's lover, lieder, song cycles, poetry, voicing the unvoiced, agency, piano, voice, female voice, empathy, AI

Published in: Journal for Artistic Research (JAR), Issue 35 (2025)  
<https://jar-online.net>

URL: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-exposition?exposition=2082863>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22501/jar.2082863>

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## Found in Translation: *The Poet's Love(r)*

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**Image description:** A colour image of a feathered quill lying on a piece of parchment, partially covered with calligraphy.

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In 'Experiences in Translation', linguist and artist Umberto Eco writes:

*Every sensible and rigorous theory of language shows that a perfect translation is an impossible dream. In spite of this, people translate. It is like the paradox of Achilles and the turtle. Theoretically speaking, Achilles should never reach the turtle. But in reality, he does. No rigorous philosophical approach to that paradox can underestimate the fact that, not just Achilles, but any one of us, could beat a turtle at the Olympic Games. (2001: 1)*

Translation, we know, is imperfect and impossible.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless it is useful, powerful, and can be a richly creative, meaningful act.

*People translate during business conventions and during sessions of the United Nations, and even though many misunderstandings can arise, people of different languages agree on the fact, let us say, that the shoes of brand X are less expensive than those of brand Y, or that Russians do not approve of the decision to bomb Serbia. The majority of Christians have read the Gospels in translations (every nation in a different language), but all of them believe that Jesus was crucified and John the Baptist beheaded, and not vice-versa. (2001: x)*

Translation is not only pragmatically indispensable, but is itself a creative act that, as Walter Benjamin argues, gestures toward something beyond the limits of any single language. Benjamin's essay 'The Task of the Translator' does not conceive of '*pure language*' as the hidden essence of a specific work, but rather as a transcendent linguistic potentiality — a

harmony of all languages that translation intimates but never fully achieves. For Benjamin, translations do not serve the reader so much as they serve language itself, revealing how fragments of meaning scattered across languages yearn toward a greater, unrealized whole. As he puts it, in a translation by Steven Rendall: *'True translation is transparent, it does not obscure the original, does not stand in its light, but rather allows pure language, as if strengthened by its own medium, to shine even more fully on the original'* (Benjamin 1997: 162).

Through this lens, the approach we lay out in this exposition does not seek to uncover a 'true spirit' locked within Heine's German or Schumann's music, but to participate in the Benjaminian project of *'liberating'* language — allowing the work's afterlives — in translation — to refract new dimensions of meaning. Translation here becomes a way to prolong the work's reverberations, not to fix them. As Benjamin notes, *'to set free in his own language the pure language spellbound in the foreign language, to liberate the language imprisoned in the work by rewriting it, is the translator's task'* (163).

This liberation is not about fidelity to an original so much as fidelity to the gaps between languages, where the *'untranslatable'* sparks creative reinvention. Thus, in *The Poet's Love(r)*, we embrace translation's paradox: its failures become opportunities to amplify what Heine's text could mean — historically, emotionally, politically — when loosened from the constraints of nineteenth-century German and confronted with twenty-first-century sensibilities. Our project, then, aligns with Benjamin's view that translation is a mode of awakening rather than replication. By layering new contexts (linguistic, visual via AI, performative), we trace how *Dichterliebe's* translational acts — its multilingual echoes and reverberations — destabilize 'pure language' as a static core, reframing it instead as an evolving, dialogic process.

Benjamin is also helpful in allowing us to reframe our concept of translation's fundamental purpose, taking the emphasis away from the faithful reproduction, word for word, of the source text. Translations, for Benjamin, should be more than a mere transmission of their original message, and focus instead on what comes after; works, in translation, should be concerned with *'reaching the stage of their continuing life [Fortleben]: Just as expressions of life are connected in the most intimate manner with the living being without having any significance for the latter, a translation proceeds from the original. Not indeed so much from its life as from its "afterlife" or "survival" [Überleben]'* (153).

Roland Barthes, in his much-cited 'The Death of the Author', vehemently argues that approaches to artistic texts have long considered the creator and his intentions over that *'true locus'* of a work and advocates for separating the two. According to Barthes, the tendency is not only to conflate the identity of the author with the work but also to give undue deference to the person of the author and what he/she was trying to convey through their art instead of focusing on the audience. He states, *'the unity of a text is not in its origin [i.e. the author], it is in its destination [i.e. the audience/reader]'* (1967: 6).

The author is a modern figure, Barthes argues, *'discovered in the prestige of the individual [...] The image of literature to be found in contemporary culture is tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his history, his tastes, his passions'* (2).

Linguist and translation theorist, Hans Vermeer, builds on this idea in his *Skopos Theory*,

shifting the impetus from the original work itself to the action of translation. Vermeer gives particular weight to the intended purpose of that translation, which he claims is the key element for assessing its efficacy. *Skopos*, which means ‘purpose’ in Greek, therefore focuses on ‘*the translation itself [which] may be conceived as an action, as the name implies. Any action has an aim, a purpose. The word skopos then, is a technical term for the aim or purpose of a translation*’ (2004: 227).

Skopos theory, according to Vermeer, reveals the focus of the translation to be not faithful representation of the source text, but the creation of something new. Translation is ‘*an action [which] leads to a result, a new situation or event, and possibly to a “new” object. Translational action leads to a “target text”*.’ Vermeer claims as well that ‘*one possible goal (skopos) would certainly be precisely to preserve the breadth of interpretation of the source text*’ (232).

In the world of art song, our area of focus, there is an ongoing debate as to the validity of translating song texts at all. Proponents of this argument state that art song texts are sacred in their original languages and must not be interfered with. When dealing with nineteenth-century canonical classical music works, there is likewise a degree of veneration which makes any and all divergences from an idealized reproduction of the composer’s purported intentions immediately suspect. Keen awareness of these hurdles was foremost in our minds as we considered engaging with this source material. While it is easy to get bogged down with the question of permission in regard to translating *Lieder*, we chose instead to focus on what Vermeer refers to as translational action as an artistic act in itself.

In this spirit, instead of focusing primarily on how things get lost in translation,<sup>2</sup> this exposition explores what translation can do with the multi-layered historical texts which are nineteenth-century song cycles. While acknowledging translation’s limits and failings, and accepting our own inevitable shortcomings, we choose to celebrate the degree of accessibility, the hidden meaning, and the unexpected emotional responses and empathies which we have found through our creative translation processes.

Specifically, we examine the possibilities and challenges of translation as a creative approach to nineteenth-century song cycles through interrogation of our own work with Schumann’s *Dichterliebe*, Op. 48 on texts by Heinrich Heine. We lay out our artistic journey in creating *The Poet’s Love(r)*, a translational process begun in 2019 and continuing today. Throughout, we interrogate our motivations and concerns during this experiment, examine external and personal responses to it, and set it in relief against other translations of the same composition.

Translation, in this case, is therefore understood in the literal, linguistic sense, but also more broadly, as the creative transformation and addition of context, which we interpret as adding a new layer to that assemblage of interpretations, writings, understandings that comprise a musical ‘work’ along with the score. We draw here particularly on Paulo de Assis’s depiction of musical works as assemblages, which he in turn extrapolates from Deleuzian ontological concepts. In brief, for Assis,

*the shift from a work-centred perspective to a vision of an exploded continuum made of innumerable objects and things, in steady intensive interaction with one another, creates fields of discourse, practice, and perception based on pure difference, leading to processes of differential repetition.* (2019: 272)

This perspective envisions a work of art as much more than the score, the expression of the original author's intentions, or any of its other single parts. It views it instead through its potential in connection with every iteration in performance and interpretation. It also assures that a 'work' of art may be much more robust in nature; instead of appearing as something tiny, fragile, and holy which must be protected and guarded against corruption, it becomes a decentralized entity, one which only grows through added engagement. Returning to Benjamin, through each translation, *'the original's life achieves its constantly renewed, latest and most comprehensive unfolding'* (1997: 154). Similarly, Barthes, who refers to the communicative potential of a text as a code, notes, *'a code cannot be destroyed, it can only be "played with"'* (1967: 3). Assis concurs, noting that this purview is one of the particular strengths of artistic research as it engages with known musical compositions:

*In the place of a reiteration of uncritically inherited performance practices, or patronising instances of surveillance and control, this perspective offers a methodology for unconventional, critical renderings that expose the variety and complexity of the musical materials available today. More than repeating what one already thinks one knows about a given work, it claims the pure unknown as the most productive field for artistic practices. Rather than accepting a reproductive tradition, it argues for an experimental, creative, and vitalist attitude. (2019: 272)*

In the process of translating Schumann/Heine's *Dichterliebe*, Op. 48 into a new, singable English translation, other layers of artistic creation revealed themselves and became part of our assemblage, titled *The Poet's Love(r)*. One layer included giving voice to the unnamed female protagonist by creating novel poetry in her voice to be held in dialogue with the male narrator. These sixteen original poems alternate with the sixteen Heine settings-in-translation and can be recited or read between (sometimes during) them. In addition, to further engage the female voice within the narrative, we conducted an experiment, feeding both the translated and novel poetry into *Dream AI Art Generator*, a Large Language Model producing graphical representations to textual prompts. Part of our motivation for doing this was a recognition of the similarity between the act of linguistic translation and the methodology behind AI text-based image production models. In brief, when a translator has a work to translate, the options branch at every turn, and quickly expand, only to be reined in by limits and guidelines (connotation, rhyme scheme, rhythm, poetic style, musical setting, etc.) while an AI generator is limited by prompts. Much, however, is seemingly random 'choice' when multiple selections could potentially serve more or less equally well.

A discussion of ethical implications of using AI in this manner, the results, and both the hidden gender bias inherent in visual art of this period as well as some of the exciting and provocative hallucinatory revelations discovered in the course of what might be termed a *post-human reflection* of our nineteenth-century/twenty-first-century hybrid composition, is found in the final page of this exposition.

All graphics included as illustrations within the exposition, unless otherwise indicated, stem from this experiment.

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## Why and How: Translating *Dichterliebe*

When embarking on this journey, three guideposts were established fairly early on — core concerns that established the creative and scholarly framework within which we navigated.

The **first guidepost** was pragmatic in nature. The initial impulse for this endeavor came from a practical need recognized by Eric Stokloßa, a professor of voice at Texas Tech University. As part of his compulsory research tied to tenure review at the university, Stokloßa commissioned a new, singable English translation of *Dichterliebe* for the English-speaking world, an audience that understands, with little exception, no German whatsoever. This is not unusual for translation. Vermeer notes: *‘the aim of any translational action, and the mode in which it is to be realized, are negotiated with the client who commissions the action’* (2004: 227). In this case, the client was Texas Tech University, and the commissioning party and singer (Stokloßa) stressed a desire for a novel, singable translation, maintaining poetic integrity, with the most significantly, stressed words in Schumann’s German setting corresponding with the new, English version.

Stokloßa, a native German speaker, wanted to give his audience the ability to connect more immediately with a cycle he knows and loves intimately, and posited that the distance created by Heinrich Heine’s German perhaps posed the largest barrier to their emotional engagement with the work.

Nineteenth-century song cycles, even for lovers of classical music, can be difficult to appreciate. Dedicated *Lieder-philes* admit that art song, in practice and as a genre, is considered particularly ‘pretentious’ as well as ‘old-lace, highbrow’:

*‘I daresay that even the greatest Lied enthusiast, when divested of her or his rose-coloured Schubertian Brille, is aware that many people view the art form as a formidably highbrow category (German) of an esoteric sub-section (song) of an embarrassingly emotional corner (vocal music) of an already doomed species (classical music)’*, writes Graham Johnson. (2004: 315)

But while language is one of the factors distancing nineteenth-century *Lieder* from a large swath of today’s public, even for native German speakers the themes, language, and concerns often feel inaccessible; in need of translation.

Classic literature is retranslated around every fifty years in English owing to shifts in idiomatic usages and cultural contexts. The Bible, for example, is currently available in numerous collectively produced English translations, including the King James Version, English Standard Version, Literal Standard Version, Revised Standard Version, New Revised Standard Version,



and New American Standard Bible. This is because translations themselves age as cultural understandings shift. When the meaning and context of language are no longer accessible, audiences cannot interact with the work successfully. Translation, then, carries with it an essential aspect of modernization:

*If modern French readers read a Shakespearean translation from the last century they feel uncomfortable and cannot take it seriously. This means that every translator, even when trying to give us the flavour of a language and of a historical period, is in fact modernizing the source to some extent.* (Eco 2001: 22)

This applies to music as a language as well. Though ragtime was seen as dangerously subversive to (white) audiences in its heyday, a few decades later it was tame enough to put in mainstream musicals and films, such as the extended dream sequence in the 1955 movie version of Richard Rodgers' and Oscar Hammerstein's 1943 musical *Oklahoma*. And though at that time it still had the connotation of being sexy and dirty, if I show the scene to students in the twenty-first century, the music seems cute, almost quaint. They giggle uncomfortably because of what now seems a mismatch between harmless, honky-tonk music they could hear on an old-timey jukebox and Agnes de Mille's evocative choreography, designed to express the sexual anxiety of young women's unconscious interiority. '*Girls don't dream about the circus,*' de Mille explained. '*They dream about horrors. And they dream dirty dreams*' (de Mille quoted in Carter 2007).

There are related philosophical reasons to disrupt how Schumann's cycle is performed, centered on keeping art song a living text, engaged with current concerns. Drawing on philosophical work by both Roland Barthes and Gilbert Simondon regarding Schumann performance practice, Lucia d'Errico contends that *Dichterliebe* interpretation suffers from a prioritization of taking the score as holy and seeing it as a stable mold to shape pleasing performances. '*The real "good" form*', she writes, '*is therefore not that which is perfected and eternally fixated, but to the contrary, that which is pregnant, namely, that is capable of further crossing and enlivening a multiplicity of different fields and situations*' (2019: 318).<sup>1</sup> In order to stay relevant, and not simply exist in a museum state, perhaps art song needs to be performed differently from time to time.

This led to a broader discussion about the extent to which we wanted to intervene with the original work. Chanda VanderHart had already experimented with the cycle in terms of musical style, and the team researched various reinterpretations, restagings, recontextualizations — in short, other translations — of *Dichterliebe*.

While tempted to throw the aesthetic baby out with its murky, nineteenth-century bathwater and start completely anew, we concluded that doing so would obfuscate the work for its intended audience. While Benjamin famously purported that '*no poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener*' (1997: 152), it might be more honest (and equitable) to admit that any work of art is created in a web of tension between artistic desire and practical reality. Our most venerated compositions were often created in part thanks to external commissions, requests, or to fill practical needs, in congress with internal, artistic, creative drive. While our approach may seem conservative to those outside the realm of art song performance and pedagogy, it is quietly revolutionary from the inside, and it may be that in working from within its time-tested, beloved aesthetic framework, this particular audience will more readily incorporate it into their own understanding.



This led us to our **second guidepost**. The team agreed that it was the inherent intimacy created by the instrumentation and Schumann's musical idiom which had drawn us to the cycle initially, and made it a priority to translate within the constraints of the original musical and textual aesthetic. This also meant preserving the cultural context within which the characters of the cycle exist; both poet and lover are locked within the strict moral and cultural codex of their own time. To cite Rufus Hallmark, discussing another gender-laden Schumann song cycle composed the same year as *Dichterliebe*:

*German women were unquestionably subordinate to men in the early nineteenth century. In the light of our modern convictions about gender equality and the great strides that have been made in women's rights, the conditions under which women lived were deplorable. The legal system, societal attitudes and norms of behavior, and prevalent philosophical ideas were magnified by the relative cultural isolation of Germany. These factors supported male supremacy, the casting of women in the fixed roles of housewife and bearer and nurturer of children, and the attribution to women of sex-determined characteristics such as weakness, emotionality, and dependence. The information we have suggests also that women for the most part accepted this state of affairs. Furthermore, even liberal-minded reformers had much more modest goals than we might imagine and did not challenge many of the basic assumptions of the patriarchal society. As curious, alien, or repugnant as we in the twenty-first century may find this state of affairs, it is necessary to understand it as the context for Chamisso's poems and Schumann's songs about women. (2014: 6)*

Because nineteenth-century art song cycles were the purview of white, educated, European men, theirs are generally the perspectives on display. In those rare cases where female characters are centered in art song, such as in Adelbert von Chamisso's *Frauen-Liebe und Leben*, their interiority is filtered (translated?) through a male lens. This has been described, to quote Ruth A. Solie as, 'the impersonation of a woman by the voices of male culture' (1992: 220). Although numerous scholars since have argued that Solie's critique is harsh, that Chamisso/Schumann's intentions were revolutionary for their time, and that the protagonist is both sympathetically and complexly portrayed (Dunsby 2007), it is hard for many women today to identify with a character whose narrative journey begins ('*Seit ich ihn gesehen*') and ends ('*Nun hast du mir den ersten Schmerz getan*') focused on a man.

In the most lauded cycles, Franz Schubert's *Winterreise*, Op. 89, D 911 or *Die Schöne Müllerin*, Op. 25, D 795, Ludwig van Beethoven's *An die Ferne Geliebte*, Op. 98, or Schumann's *Dichterliebe*, Op. 48 female characters rarely speak directly and their shading is flat. Women in song are often the object, but rarely the subject of song narrative — they demonstrate such minimal agency and are invisibilized in song to the point that it is possible to believe they are nothing more than a figment of imagination for the (male) protagonist. In *Die Schöne Müllerin* the protagonist is a restless dreamer, maybe a fantasist. 'How real is his relationship with the Miller's daughter?' writes Christopher Fox (2016). Similarly, Florian Boesch asked during an interview, 'think about *Dichterliebe* — do we even really believe she exists?' (VanderHart and Lloyd 2023–24).

The **third and final guidepost** emerged slightly later, as the translation of the text was developing. During the translation process, specifically while translating Poem IX, 'Das ist ein Flöten und Geigen', poet and translator Rebecca Babb-Nelsen was struck by the image of the

mad poet as an angry apparition during the wedding of the unnamed female protagonist in the cycle. She felt an immediate need to answer the accusations levied by Heine's poet. This aligned perfectly with pianist and musicologist Chanda VanderHart's background in gender studies, where she has focused extensively on uncovering previously marginalized historical narratives. Upon discussion, the decision was made to explore how to more systematically de-invisibilize the female perspective throughout the cycle, effectively moving the passive poet's lover from object to voiced subject.

In conclusion, our approach was guided by three foundational principles: a pragmatic need for an accessible, singable English translation of *Dichterliebe*; a commitment to preserving the intimate and historically grounded aesthetic of Schumann's work; and a deliberate effort to give voice to the often-silenced female perspective within the song cycle. These guideposts shaped our approach, ensuring that the translation remained both artistically faithful and culturally relevant.

Far from a mere academic exercise, this endeavor reflects the evolving nature of translation as both an artistic and philosophical act. Just as language and cultural understandings shift over time, so too must our engagement with historical works in order to keep them alive for contemporary audiences. Rather than discarding *Dichterliebe*'s original framework, we sought to enrich it — bridging the gap between tradition and modern interpretation while acknowledging the complex interplay between historical context and present-day concerns.

*The Poet's Love(r)* underscores the idea that performance, like translation, is not a static act but a dynamic one. By honoring a past composition while interrogating its limitations, we aim to foster a deeper, more inclusive engagement with *Dichterliebe* — one that resonates not only with scholars and musicians but with listeners who might otherwise find themselves distanced from its world.

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This accessible page is a derivative of <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/2096445> which it is meant to support and not replace.

**Page description:** At the top of the page an introductory text is accompanied by an image and two audio files.

The image is of a CD cover and features portraits of the three performers of the piece: Eric Stokloša, Chanda VanderHart and Rebecca Babb-Nelsen. Their images are superimposed over an image of a forest and overlaid with the title: *The Poet's Love(r)*.

The audio files present sections from a live discussion between the three.

The page is then split into three columns, with two columns of poetry (on the left and right) and one of colour images (in the middle). The images present an AI program's interpretations of the poems.

This part of the page is interspersed by further audio files, which present recordings of the sections of poetry, variously read, sung and accompanied on piano.

## ***The Poet's Love(r)***

The creation of *The Poet's Love(r)* was the result of iterative conversations and varied interests, both creative and pragmatic, as Rebecca Babb-Nelsen, Chanda VanderHart, and Eric Stokloša discuss in an informal round table in Vienna on 20 March 2022:

**Audio description:** Two sections of a discussion between Rebecca Babb-Nelsen, Chanda VanderHart and Eric Stokloša, from an informal round table in Vienna on 20 March 2022.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/2096445#tool-2152426> to listen to the recordings.

The music and recited poems were recorded in Hemmle Recital Hall at Texas Tech University in November 2021 and will be released in full as a commercial product (CD with booklet) in 2025, along with an open access score created by VanderHart.

All texts are printed below. The translations of Heine's texts and the original poems were written by soprano, poet, and German studies scholar, Rebecca Babb-Nelsen. A selection of the mastered audio tracks is likewise included, featuring Eric Stokloša (tenor), Chanda VanderHart (pianist) and Rebecca Babb-Nelsen (recitation).

The fleshed-out narratives from the perspectives of both poet and lover are laid out below, conforming spatially in terms of chronology to indicate where both characters' experiences coincide, and where they significantly diverge.

All illustrations are the results of feeding texts into the AI program *Dreamer AI Art Generator*, with a most in-depth discussion of the process and implications on [page six](#) of this exposition.

On the left are Heine's original poems, in singable English translations, representing the male protagonist's viewpoint, while on the right Babb-Nelsen's original poems illuminate a second, hitherto unvoiced female protagonist's potential interior experience.

#### His path

1.

*The wondrous, lovely month of May  
As all the tender buds unfurled,  
There opened in my heart  
True love's enchanting world.*

*The wondrous, lovely month of May,  
As all the birds sang in their choir  
Then I confessed to her,  
My longing and desire.*

2.

*From my own tears, there sprang  
A bounty of flowers in bloom  
And my deep sighs grew into  
A nightingale's sweet tune.*

*And if you can love me, darling  
I'll give you the flowers all  
And beneath your window will echo  
The nightingale's sweet call.*

**Audio description:** *From My Own Tears  
There Sprang*; Eric StokloBa (tenor),  
Chanda VanderHart (piano)

Click on [https://  
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view/2082863/2096445#tool-2175094](https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/2096445#tool-2175094) to  
listen to the recording.

3.

*The rose and the lily, the dove and the  
sunlight,  
I loved them all once with my heart's delight,  
I love them no more, I cherish now solely,*

#### Her path

1.

*I met him on a summer's day  
New life bloomed all around us  
What started out as childrens' play  
Matured, young love had found us.*

*My smile had caught a poet's eye  
And he a love poem proffered  
My maiden's blush in my reply  
Accepted what he offered.*

2.

*The poet stood under my window last night  
Awakened me, breathless and pale  
And there in the garden spoke of love's  
delight,  
To the tune of a lone nightingale.*

*The youth held a bouquet of flowers  
Clenched tight in his quivering hand  
And I could have listened for hours  
To the words of this beautiful man.*

3.

*Never before in my young life  
Have I been so effusively praised  
The pedestal, on which he placed me  
Seems over all mountaintops raised.*

*The sweet one, the rare one, the pure one and only,*

*She lives alone in love's delight,  
As rose and as lily as dove and as sunlight,  
I cherish now solely the sweet one, the rare one,  
the true one, the pure one and only!*

*But dare I look down in the shadows,  
From the dizzying heights of his tower  
I grow weak and afraid of the plummet  
That awaits if I let go this hour*

*Of my virtue, that white banner flying,  
Displayed to all over my head.  
My standard at once would be sullied  
If I stole to my dear lover's bed.*

*He has made me no promise of marriage,  
As a poet, my love has no means.  
We must meet with each other in secret,  
Yet his love gives my tender heart wings,*

*So I take on the risk and the peril  
Of temptation and meet him again  
And as moths, our two hearts fly yet nearer  
To the danger of passion's bright flame.*

**Audio description:** *Never Before in My Young Life*; Rebecca Babb-Nelsen, poetic reading

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/2096445#tool-2175226> to listen to the recording.

4.  
*I gaze in your dear eyes and see  
You've banished all my misery,  
But when my lips taste your sweet kiss  
I am filled utterly with bliss.*

*When I lay down on your soft breast  
I'm overcome and heaven-blessed,  
But when you say, "I love you, dear"  
Then I must shed a bitter tear.*

**Audio description:** *I Gaze in Your Dear Eyes and See*; Eric StokloBa (tenor), Chanda VanderHart (piano)  
Click on <https://>

4a.  
*My father says he has a plan.  
A contract has been signed.  
I must belong to some strange man  
Until the end of time.*

*I cry, I protest bitterly  
This choice that would be mine.  
Yet father sneers dismissively  
And drinks his glass of wine.*

*My maidenhead, so highly prized,  
Should now go to this stranger.  
I make a quick, rebellious plan,  
Near swooning from the danger.*

[www.researchcatalogue.net/  
view/2082863/2096445#tool-2175122](http://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/2096445#tool-2175122) to  
listen to the recording.

*My hand may be my father's ware  
To sell as he sees fit,  
My heart, however, is not his.  
I hold control of it.*

4b.

*My mother is an empty shell,  
She does what father orders.  
She gives no respite from my hell  
But firmly draws the borders*

*Of what's acceptable for me  
how I each day should live.  
I see her watching warily  
No missteps she'll forgive.*

*My mother is an empty shell  
Wrapped up in silk and lace.  
The worries that she does not tell  
Lie etched upon her face.*

*She echoes for the hundredth time  
The tale of her poor sister,  
Who lost her virtue, and her mind,  
To one beguiling trickster.*

*He promised her the stars, the moon,  
If she would give her passion,  
But his false love was gone too soon,  
Then her sweet face lay ashen,*

*Upon a pillow in a tomb,  
Dressed up as if a bride  
A secret child still in her womb  
By her own hand she died.*

*My mother is an empty shell  
That's what she wants for me,  
To languish chaste, to marry well  
Devoid of liberty.*

**Audio description:** *My Father Says He  
Has a Plan / My Mother is an Empty Shell;*  
Rebecca Babb-Nelsen, poetic reading

Click on <https://>



5.

*I'll pour my dear soul like a river  
In the cup of lily's perfume  
The lily should softly whisper  
A song of my love's first bloom.*

*The song should shiver and glisten  
Like a kiss from her sweet lips  
Once she to me has given,  
Time wonderf'ly sweet eclipsed.*

6.

*The Rhine, its holy stream flowing,  
Reflected there in the foam  
With its cathedral glowing  
Stands mighty, sacred Cologne.*

*Therein, there hangs a painting  
On golden leather engraved  
In my life's chaos reigning  
A friendly sweet smile displayed.*

*There float sweet angels and primrose  
Around Our Lady fair  
The eyes and the lips blush, the lips, her  
cheeks' blossoms  
Resemble my love past compare.*

5.

*We meet in secret one last time.  
I carry out my plan.  
I give my heart, my soul, my all  
To my beloved man.*

*There's pleasure, but there's also pain,  
In this, our final tryst,  
I feel his heart beat in my chest,  
He feels my heart in his.*

*And I profess my deepest love  
But cannot hide my sorrow,  
Because I know that this pure bliss,  
Will die upon the 'morrow.*

*He holds me tight as we embrace,  
I fight the pain inside,  
If only he had means to wed,  
I would become his bride.*

6.

*The flower that we planted,  
Together on that night,  
Grows slowly in my garden,  
And fills my heart with fright.*

*I go to tell my father,  
About the deed I've done.  
I kneel and plead for marriage  
To him, my only one.*

*My father's visage darkens,  
He threatens with a shout,  
I'll be a ruined woman,  
And he will turn us out.*

*My mother sits in silence,  
Declaring with her gaze,  
That she will never help us,*

*Till the end of all her days.*

*My lover has gone missing.  
For me remains one way,  
I must lie and I must marry  
Father's choice without delay.*

**Audio description:** *The Flower That We Planted*; Rebecca Babb-Nelsen, poetic reading

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/2096445#tool-2176351> to listen to the recording.

7.  
*No grudge I bear, despite my heart's despair.  
Ever departed love! Ever departed love!  
No grudge I bear. No grudge I bear.  
Oh how you shine in diamonds false delight.  
There is no glow in your cold heart's dark  
night!  
I've known so long.*

*No grudge I bear, despite my heart's despair.  
I saw your mask in visions,  
I saw the night live in your heart's decisions,  
I saw the snake, that gnaws your heart with  
glee,  
I saw, my love, you in your misery.  
No grudge I bear! No grudge I bear!*

8.  
*If only the flowers so small knew,  
The depth of wounds in my heart,  
Their petals sweet would weep dew,  
To make my pain depart,*

*If only the Nightingales heard  
How I am lonely and grim,  
They'd call out as one sweet songbird,  
A soul-refreshing hymn.*

*On hearing my frustrations*

7.  
*I go to the church for confession,  
My father has driven me here,  
But I'll speak to no priest, ask no blessing,  
From a man chaste of love, bound in fear.*

*Instead I will seek out the virgin,  
Who was pure, and yet mother with child.  
And from her loving gaze gain permission,  
To love on, and remain undefiled.*

8.  
*The man I wed I do not love,  
Despite this gaudy show,  
I hide my grief behind a smile  
And no one seems to know.*

*I look across the crowded hall  
And lo, who do I see?  
The poet I loved over all  
Stands glaring hate at me.*

*His countenance a mad man's mask*

*The golden bright stars above  
Would fly down from their high stations  
To speak relief and love,*

*But none of them can now grasp it  
Just one heart can know my pain  
For she herself has dashed it  
And ripped my heart in twain!*

**Audio description:** *If Only the Flowers So Small Knew*; Eric Stokloßa (tenor), Chanda VanderHart (piano)

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/2096445#tool-2175180> to listen to the recording.

*His eyes are wide - a ghost.  
My husband raises up his glass  
To bid the wedding toast.*

*I smile and raise my glass to his  
This hollow gesture done,  
I turn my eyes and search the room  
To seek my only one.*

*But he has fled far from this place  
I never had the chance  
To tell him why I made my choice  
They start the bridal dance.*

*The trumpets and the violins,  
They scream their happy tune,  
The wedding guests, like harpies,  
Spin 'round this fetid room.*

*And I am swept away, away,  
With friendly, smiling eyes,  
I've traded my true love today  
To live a farce of lies.*

**Audio description:** *The Man I Wed I Do Not Love*; Rebecca Babb-Nelsen, poetic reading

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/2096445#tool-2176368> to listen to the recording.

9.  
*A choir of flutes and of fiddles  
And trumpets sound in the hall,  
Yes, trumpets sound in the hall,  
There dancing this wedding-swindle,  
The love of my life, my all,  
The love of my life, my all.*

*There is cacophonous droning,  
There is cacophonous droning,  
Of drums and of loud bassoon,  
Amidst this, crying and moaning,*

9.  
*I have become a stranger's wife,  
I do not know his heart.  
He lays so heavily on me,  
I fear I'll fall apart.*

*No poetry escapes his lips,  
Instead a hearty snore.  
I curl up tight, away from him,  
And know myself a whore.*

*My duty done, I can but hope,*

*Amidst this, crying and moaning,  
The kindhearted angels swoon.*

**Audio description:** *A Choir of Flutes and of Fiddles*; Eric Stokloßa (tenor), Chanda VanderHart (piano)

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/2096445#tool-2175186> to listen to the recording.

*The bud that grows within,  
Can dally 'till her time to bloom,  
So he will call her kin.*

*And I've betrayed my lover,  
Far more than that, my soul,  
No other choice was left for me,  
This grief will eat me whole.*

10.  
*When that sweet tune is blowing,  
That once my darling sang,  
I feel my poor breast exploding,  
With wild, heart-crushing pain.*

*I'm led by a darkness sighing,  
High up where willows grow,  
There vanishes, in crying  
My overpowering woe.*

10.  
*I know not where my lover is,  
His heart calls out to mine,  
The new life quickens in my womb,  
And ice runs down my spine.*

*I open up the window  
Of the prison I call home  
And sing the lover's ballad  
My true love would know alone.*

*The melancholy melody  
Floats out into the gloom  
I hear my life flow out of me,  
With each note of his tune.*

*I see him in my mind's eye  
Still overwrought with grief,  
I wish that I could offer him,  
My one true love, relief.*

*My husband is a boorish brute,  
His eyes are always prying.  
I cannot leave his cursed house.  
I feel as if I'm dying.*

11.  
*A young man loves a maiden,  
But she has another in mind  
The other loves yet another  
And he has made this one his bride.*

*The maiden weds in anger*

11.  
*I am beset with anger,  
True love abandoned me,  
He knows not of the growing seed,  
Or how I wish to flee.*

*But where could I, a woman, go,*

*The next distinguished gent,  
Who crosses her path ill-fated  
The young man is malcontent.*

*It is but an ancient narration  
But one that's always new  
For him, its newest victim  
It breaks his heart in two!*

*In this cruel fated world?  
I have no craft, I have no trade,  
I own no gold, no pearl.*

*I heard my love has lost his mind,  
And wails into the distance,  
That he goes barefoot, seeming mad,  
This offers no assistance.*

*My brilliant poet, beggar now,  
Has made the woods his home,  
A child and mother cannot live  
On pretty words alone.*

*Why could he not find some small way  
To work, to ply a trade?  
It would not take so very much  
To keep the oaths we made.*

*I know his heart is broken,  
Mine's rent beyond repair,  
But I do not have the luxury,  
To wallow in despair.*

12.  
*One shimmering summer's morning  
I walked in gardens forlorn,  
There whispered and murmured the flowers  
I sadly wandered, torn.  
There whispered and murmured the flowers  
And gazed as pity began  
"Hold for our sister no malice,  
You heartbroken, pallid man."*

12.  
*This morning in the garden,  
I swear I saw a ghost,  
For a moment he was there,  
The poet I loved most.*

*His face was white and ashen,  
A vision through the veil,  
His eyes, devoid of passion,  
His mouth, a silent wail.*

*I ran to where I'd seen him,  
He vanished in the mist,  
Left behind a broken flower,  
where his dear feet had kissed.*

*I took that broken blossom,  
And pressed it to my heart,  
I know the endless torture,  
When life tears love apart.*

13.

*I in my dream was weeping,  
I dreamed that you laid in your tomb,  
I quickly woke, and my tears were  
Flowing from my cheeks full of gloom.*

*I in my dream was weeping  
I dreamed you abandoned me  
I sadly woke and was crying  
For hours bitterly.*

*I in my dream was weeping  
I dreamed your love cured all my fears  
I gladly woke, but to notice  
still coursed my flood of tears.*

14.

*Each night, love, in my dreams you appear  
And I see you sweetly, sweetly smiling  
I loudly weeping sink sincere  
to your sweet feet, beguiling.*

*You gaze down at me, heartbroken kneel  
And shake out, shake out your flaxen ringlets,  
From your deep blue eyes softly steal  
Your pearly tears' sweet droplets.*

*You tell me, softly, a whispered word  
And give me a branch, a branch from a  
cypress.  
Then I wake up with no branch conferred  
the word lost in my blindness.*

15.

*From olden tales it tempts us  
Invites with iv'ory hand*

13.

*My husband and my lover  
Are not one and the same,  
My child will bear the face of one,  
And wear the other's name.*

*I endure my wifely duties,  
But escape with tight-shut eyes.  
There I see my lover's visage,  
There I hear my lover's sighs.*

*How many women must like me,  
Trade joy for such vile lies,  
Survive the daily drudgery,  
Of marriage they despise?*

14.

*I saw my lover in my dreams,  
His eyes were full of tears.  
His feet were perched upon a cliff,  
Awakening my fears.*

*I cannot reach my lover here,  
I cannot call his name,  
I cannot tell him of his child,  
Or heal my lover's pain.*

*When I wake, I'll see the face,  
That I am loathe to see.  
My angry, boorish husband  
There, staring down at me.*

*I feel alone when next to him,  
My heart, an empty tomb,  
How I would run away from him,  
But for my growing womb.*

*Yet, here in dreams, I see his face,  
Remember his sweet poem.  
I feel the ghost of his embrace,  
Then wake, and am alone.*

15.

*The day has come when our sweet child,  
Will lay upon my breast,*



*With singing tones tempestuous  
Of an enchanted land.*

*Where vivid flowers twining  
In golden evening light  
and sweetly scented shining  
Each bride's sweet face delight.*

*And verdant trees are singing  
Their ancient, sacred tune  
The heavens softly ringing  
As birds in song commune.*

*With cloud-born visions rising  
Up from the earthly fire  
They dance, new forms devising  
In wondrous, perfect choir.*

*And bluish flames are burning  
On every leaf and sprig  
And bright red lights are turning  
A manic, tangled jig.*

*And raucous fountains shiver  
From wild white marble peer  
And strangely, in each river  
reflects a mystic mirror.  
Ah! Ah!*

*How gladly there I'd travel  
To fill my heart with glee  
And all my pain unravel  
And free and happy be!*

*Oh this dear land of joy mine,  
I see it oft in dreams  
Alas! The morning sunshine  
Dissolves it in its beams  
Dissolves it in its beams.*

16.  
*The old and angry music  
The dreams so wild and dire  
We'll let them now be buried  
Build an enormous pyre!*

*I yearn, and yet am sore afraid,  
My heart pounds in my chest.*

*I fear the pain, I fear the risk,  
I fear she won't survive,  
I feel the joy and rush  
of being utterly alive.*

*This unknown land of motherhood  
Seems like a fairy tale,  
God willing, I will take her hand,  
And lead her through the veil.*

*The pains set in, a stronger pain,  
Than I have ever known.  
I fight it, hoarse from screaming;  
I must walk this way alone.*

*The bridge is dark and perilous  
With death on either side,  
I must not fall into the gulf,  
Whose jaws have opened wide.*

*Amidst my cries of agony,  
A new sound cuts the gloom,  
And light and beauty trickle in,  
Her cries ring through the room.*

*They lay her head upon my chest,  
And I give in to laughter,  
I can't have him, but I have her,  
To love forever after.*

16.  
*I heard the chilling news today,  
That my love took his life.  
They found him in the river,  
With a note marked 'For my wife.'*

*On this I'll lay a great deal  
Of what, please do not ask  
The coffin must be larger  
Than Heidelberg's great cask.*

*And bring me a dead man's gurney  
Find boards with strong thick ridge  
These boards should be yet longer  
Than built in Mainz the bridge.*

*Then find for me twelve giants  
To each brute more strength assign  
More than the statue Christoph  
Who stands guard o'er the Rhine,*

*They then should the coffin lower  
And sink in the sea's dark gloom  
For such a mighty coffin  
Deserves a mighty tomb.*

*Do you know why the coffin  
So great and vast must be?  
I drowned all of my love  
And all my pain with me.*

*And in some secret kindness,  
His note came here to me,  
Inside it were his final poems,  
His love for all to see.*

*Before I can dissolve in tears,  
I hear our daughter's cries,  
I lift her and take solace  
In her father's dulcet eyes.*

**Audio description:** *The Old and Angry Music/I Heard the Chilling News Today*; Eric Stokloßa (tenor), Chanda VanderHart (piano), Rebecca Babb-Nelsen (poetic reading)

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/2096445#tool-2175200> to listen to the recording.

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## Adventures in Translation and *The Poet's Love(r)* Creation Process

*Many theories of language say that no text has only one sense, but when two or more copy editors in a publishing house check the translation of a novel (or of an essay) there are cases in which all of them decide that the translator ought to be fired because his or her translation is unacceptable. (Eco 2001: x)*

*In reality, with regard to syntax, word-for-word translation completely rejects the reproduction of meaning and threatens to lead directly to incomprehensibility. Finally, it is self-evident that fidelity in rendering form makes rendering meaning more difficult. (Benjamin 1997: 161)*

### Obstacles to translation

Poetic and artistic translation is particularly difficult.

These translations can fail miserably and for different reasons.

‘Ich will meine Seele tauchen’  
from *Dichterliebe*, No. 5, **Heinrich Heine**, *lyrisches Intermezzo* (1823)

*Ich will meine Seele tauchen  
In den Kelch der Lilie hinein;  
Die Lilie soll klingend hauchen  
Ein Lied von der Liebsten mein.*

*Das Lied soll schauern und beben  
Wie der Kuß von ihrem Mund,  
Den sie mir einst gegeben  
In wunderbar süßer Stund.*

‘Oh, Let me Plunge my Heart’  
translation by **Hal Draper**, Oxford University Press and Suhrkamp/Insel Verlag (1984)

*Oh, let me plunge my heart  
Deep, deep in the lily's cup  
And hear, from its inmost part,  
A song for my love breathe up.*

*That song will tremble and quiver  
Like the kiss on her red mouth-flower  
That once she let me give her,  
One wonderfully sweet hour.*

Draper's 1984 translation, published by Oxford University Press and Suhrkamp/Insel falls into several translation traps. Ostensibly hyperfocused on using 'hour,' for the rhyme in line six, Draper chose the regrettable 'mouth-flower,' a bizarre, unpalatable euphemism for female lips.

In addition, all female agency is erased here, through translation. Instead of the freely given kiss in Heine's provocative text bestowed by 'her' [*Wie der Kuß von ihrem Mund / Den sie mir einst gegeben...*], in Draper's version the kiss is something 'she let me give her'. This is not just a semantic shift, but one which upsets the entire gender dynamic. The female figure is relegated to a passive position, and within the context of the song cycle, the relationship made yet more one-sided in the reader's mind, betraying the original poem.

**Image description:** A colour photograph shows an open notebook, tablet and pencil lying on a table next to a coffee mug.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/3177979#tool-3177998> to see the image.

'I'll Pour my Dear Soul Like a River' (**Rebecca Babb-Nelsen** 2019)

*I'll pour my dear soul like a river*

*In the cup of lily's perfume*

*The lily should softly whisper*

*A song of my love's first bloom*

*The song should shiver and glisten*

*Like a kiss from her sweet lips*

*Once she to me has given,*

*Time wonderf'ly sweet eclipsed.*

Babb-Nelsen's approach differs, with priority given to maintaining the sensuality of Heine's original and the importance of words stressed vis-à-vis the musical ductus, as well as preserving the dynamics of agency in the original.

**Image description:** A close up colour photograph shows pages of Babb-Nelsen's translation notebook. The words of a song are written in coloured pencil, in German and in English, with different colours for each language.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/3177979#tool-3177988> to see an image of the notebook.

## The translation process

The process Babb-Nelsen applied to each of Heine's sixteen poems used in Schumann's *Dichterliebe* follows a pattern:

1. Get a feel for the poem, do 'word archeology' (i.e. delve into the full meanings of antiquated words and obscure cultural references as well as contemporary and literary context required to fully comprehend the literal and figurative meaning of the poem)
2. Study the musical score and identify how stressed words/syllables interact with the musical composition
3. Identify key words in the poem that are the top priority for direct translation
4. Analyze the rhyme scheme and attempt to fit the translation into it organically
5. Analyze the poetic rhythm of the piece and identify potential pitfalls
6. Begin to build a poetic framework based on keywords, rhyme scheme, and rhythm, making concessions where necessary to preserve the most important elements and intentions of the poem
7. Refine
8. Test the translation in practice with the singer and tweak the text where necessary; this is highly individual

## The recording process

**Image descriptions:** Three colour photographs depict the recording process. In the first Vanderhart and Stokloßa are shown reading scores and listening to a recording on headphones, in a second they are rehearsing together on a grand piano, and in the third they are sitting in a sound editing studio with recording engineer Hideki Isoda.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/3177979#tool-3177990> to see the images.

Following a series of discussions, concept planning and rehearsals in Vienna, during Thanksgiving week in November 2021 VanderHart and Stokloßa met to rehearse, then record over three days in Hemmle recital hall at Texas Tech University of Music with recording engineers [Hideki Isoda](#) and Saikat Karmakar. Babb-Nelsen joined for the latter sessions, tweaking language as needed and recording her original poems.

The following day was reserved for recording, but instead involved listening, beginning to edit and select tracks, and finally a last, recorded run-through, just for fun.

## An unexpected moment

On the final day of the recording project, on 26 November 2021, after determining that they

had already recorded everything they needed for the individual songs, VanderHart and StokloBa decided to sing a full run of *The Poet's Love(r)* songs. As he finished the last phrase of the final song, 'The Old and Angry Music', StokloBa was overwhelmed by a wave of emotion that he could not hold back leading to a full, weeping catharsis that was unlike anything he has ever experienced before. In the video you can see the beginning and end of this catharsis, which came as such a surprise to Babb-Nelsen, who was filming, that she stopped recording as soon as she saw StokloBa crouching on the floor. Here, StokloBa describes the impact of this experience

**Video description:** *Recording*, Texas Tech University, 26 Nov. 2021, 2'29" The video depicts a recording session, the camera moves from the singer, StokloBa to the pianist Vanderhart. It captures the emotional reaction of the singer at the end of the song.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/3177979#tool-3576080> to watch the video.

*The ending of Dichterliebe is always sad and emotional, but I have never experienced an outburst of gut-wrenching feelings like this before. It was as if someone had sucked the air out of my lungs — I had trouble breathing, and then I just started crying out of nowhere. It was quite an experience, which I will never forget.*

—Eric StokloBa, Vienna 2023

## The collegiate classroom as a sounding board

On 15 and 22 October 2022, VanderHart, Babb-Nelsen, and StokloBa presented their project: *The Poet's Love(r)* to two separate, day-long seminar classes, which launched the module/course 'Voicing The Unvoiced – Liederzyklen des 19. Jahrhunderts ins 21. Jahrhundert transportiert'. The [course, conceived and taught by VanderHart, Stephen Delaney, and Judith Kopecky](#) is part of an ongoing cooperation between the [Antonio Salieri Institute](#) and the [Institute for Department of Musicology and Performance Studies \(IMI\)](#) under the rubric *Content-Concept-Context*. For an extensive summary of those lectures with direct transcription of the lecture in the form of commentary, click [here](#). The tone of the commentary was a casual and largely extemporaneous academic discussion, and the excerpts below are taken directly from a transcript of that discussion leading to more casual banter and repetition than one would find in a traditional interview or research project.

**Image description:** A colour photograph documents a poster for the performance hanging in a glass frame at the Vienna Volksoper.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/3177979#tool-3515331> to see the image.



## Premiere and reception

The new version was premiered at the Vienna *Volksoper* in March 2024 to critical acclaim:

*With her sonorous English version, Rebecca Nelsen has not only translated this poetry into Shakespeare's language but has also put herself in the role of Heine's adored beloved and responded to him — so to speak, at eye level — with her own poem to each of his poems. In doing so, she has not only removed a certain one-sidedness of the spurned lover, who circles around himself in melancholic despair, but has also told a story that was certainly not an isolated fate in Heinrich Heine's time. It was not for the sake of the 'diamond splendor' of a radiant wedding with a richer suitor, but because her father pursued his own plans with her marriage and her mother — like a blank sheet — did not defend her, that she had to leave her beloved poet. [...] All of this, presented without sentimentality and in the most lively freshness, aroused bright enthusiasm among those present in the chamber music setting of the foyer', writes Ursula Szyrkariuk from Die Neue Merker. (2024: 25).*

Meanwhile critic Dr. Charles E. Ritterband dubbed it *'a very special, successful experiment that the three artists presented this evening'* (2024).

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## Exploring Alternate *Dichterliebe* Translations

If, as Benjamin suggests, translation liberates a work from the confines of its original language, then every act of rewriting *Dichterliebe* — linguistically, musically, or performatively — extends its ‘*afterlife*’ into new realms of meaning. Our own project, *The Poet’s Love(r)*, is but one node in this expansive network. Here, we examine three further reinterpretations of Schumann’s cycle, not as mere appendices but as test cases for the theoretical claims central to this essay: that translation’s ‘*failures*’ are generative, that ‘*pure language*’ emerges through multiplicity, and that art song thrives when destabilized from its historical moorings.

The Erlkings’ folk-rock adaptation, Koen van Stade and Neal Peres Da Costa’s historically informed ‘*reimagining*,’ and Ambitus Extended’s experimental deconstruction each exemplify distinct facets of translation’s emancipatory potential. Like our AI-generated visuals, these projects interrogate the boundaries of fidelity, gender, and medium — not to fracture *Dichterliebe*’s identity but to prove its resilience as an ‘*open work*’ (Eco 1989). Collectively, they demonstrate how translation, in Benjamin’s sense, ‘*serves language*’ by revealing the cycle’s capacity to speak anew across centuries, genres, and cultures.

Crucially, these examples are not neutral. They respond to the same questions driving our research: How does translation amplify emotional accessibility? What happens when marginalized voices (feminine, non-classical, post-human) intervene in canonical works? And how might such interventions model a more ethical engagement with musical tradition? By placing these case studies in dialogue with our own practice, we underscore translation’s role not as a derivative act but as a vital, philosophical practice — one that ensures *Dichterliebe* remains a living, contested, and infinitely renewable artifact

### I. The Erlkings

The Erlkings’ folk-rock *Dichterliebe* exemplifies Benjamin’s notion of translation as a ‘mode’ rather than a replica — where the ‘*pure language*’ of Heine’s poetry is not preserved but reactivated through contemporary sonic vernacular. By grafting Schumann’s Lied aesthetics onto guitar and drums, the ensemble emancipates the cycle from its nineteenth-century vessel, proving Eco’s claim that every translation is a negotiation with the present. Their process mirrors our own: a deliberate surrender of lexical fidelity to amplify emotional resonance, inviting audiences to hear Heine’s irony and Schumann’s longing through the prism of rock’s raw immediacy.

**Image description:** A black and white image shows the CD cover art for *The Erlkings, Schumann, Dichterliebe op. 48* (image used with permission of Bryan Benner/The Erlkings, illustrations by André Breinbauer)

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/3178170#tool-3178178> to see the image.

## Schumann... Rock?

The Erlkings, self-described as a ‘*bridge between today’s beloved genre of acoustic Singer Songwriters and the great Lied composers of the past*’ (Muvac n.d.), recorded their rendition of *Dichterliebe* and [released it in 2020](#) under Rocket Dog Records in a folk-rock, English language version performed by voice, guitar, cello, tuba and drums.

The endeavor, described by scholar Richard Stokes as ‘*paving the way for a new generation*’ and ‘*offering a new perspective on a repertoire already prized by so many*’ (Stokes n.d.) takes Schubert, Schumann, and Beethoven songs and cycles and reworks them both linguistically and musically and sells out festivals and concert halls alike. In two separate interviews on 12 and 14 October 2022, Erlkings frontman (vocals, guitar) founder and translator Bryan Benner, cellist Ivan Turkalj, and percussionist Thomas Toppler spoke with VanderHart (in a mix of German and English) about their *Dichterliebep*project, the ensemble, and what their translations processes have yielded for them. Selected clips from their interviews are made available below.

### Audio descriptions:

Five audio files present sections of interviews with members of the Erlkings in English and German.

- 1) The Erlkings’ origin story (EN), Vienna, 14 Oct. 4’50”
- 2) What is The Erlkings? (EN & DE), Vienna, 12 & 14 Oct. 2’42”
- 3) On translating song & Heine (EN), Vienna, 14 Oct. 6’50”
- 4) The Erlkings’ particular translation process (EN & DE), Vienna, 12 & 14 Oct. 4’18”
- 5) On English as the ‘musical mother tongue’ in German speaking countries (EN & DE), Vienna, 12 & 14 Oct. 2’42”

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/3178170#tool-3178180> to listen to the recordings.

**Video description:** *Dichterliebe* Nr. 5; The Erlkings live (at home) 2019

A video presents the four musicians performing together, using an online video conferencing software.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/3178170#tool-3178190> to watch the video.

## II. *Dichterliebe, Reimagined* at the Sydney Conservatory of Music

Koen van Stade and Neal Peres Da Costa's Historically Informed Performance Practice (HIPP) intervention aligns with Vermeer's Skopos theory: Their translation is goal-oriented, seeking to 'liberate' (Benjamin) *Dichterliebe* from anachronistic performance traditions. By excavating nineteenth-century vocal techniques and pianism, they translate not just text but time itself — revealing how historical distance, like linguistic distance, demands creative reconstruction. Their work challenges the myth of an 'original' version, paralleling our project's feminist interrogation of the cycle's gendered assumptions through spoken-poetry interludes.

**Image description:** A colour photograph portrays the tenor Koen van Stade and pianist Neal Peres Da Costa (photo credit: Robert Catto)

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/3178170#tool-3178240> to see the image.

**Audio description:** An audio file presents a recording of *Dichterliebe, Reimagined* by Koen van Stade and Neal Peres Da Costa.

*Dichterliebe, Reimagined* is the intellectual and artistic property of Koen van Stade and Neal Peres Da Costa and is published here with permission of Deux-Elles Classical Recordings. Producers Francis Greep and Nicolas Kennedy; audio and editing by Patrick Mullins; piano preparation: Terry Harper

It was recorded on the 12–14 December 2021 in Verbruggen Hall at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music of the University of Sydney.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/3178170#tool-3178245> to listen to the recording.

**Pdf description:** A pdf file outlines the concept for *Dichterliebe Reimagined* by Koen van Stade and Neal Peres Da Costa (2023); used with permission

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/3178170#tool-3178239> to read the document.

## Getting HIPP with it

Tenor [Koen van Stade](#) and pianist [Neal Peres Da Costa](#) have dug deep into the performance practice history of *Dichterliebe*, believing that studying the past offers new possibilities for performers today. Drawing on historical records of art song performance from the turn of the twentieth century and documentary evidence of shifts in vocal technique instruction, they have derived new performance practice evidence to inform their radically ‘new’ approach to Schumann’s cycle.

The duo will be releasing a full commercial recording with [Deux-Elles Classical Recordings](#) later in 2023 but have graciously allowed us to bang their drum here. Read the full PDF of their concept to the right and delve into their beautiful recording. The recording is an output of [Australian Research Council Discovery Project](#) (DP1701011976) titled *Deciphering 19th-Century Pianism: Invigorating Global Practices* and project DP220101596 *The Shock of the Old: Rediscovering the Sounds of Bel Canto 1700–1900*.

## III. Ambitus Extended and *Dichterliebe Extended*

Ambitus Extended’s *Dichterliebe Extended* radicalizes translation as a posthumanist practice. By fracturing the cycle into chamber reflections and commissioning new compositions, they treat Schumann’s work as a porous ‘assemblage’ (de Assis) — echoing our use of AI to generate visual ‘translations’. Here, the translator’s task (Benjamin) becomes a collaborative dismantling of hierarchies: between composer and performer, text and subtext, human and machine. Like *The Poet’s Love(r)*, their project insists that translation is not about carrying across but breaking open.

**Image description:** A press photo for *Dichterliebe Extended* of Meredith Nicoll(ai), (photo credit: Sana Lis)

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/3178170#tool-3178275> to see the image.

### Audio descriptions:

Three audio files from 2023 present short interviews with Johanna Lacroix (Ambitus Extended musical director, violinist and concept), Chanda VanderHart (pianist and concept), and Meredith Nicoll (vocalist) in which they reflect on how they recall the project coming to be and what they appreciate about it, in German and English.

- 1) Meredith Nicoll (EN), Vienna, 26 May 1’28’’
- 2) Johanna Lacroix (DE), Hamburg, 28 May 4’35’’
- 3) Chanda VanderHart (EN), Vienna, 30 May 4’34’’

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/3178170#tool-3178279> to listen to the recordings.

## ‘Classical’ datings, musical and textual reflections

In 2017, the Vienna-based new music chamber ensemble Ambitus Extended (musical directors Johanna Lacroix and Silvia Kaniczki) approached VanderHart for a collaboration featuring the song cycle *Dichterliebe* to be performed in concert in a former pea-shucking factory turned into a concert hall in an outlying district of Vienna called [Brick-5](#). The decision was made collaboratively to think about how Schumann’s musical ideas might be [filtered through a modern, classical aesthetic](#) both musically and textually, using a string ensemble (two violins and bass) as well as piano and voice.

In essence, the beginning and end of the cycle were left fairly untouched with the exception of the piano postlude, which was expanded by chamber music instrumentation. The inner songs in the cycle were also rescored for various chamber music combinations. In addition, composers including Sylvie Lacroix, Fritz Keil, Rudolf Hinterdorfer, Alexander Wagendristel, Rudolf Jungwirth, Jörg Ulrich Krah, Maria Gstättnner, and Thomas Trsek were commissioned to compose ‘reflections’ on individual songs or texts: original compositions interspersed between numbers in concert, thereby extending *Dichterliebe* instrumentally, compositionally, and also temporally. Singer Meredith Nicoll (at the time Nicollai) was brought in, taking on what is broadly seen as a male role. For the second half of the evening, poets Andrea Heuser and Semier Insayif each penned a text based on Heine’s ‘Und wüssten’s die Blumen, die kleinen’, which became the basis for newly composed songs as well as original instrumental compositions.

### In addition:

A short list of other *Dichterliebe* translations / interventions include:

- Spitalfields’ award-winning ‘[Schumann Street](#)’, where an English neighborhood was transformed for an evening in 2017 into a song cycle setting with each residence housing a single song, translated into the musical vernacular of that musician or ensemble, from rap to folk to banjo.
- CrossNova’s [jazzy Dichterliebe for voice, piano, violin and bassoon](#), as performed by Markus Miesenberger and Heidemaria Oberthür, vocals; Sabine Nova, violin, vocals, and percussion; Leonard Eröd Fagott, vocals and percussion; Rainer Nova, piano.
- An additional English language translation by Jeremy Sams which [Roderick Williams](#) has been performing of late.

These eclectic adaptations — from rap to jazz — epitomize Eco’s ‘*open work*,’ where *Dichterliebe*’s meaning proliferates through cultural hybridity. Like our AI-generated imagery, they embrace translation’s subjectivity, proving that ‘fidelity’ to Schumann’s legacy lies not in replication but in reinvention. Each intervention, whether linguistic or musical, maps new coordinates for the cycle’s afterlife, expanding its emotional and ideological possibilities.

Translations of *Dichterliebe* can open up space for more kinds of musical voices to perform Schumann’s music and a multitude of perspectives to shine through the story. Translation can blur what we see as the limits or restrictions to performance and open up spaces and contexts



for new audiences to appreciate music-poetic works. Translation can allow us to care more deeply for the characters and perhaps even feel or process something new ourselves.

As performers and researchers, experiencing *Dichterliebe* through all these modes has offered new layers of context to the work. Instead of focusing on the inevitable losses inherent in translation, today, when we experience standard performances of *Dichterliebe* in a concert hall, we now carry those additional layers of love and understanding with us. Having made the translation journey, we now appreciate the cycle — in all its forms — just that much more.

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## 'Post-Human': Girl, De-Invisibilized

If translation, as Walter Benjamin argues, reveals the *'unfolding'* of a work's latent possibilities, then AI-generated imagery serves as a distorted mirror — amplifying the gendered subtexts buried in *Dichterliebe*'s historical and linguistic fabric. By feeding Heine's poems and our feminist interventions into an AI trained on Western art's patriarchal visual lexicon, we expose the tensions between historical erasure and contemporary reclamation. The algorithm's *'hallucinations'* — grotesque, surreal, or darkly comic — are not random. They are collisions of the nineteenth century's repressed anxieties (about female agency, desire, and suffering) with twenty-first-century tools that replicate, rather than resolve, those biases.

Like Christine Brückner's *Unspoken Speeches of Outraged Women*, these images force visibility upon what Heine's text elides: the bride's silent grief ('Marriage is a Trap'), the violence of romantic idealization ('Codependence'), and the bodily horrors of motherhood ('Gynecological Horrors'). The AI's failures — literalized idioms, fused bodies, monstrous intimacies — become metaphors for translation's imperfect but necessary act: to deform the original until its hidden truths crack open.

### De-invisibilizing the female

The process of de-invisibilizing the female voice in *Dichterliebe* raised legitimate concerns. We opted to maintain a degree of historical plausibility when giving our second protagonist her own voice, and maintained the nineteenth-century historical setting which is inextricably intertwined with Schumann and Heine's original work. Concurrently, we considered what has been termed the 'Bridgerton effect'. Applied to describe a *'growing pantheon of historical drama that peddles a vision of the past crudely shaped by present-day preoccupations'* (Strimpel 2021), the concern is that while visibilizing the marginalized in period pieces is *'helping audiences become acclimated to seeing more diversity in historical settings'*, giving those characters an unrealistic amount of agency may also be numbing audiences to the historical difficulties and brutal realities for their marginalized group (Conlan 2022). Writing our poet's lover into Heine and Schumann's work is an attempt to reconcile these bundled concerns: de-invisibilizing her, but within a historically plausible setting which neither relishes nor erases her inherent challenges as a nineteenth-century woman.

Here, we found inspiration within a similar poetic model executed in literature, namely Christine Brückner's 1983 *Ungehaltene Reden ungehaltener Frauen* [*Unspoken Speeches of Outraged Women*]. In it, Brückner provides female characters from history, both fictional and

historical, including Christiane von Goethe, Katharina Luther, and Effi Briest with original, powerful monologues (Brückner 1983). Writing when the book was reissued and expanded, critic Klaus Ziermann contends:

*This poetic concept has proven to be extremely productive and enduring, and although the author refrains from theoretical treatises and cultural-historical excursions, the book is among the most interesting, instructive, and enjoyable works written so far on the situation of 'disgruntled women' in world history. Clearly, only a woman — a writer of stature, a sensitive psychologist, and an acute observer of marital life — could have dared this original literary excursion into European history since ancient Greece and captured the specifically feminine in its many nuances. (1997, p. 58)*

## AI-visualizations

Interested in further opportunities to literally visibilize both protagonists, we turned to AI, feeding both Heine's texts in translation and Babb-Nelsen's original texts into the AI program Dream Time Art Generator with minimal historical-aesthetic prompts (i.e. '1800s', 'painting').

The slideshow to the right illustrates the process and both accepted and rejected outputs. These begin with straightforward, but continue through increasingly surprising, responses. These included visualizations which range from the hilarious to the uncanny to the horrifying.

The most common and obvious stumbling blocks for AI art, at least when trained this way, appear to be idiomatic turns of phrase, which prompted overtly literal visualizations; 'no grudge I bear', references to 'masks' and 'pedestals' being the most fascinating. The tendency to blend unrelated artistic styles and producing complex facial features and hands were also common issues.

**Slideshow description:** A slideshow of eight screenshots from the AI program Dream Time Art Generator, show the process of selecting the images for the exposition.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/3178344#tool-3178354> to see the slideshow.

Post-human in no way means non-human. Dreamtime AI Art Generator, like most AI image-generating-systems, is trained on extensive datasets comprised of enormous swaths of pre-existing artwork and images, which have been tagged and identified. By employing deep learning techniques, the system 'learns' to discern relationships and identify patterns within the data until it gets to the point that the AI is capable of generating new outputs based on input prompts, which are likewise text-based (Clarke 2023).

AI does not inherently create new media, but rather re-synthesizes existing media, drawing from a corpus of data and using algorithms to match input keywords. The system will therefore largely regurgitate the same types of images, with all their gendered clichés and tropes, as have existed in art and language prior. AI art generators, trained on a dataset shaped by societal norms, including gender-normative biases, inevitably inherit these biases: *'As a consequence of AI coding and algorithms, the next dilemma stems from bias and*

*stereotypes*,' a report from the Center for Media Engagement at the Moody College of Communication confirms. 'Ask DALL-E for a nurse, and it will produce women. Ask it for a lawyer, it will produce men [...] the algorithm likely can't eliminate stereotypes on the user's end' (Parra and Stroud 2023: 7).

Data is not neutral; it reflects the biases embedded within the cultural and social contexts from which it originates, and that is hardly the sole ethical dilemma inherent in the use of AI. Not only have AI art generators been trained on copyrighted existing works of art without compensation or acknowledgment of the original artists, creating a '*risky precedent for the creative community and industry*', but also threaten to '*stifle the development of unique and inventive ideas, potentially jeopardizing future opportunities for painters, writers, content creators, and other artists in various lucrative industries*' (Steynberg 2024: 2; 6).

Perhaps because AI art generation '*can contain flecks of elements from numerous human-created images, so many that it would be hard to determine what parts came from which piece*,' it serves as a Frankenstein-esque experiment generator, creating novel, life-like monsters from known entities (Townsend 2024: 3). This sometimes holds up a mirror, allowing new prisms, pastiches, and kaleidoscopes through which to visualize women, love and motherhood. While containing only instances of how they have classically been depicted in art, and therefore generally blindly reinforcing gender norms and stereotypes, things get most interesting when the AI '*hallucinates*,' producing the incorrect, the unexpected, or the bizarre (Salvagno, Taccone, and Gerli 2023: 27). While these errors can be dangerous for those using AI for scientific purposes, for artists they can be interesting indeed, revealing how thin the veil between the idyllic and the nightmarish actually is, and perhaps bringing to light latent fears and touching on difficult truths.

Here is a gallery exhibition of some of our top-ranked *Dreamtime AI* hallucinations with respect to *The Poet's Love(r)*, including key text prompts:

*'This man I wed, I do not love, despite this gaudy show. I hide my grief behind a smile, and noone seems to know...'*

**Images description:** Three AI generated images are presented in a row.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/3178344#tool-3178368> to see the images.

The AI's rendering of brides and grooms — one veiled in performative joy, the other unraveling into monstrosity — mirrors the nineteenth-century paradox of marriage as both sacrament and prison for women. Interestingly, although our brides certainly have their secrets, the grooms seem to be dealing with much more terrifyingly deep-seated issues. Marriage is, of course, so codified and venerated in Christian, western cultures as to be universally venerated. It has historically also been dangerous for women in particular; not only are forced marriages still prevalent in many corners of the world, but violence, rape and the stripping of fundamental legal rights has regularly been tacitly accepted as long as it happens within the family confine.

*'I gaze in your dear eyes and see, you've banished all my misery. But when my lips taste your sweet kiss, I am filled utterly with bliss.'*

**Images description:** Three AI generated images are presented in a row.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/3178344#tool-3178374> to see the images.

Romantic ecstasy tips into horror: limbs merge, mouths consume. Here, the AI literalizes Heine's metaphors of love as annihilation, exposing the thin line between adoration and obliteration of the self. From horror-Klimt to figures literally consuming each other, this series could happily be titled simply 'Codependence' or perhaps 'Addiction'. The type of romantic infatuation often lauded through poetry and prose often hints at a loss of self and an unhealthy and untenable degree of dependance.

Series three is titled 'The Aftermaths of Young Love':

*'Never before in my young life have I been so effusively praised. The pedestal, upon which he placed me seems over all mountaintops raised.'*

**Image description:** A sepia coloured, AI generated image of a female figure in a ball gown, standing in a landscape next to a monument.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/3178344#tool-3178379> to see the image.

*'I met him on a summer's day. new life bloomed all around us. What started out as children's play matured, young love had found us.'*

**Image description:** A black and white, AI generated image of a young couple embracing with their eyes closed.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/3178344#tool-3178382> to see the image.

Here, over-effusive infatuation seems to either threaten impending imprisonment or the literal relinquishment of bodily autonomy, mirroring historical risks for women willing to engage in relationships, which could have consequences ranging from physical imprisonment to forced sterilization, legal conservatorships, and involuntary commitment to insane asylums.

*'No grudge I bear, despite my heart's despair. Ever departed love! Ever departed love! No grudge I bear.'*

**Images description:** Two AI generated images depict a woman embracing, respectively, a bear and a man with a painted or tattooed face.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/3178344#tool-3178385> to see the images.

We get it, AI, idioms are hard. I guess our options here are *bearly*-legal bestiality or knock-off Andrew Lloyd Webber? Clearly these images are exploring taboos and kinks.

*'The day has come when our sweet child will lay upon my breast. I yearn, and yet am frightened, my heart pounds within my chest.'*

**Images description:** Three AI generated images are presented in a row.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/3178344#tool-3178389> to see the image.

Motherhood, idealized in *Lieder*, is recast here as visceral trauma. The AI's warped infants and fused bodies echo the unspoken dangers of childbirth and maternal bonds in Heine's era — a counterpoint to Schumann's lullabies. This final series, titled 'Gynecological Horrors & Inappropriate Parental Relationships', exposes the terrors of motherhood, which in the nineteenth century cost a significant percentage of women their lives, and regularly caused both physical and mental trauma. Also, it is clear that our art AI does not understand what women's bodies are for or where the limits of motherly love should be — is that last child literally attached at the chest?

These AI-generated 'failures' are the project's most candid collaborators. They betray what human translators might soften: the violence underlying *Dichterliebe*'s romanticism. By forcing the algorithm to visualize marginalized perspectives, we expose not only the limits of AI (its reliance on biased datasets) but also the limits of the original work itself — its silences, its sublimated fears. In this sense, the machine's distortions are a form of truth-telling, pushing translation beyond linguistic fidelity into the realm of cultural reckoning. To de-invisibilize the female in *Dichterliebe* is to confront the monstrous latent in the familiar.

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Beyond the self-interrogation which appears throughout this exposition in a variety of formats, from text to round table recordings to reported speech summaries, we are immensely grateful to all our collaborators, only some of whom have Research Catalogue profiles but all of whom were excited to know their work is included here. They include:

- Bryan Benner, Ivan Turkalj, and Thomas Toppler from *The Erlkings*, who were interviewed on 12 and 14 October 2022 in Vienna and who gave explicit permission for their video and audio material and CD cover imagery to be republished in this format.
- Neal Peres Da Costa and Koen van Stade of *Dichterliebe, Reimagined* who provided their press images, liner notes and full length recording for this article.
- Meredith Nicoll and Johanna Lacroix, who provided voice recordings reflecting on Ambitus Extended's *Dichterliebe Extended* project for publication.

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## Unexpected Discoveries Through Translation

A Discussion of *The Poet's Love(r)* Project in Two Lectures at the mdw — University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna on 15 and 22 October 2022:

**Image descriptions:** Three colour images are grouped together in a row. The central image is described by the authors as: A candid classroom photo from the seminar 'Voicing the Unvoiced — Liederzyklen des 19. Jahrhunderts ins 21. Jahrhundert transportiert' taken on 22 October 2022. Professor Eric StokloBa, Dr. Chanda VanderHart and Rebecca Babb-Nelsen (not pictured) present their project: *The Poet's Love(r)* to the class. Photo by Rebecca Babb-Nelsen. Left and right of this image are two quotes from, respectively, StokloBa and a student.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/3178067#tool-3178076> to see the image.

### The Origins

StokloBa, the singer in the recordings and instigator of the project, explains the genesis of *The Poet's Love(r)* to the students:

*Just to give you some background about the project, and how it came about, I started my professorship in Texas four years ago, and part of my academic work at the University is research. I was wondering, what can we do? What would be a good research project? So, we considered doing translations. And I thought, actually, I've sung all the big German cycles so many times, and I think there's no good poetic, singable translation to any of them: Dichterliebe, Die Schöne Müllerin, and Winterreise. So, since Rebecca has a master's degree in German Literature, and is a singer, she said, 'I think we can pull this off, starting with Dichterliebe.'*

VanderHart, the pianist in the recordings and a musicologist, describes the original intention of the project: 'Originally, we were planning to do parallel English and German versions and then we did the English and we thought, "No, it's good. We don't need to make another German language recording".'

Babb-Nelsen, a professional classical singer, who holds a master's degree in German Literature, is the project's translator and poet. She explains how an additional dimension

evolved that changed the course of the project. In addition to translating the sixteen poems taken from Heinrich Heine's *Lyrisches Intermezzo* for *Dichterliebe*, she was inspired to write sixteen original poems from the perspective of the woman described in the cycle, the eponymous 'Poet's Lover':

*As I dug into the pure translation work of the cycle, because Chanda and I have talked a lot about gender studies as well, it just started to rankle me the way the young woman in the story is portrayed. It actually came out of a real need to set the story straight for me - after doing so much intense work with the poetry, and spending so much time with each individual song when translating. I also thought, 'this is so one-sided'. One feels like the female character in the cycle is almost maligned from this perspective, that she's this heartless person that loves him and leaves him, and he's suffering and she doesn't care. That's kind of the feeling that you get. I felt a driving need to find a voice for this unvoiced character.*

Babb-Nelsen titled the set of sixteen original poems *Her Side*. She explains that not everyone in the team had an initially positive reaction to this idea, which leads to humorous banter between the three colleagues: *'It was really fun when I told Chanda about that. She was also not super thrilled about the idea.'*

VanderHart interjects, *'I said, "I'm interested, but do we really want to try to do that?" Because it could have been very kitschy. Something like that could go either way; it could be shit. And then they're my friends and I would have to say, "no, this is shit".'*

*'Exactly,'* Babb-Nelsen laughs.

*'Which you would do,'* StokloBa insists.

*'I would 100%,'* VanderHart replies, then assures the students that she has since been convinced of the artistic merit of the new poems: *'I'm now firmly on the other side of the barrier.'*

## **Motivation — Why a New English Version?**

Babb-Nelsen delves into the motivation behind this project:

*I don't know if you have ever been to an art song concert with an audience full of people who do not understand a word of what is being sung. There is a general sense of enjoying the music, but not a deep emotional connection to the true meaning of the poetry selected by the composer. It works differently with opera, at least it works better than with art song. You can go to La Traviata or La Bohème and not speak Italian and still get a good sense of the story from the music, sound effects from the orchestra, the acting and the stage elements of the medium: the costumes, sets, props, lighting. You can understand that there is a tragic love story in which the lovers separate and the heroine is going to die... you will get that context even if you don't understand a word of the language in which the opera is being sung. In an art song concert, that context is mostly stripped away leaving only the pianist, the singer, the music and the text, and if the text is incomprehensible to the audience, it is as if a leg has been sawed off the table.*

In discussion, one female student discusses the relevancy of the project from her own

perspective:

*It was funny because I was just talking to someone about Lied because I was studying in England. He works in Berlin and was saying that in England he finds their approach especially conservative because they don't have the language. So, they really approach it conservatively and for him, it doesn't express anything, because it's not the native language and so you're singing these song cycles to people who don't understand them. This is just such a great way to make these Lieder accessible to the English-speaking world. It is so cool.*

Babb-Nelsen argues that reading program notes is not a true substitute for hearing art song in words that one can intrinsically understand:

*If you look at right brain vs. left brain activity when somebody goes to a concert and they are enjoying the concert and experiencing it, they are fully in the creative side of their mind. If you hand them a piece of paper and tell them they have to read it to understand the art, the analytical part of the brain turns on, arguably pulling the listener out of the moment. What we want to do with this endeavor is to make it possible for a non-German speaker to enjoy Dichterliebe without having to go into the analytical part of their mind — to be able to fully enjoy it in a way that is more organic. So, this was our idea and attempt.*

## **Different Layers of Translation**

Babb-Nelsen takes the students through an exercise in which they collectively come up with the challenges of translating different types of texts:

*'Regarding the translation of texts, there are multiple layers of difficulty that increase depending on the type of text being translated.'*

*'When translating purely technical writing — an operations manual for an electrical appliance, for example — all one needs to focus on is basic information, meaning and clarity. The writing does not need any particular form or style, the translation must simply take a text in a language the reader does not speak and substitute the simplest, most clear version of the same information in the target language.'*

*'When translating prose, for example a fictional novel by a famous Author like Paulo Coelho, suddenly there are artistic layers of complexity to consider — on top of the literal meaning of the text, one must consider figurative meaning, cultural nuance, implication, connotation, and most importantly the individual author's style. The style element is arguably the most difficult for the translator, who must attempt to shape their literary fingerprint into the closest possible approximation of that of the author, but in a different language.'*

*'Translating poetry becomes even more challenging with more constraints and layers of complexity added, including: rhyme scheme, rhythm, meter, stressed syllables, onomatopoeia, and word painting.'*

*'Translating poetry for use in an art song presents yet more hurdles. As a translator of poetry for art song, you are working with a text that has already been interpreted musically by the composer, and it is your task as the translator to fit your interpretation of the poem*

*into a filigree corset of melody, musical stresses of specific words, vowel placement, singability, intertextuality, a textual connection to the period of time in which the music was composed, and understandability vis-a-vis a listening audience.'*

## **Found in Translation**

Stokloßa tells the students about an unforeseen, but fortuitous, side-effect of the project in regard to his relationship to and understanding of the original work:

*When we started to really work on the English versions, I started, even before I knew about the original poems from the woman's perspective, to feel differently about the whole cycle. I started to feel, in a way, even though German is my native language, and even though German is in my opinion the most poetic language in the world, that I understood Heine better singing in English. I can't explain to you why, because ultimately, it's a translation, so it's an interpretation, but it made me feel differently singing it in English, and I felt even better singing it in English. So, in a way, adding to what we've heard before about what translations are for and why we do this, I think a translation is also always a chance to rethink; it's always a chance to reimagine poetry. Because in a way, sometimes if you are introduced to one piece of poetry in your own language, it also really depends on how was it presented to you when you heard it at first. Did you just read it? Was it sung to you? Did you hear it on the radio or in a concert? There are so many different ways. How did you feel in that moment? And that kind of sets the basis for your understanding of specific pieces. And in this case, I had all of this knowledge from the German language before and then did it in English. And to me, it set the story straight. It kind of made much more sense when I started singing Dichterliebe in English.*

## **The Poet's Love(r) in Performance**

*The Poet's Love(r)* is intended to be presented as a complete concert program, with alternating songs and poems, performed by Stokloßa and VanderHart and read by Babb-Nelsen, which gives the audience, in the opinion of the creators, a more equitable portrait of the tragic young couple. VanderHart explains that the practice of alternating Lied with poetry was actually well-established in salon tradition — a specific area of expertise for VanderHart and the subject of her Ph.D. dissertation:

*As a musicologist, declamation was such a part of art song culture in the salon. The feeling between spoken text that you would read together and engage with these new books, in the reading circle, and then singing poetry — that happened really freely. Then, the borders between it were not so strong. And I kind of like that. I kind of like the mixed-media sort of feeling of it and that there's this historical precedent. And I don't think we do a lot of reading poetry out loud, especially not in English.*

Babb-Nelsen adds: *'And we think that can actually add a very nice element for the audience as well. Because this can happen when you're in an art song recital, that it sort of sinks into the monotone. You keep hearing the same voice with piano through the entire evening. And as wonderful as the music is...'*

VanderHart offers: *'...maybe variety is nice too.'*

*'You need to process it too,' StokloBa contributes. 'The audience needs to process what they're listening to... So, the poetry doesn't only counterbalance the singing and the music, it also counterbalances thought.'*

## Inspiration

Babb-Nelsen illuminates the inspiration for much of the original poetry in 'Her Side':

*I found a lot of her stories in the music and in the piano. There's a softness in so much of the music, and Chanda plays it so beautifully. When he (the poet) sings about how much he loves her, it's so touching and it's so true that if he was in love with some soulless harpy, it wouldn't sound like that. Honestly, I find it makes a much more beautiful story if it is this real love. If it is the unfortunate circumstance of the time and not the people themselves that were keeping them apart, and there were so many stories like this one. I think it lends more credibility to his story as well, because what he felt was real. He wasn't a stalker who had one date with a woman and decided they were getting married. I think that this was a real, true connection. These two people fell deeply in love with each other, but because of the time and societal constraints and the fact that he was this penniless poet it couldn't work.'*

VanderHart adds: *'What I think comes so strongly through Rebecca's poetic commentary on this piece and how she translates the poetry too is her love and respect for these two characters. And that's just another example of how you personally read something, and how that affects how you then interpret it.'*

Babb-Nelsen expounds on the theme of truth in poetry: *'I find that I'm the most honest when I'm writing poems. Sometimes things come out of you when you are writing poetry that are truer than you could say in prose.'*

## A Unique Voice

Babb-Nelsen describes the voice she decided to give to the female object-turned-protagonist and how it differs from the voice she chose to use when translating Heine's poems: *'She's much more down to earth, less figurative language, less poetic.'*

VanderHart interjects: *'She's got other problems.'*

Nelsen replies: *'Yes, this is true. You'll see that later. But it stays throughout the cycle that way. She is more down to earth, she is not a highly figurative poet. Her poems are more about what she is experiencing and live less in the realm of metaphor whilst expressing a frank honesty about the precarious nature of her situation.'*

In a side-by-side comparison of their fateful tryst, the poet's words present a highly metaphorical language:

*I'll pour my dear soul like a river  
In the cup of lily's perfume  
The lily should softly whisper*

*A song of my love's first bloom*

*The song should shiver and glisten*

*Like a kiss from her sweet lips*

*Once she to me has given,*

*Time wonderf'ly sweet eclipsed.*

His extremely poetic portrayal contrasts starkly with his lover's more factual description of the same event:

*We meet in secret one last time,*

*I carry out my plan.*

*I give my heart, my soul, my all*

*To my beloved man.*

*There's pleasure, but there's also pain,*

*In this, our final tryst,*

*I feel his heart beat in my chest,*

*He feels my heart in his.*

*And I profess my deepest love*

*But cannot hide my sorrow,*

*Because I know that this pure bliss,*

*Will die upon the 'morrow.*

*He holds me tight as we embrace,*

*I fight the pain inside,*

*If only he had means to wed,*

*I would become his bride.*

The societal and religious pressure especially vis-à-vis the evergreen cultural theme of 'purity' faced by the female protagonist is something that Babb-Nelsen has experienced in her own life and was therefore able to write about with authenticity. She states: *'Well you know, I didn't live in the time period that she lives in, but I did live in the South, in Texas, which is very religiously conservative, and so this element of pressure from society and the religious world*



— *that they are weighing down upon a person, I am very intimately aware of, and so I was able to bring that color to this.*

The weight of this pressure is specifically expounded on in the female protagonist's poem 'My Mother is an Empty Shell', which tells the story of the female protagonist's mother and her obsession with marrying her daughter off as a pure virgin — an obsession that is fueled by the story of the mother's sister who committed suicide after falling pregnant with an illegitimate child.

VanderHart makes sure the class understands the implications of this history for the female protagonist when she realizes that she has fallen pregnant with the poet's illegitimate child: *'Did you guys understand the poem? What have we learned then about her perspective and through those two very brief poems?'*

*'That she has no choice,'* a female student answers:

*'That she's got no choice, and that there's a whole family history that feeds into this as well as all the social constrictions and constraints of the time. And this is a completely realistic thing that happened all the time. Women were first of all, committing suicide very, very, very often in both the eighteenth and the nineteenth century. We'll talk about that a little bit later, but illegitimate children were a massive issue. They were incredibly scandalous and would ruin social chances.'*

Babb-Nelsen explains that she wrote many, but not all, of the female protagonist's poems to correlate directly with the translated Heine poems. Notably each of the lovers has a poem about her wedding. Babb-Nelsen comments:

*I don't know if any of you have ever had the experience of being at a celebratory event when you didn't feel like celebrating. It is one of the worst feelings. Where everyone is happy and you're trying to just get through the evening. And I was imagining that this is what she's going through. And now imagine you're being forced to marry someone you don't love. This wasn't your choice. You look across the room, and there he is. How is this for her? So I tried to put that into words.*

## Reactions

VanderHart, Stokloßa, and Babb-Nelsen presented excerpts of their work, both the translated and recorded songs of Schumann and Heine as well as the original poetry by Babb-Nelsen to both classes and received an overwhelmingly positive response from both groups. One student said: *'You know, with this part, I'm more sympathetic and empathetic towards both of them. I just feel like I want to go to both of them and tell them "It's going to be ok."*

Stephen Delaney, one of the course's co-directors, who was introduced to the *Poet's Love(r)* for the first time in the lecture, observed:

*'What I also believe, because I've been thinking about this a lot, what I really appreciated and what I found very touching and honest is: that it's not like you're trying to justify yourself, it's not like you're defending this girl, there's nothing to defend, and that makes a greater impact.'*

In both classes, at least one student said in a positive manner, that this new, added perspective had an element of 'Netflix' to it, one student even adding that the birth of the child

at the end of the cycle hearkens the next season of the 'show'.

Here is a larger exchange that highlights more of the positive comments from the students, starting with a statement by StokloBa:

*'It evolved into this, where we would add the original poetry, and for me as a German, it gave me a completely new perspective of the whole subject of Schumann's songs in general, where I, because I didn't do it in my own native language, got deeper understanding of what it actually means. That it sounds so weird, but there it is.'*

A female student interjects: *'You really need to go to the essence of it. Expressing it is different, and so you express a different facet of the story.'*

*'Correct,' StokloBa says.*

*'How is it for you?' VanderHart asks a male student.*

*'Same. The translation is so deep,' the student answers, 'and if you take the translation and the original, the German, and you have to think about — it's a new life and a new perspective to you.'*

Another female student approaches Babb-Nelsen after the formal closing of the seminar, but still on the recording: *'I loved the poems! Honestly, it's so good, they have so much depth. It's such a great project!'*

## **'I like them both so much more'**

Students first contemplated what they could extrapolate from the *Dichterliebe* text — reading and listening through Heine's text and Schumann's musical setting — about each key character. They recognized quickly that they knew almost nothing about the female subject, and certainly nothing positive. She betrayed the male protagonist, quickly married someone else (which seems fairly heartless) and apparently drove him mad with grief. Interrogating their own feelings about the male protagonist, though one student recognized that *'it is kind of nice that men were allowed to be so emotional and vulnerable at that time,'* he was primarily characterized as *'sad,' 'suffering,' 'pale,' 'whiny,'* and as *'an unreliable narrator.'*

The suffering artist trope is nothing revolutionary today in an age where depression, particularly situational depression, is accepted as a standard part of many humans' experiences, and it is perhaps harder today to empathize with a continuously suffering main character without more context. Interrogating our own feelings, even we three authors, lovers of this music and this poetry, must admit the occasional desire to shake our poet, and encourage him to pull himself together and find a good therapist.

## **Final Thoughts**

Babb-Nelsen sums up the intended impact of this project:

*I find that it's a way to make something that we love and respect, make contact and touch an audience that may otherwise not be able to make a connection to it. And the main audience that we did this for is a predominantly English-speaking audience. But as Chanda mentioned, I do believe that there is value also for a German speaking audience*

*in this experience.' She adds: 'It was a beautiful experience getting to work with these two and watch them record these new translations.*

VanderHart adds that she believes a recital featuring unorthodox interpretations of known works is absolutely justified and valuable:

*From my perspective as a historical musicologist, Lied was always a very vibrant and very socially engaged form. It wasn't something that people just did in this one format. And we've narrowed the way we experience art song to this one very, very specific, very narrow thing that doesn't reflect the rainbow of what used to be art song. That really engaged with people and with social concerns and with politics and with life and was performed in churches and bars and people's houses and salons and all sorts of different functions. So, I hope what all my study of Lied has given me, and what I hope to convey the most urgently to all of you is that just that you can feel really free. There's nothing that you can't do with song. It's song. And every experience I've had playing with it has never taken anything away, for me, from the original. It's only added to my understanding of how it's traditionally done, and allowed me to engage much more deeply with a text and feel much more personally connected with it.*

StokloBa closes with the thought: *'I think this is the greatest outcome you can wish for when you do a project like this — that it actually goes in a completely different direction from what you've thought and you actually feel much better about your entire project after having gone in a different direction, and that's the beauty of doing academics, of doing research. It's opening up new worlds to our beloved art form.'*

### **Audio and pdf descriptions:**

At the bottom of the page, six audio files contain sections from two lectures at the mdw — University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna, and a PDF file contains a transcript of these.

Audio clips:

- 1) Babb-Nelsen on the audience, Vienna, 22 Oct. 2022, 1'31"
- 2) Babb-Nelsen & students on "The Father" Oct. 15, 2022, Vienna, 22 Oct. 2022, 2'35"
- 3) VanderHart on the historically vibrant tradition of Lieder, Vienna, 15 Oct. 2022, 0'23"
- 4) StokloBa & students on singing in English, Vienna, 15 Oct. 2022, 0'33"
- 5) Babb-Nelsen, VanderHart & students on the final poem, Vienna, 22 Oct. 2022, 0'24"
- 6) Babb-Nelsen & students on imagery in her voice, Vienna, 22 Oct. 2022, 1'31"

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2082863/3178067#tool-3752788> to listen to the audio clips and read the transcript.