

Richard Strauss's Mid-Period Art Songs “Ruhe, Meine Seele”

Qi Huifang^{1,a,*}, Jiang Hao^{2,b}

¹Guangzhou Vocational College of Technology & Business, Guangzhou, China

²University of the Cordilleras, Baguio City, Philippines

^a316287571@qq.com, ^boz_jiang@163.com

*Corresponding author

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Abstract: Richard Strauss (1864-1949) was a prominent composer of the late German Romantic period, renowned for his over 200 art songs. His compositional career is divided into early, middle, and late periods, with the middle period (1891-1906) marking the peak of his art song creation, predominantly featuring themes of love and irony. "Ruhe, meine Seele" is the first of four songs in Strauss's opus 27, a representative work of his middle period, composed as a wedding gift for his wife Pauline. This opus showcases diverse love stories and styles. This study delves into the creative background, musical form, artistic characteristics, and vocal style of Opus 27, exploring how to better interpret the work and how it can enhance the artistic appreciation and expressive abilities of performers.

Richard Strauss (1864-1949), a renowned German conductor and composer, is ranked alongside Schubert and Schumann as a vital composer of German-Austrian art songs. With over 200 art songs composed in his lifetime, he is hailed as a master of art song composition. Strauss's art song creation is divided into early, middle, and late periods, with the middle period (1891-1906) representing his peak of productivity. During this time, he chose poems by poets such as Hankel, Bilbaum, and Dahn for his song compositions, resulting in works with a strong political flavor. In his late period, he frequently utilized orchestras, tightly integrating them with vocal parts. Strauss's middle-period opus 27, comprising four songs, was composed to commemorate his new marriage. Among them, "Ruhe, meine Seele" (Op. 27, No. 1), with its profound emotions and serene melodies, demonstrates Strauss's deep understanding of love. Currently, there is a scarcity of research on Strauss's middle-period art songs, opus 27. Therefore, the performance practice and study of "Ruhe, meine Seele" hold significant importance for understanding the characteristics of Strauss's art song composition and enhancing the musical expressiveness of vocal learners [1].

1. Introduction

Richard Strauss (1864-1949) was a pivotal composer in the late German Romantic period, renowned for his extensive collection of over 200 art songs. His creative journey spanned early, middle, and late periods, with the middle period (1891-1906) marking the zenith of his art song composition. This era was characterized by themes of love and satire, with "Ruhe, meine Seele" being

a prime Figure from his Op.27 collection, composed as a wedding gift for his wife, Pauline de Ahna.

This song, based on the poetic work of German poet Karl Henckell, is renowned for its profound emotions and serene melody. The poem encourages the listener to rest their soul, to attempt to forget all pain, and to comfort them that their suffering is about to end. "Ruhe, meine Seele" stands out in Strauss's art songs for its most melancholic characteristics, demonstrating Strauss's profound understanding of the combination of music and poetry. Through this song, Strauss conveys a tranquility and introspection that transcend everyday life, as well as a deep reflection on love and the hardships of life. This work is not only a representative of Strauss's middle-period art songs but also a heartfelt personal confession, reflecting his pursuit of poetic expression in music.

2. The artistic characteristics of the song

2.1. The harmonic characteristics

Richard Strauss's "Ruhe, meine Seele," (Op. 27, No. 1) exhibits rich chromatic harmony. In this work, Strauss skillfully employs altered tones and chromatic harmonic techniques, which not only enrich the harmonic palette of the music but also reflect his innovation and development of traditional German-Austrian art songs. Through alternating modalities of light and shadow, as well as varied decorative hues, Strauss gives the music a mutable "color," making each melody akin to being adorned in different-colored attire, displaying a colorful and diverse artistic effect [3].

In "Ruhe, meine Seele," Strauss utilizes altered chords or chromatic harmonies as auxiliaries to the primary chords, sometimes surrounding them, sometimes inserting them, or using them as transitional harmonic materials. These different pitch classes and chords generate various tonalities, resulting in distinct auditory effects. This exploration and utilization of harmonic colors make Strauss's art songs more than just a simple combination of melody and lyrics; they become a profound musical language capable of conveying more complex and rich emotions. Through such harmonic treatment, Strauss's works, while maintaining the charm of traditional art songs, also demonstrate a new height in the exploration of harmony during the Romantic music period.

"Ruhe, meine Seele," as exemplified in Figure 1 [2], utilizes block chords in the introduction, arranged in a relatively dense manner, with harmony built upon a bass note of E and employing a half-appoggiatura. The relationship between the two chords seems distant at first glance, transitioning from a first-inversion dominant seventh chord on C to a third-inversion minor seventh chord on F, as seen in Figure 1.

These two chords are connected through common tones and chromatic progression. The chord arrangement in the first measure is quite dense, with frequent use of altered notes, creating a sense of modal ambiguity and thereby fostering an atmosphere of mystery and tension. The appearance of the tonic chord in C major in the fourth measure introduces the tonic pitch through chromatic leading from the bass of the piano part in the first three measures. After the entrance of the vocal part in the fourth measure, the piano part continues with block chords, while the vocal part mostly employs ascending eighth notes. The combination of block chords in the piano part and the fluidity of the melody alleviates the initial tension. The addition of eighth notes in the vocal part makes the entire music more fluid, avoiding stiffness and dullness [3].

(Op.27, No.1)

KARL HENCKELL

Langsam
Lento

(Gesang)

Nicht ein Lüft - chen

(Klavier)

mf *mf* *pp*

regt sich lei - - se, sanft ent-schlum-mert ruht der Hain;

pp L.H.

Figure 1: "Ruhe, meine Seele," measures 1-7.

was dich be - droht!

mp *pp* r.H. r. l.

Figure 2: "Ruhe, meine Seele." measures 38-43

As shown in Figure 2, the first measure of this part uses a cadential six-four chord, leading to a C major dominant seventh chord in the second measure. From the third measure to the end of the song, the tonic C is sustained, with various chords based on the C pitch. Starting from the third measure, it is the subdominant seventh chord of the IV degree, followed by the dominant seventh chord leading to the fourth measure, where the leading tone C is raised, creating an auxiliary semitone progression in the inner voice with the preceding and following chords, C- \hat{C} -C, to avoid incorrect harmonic rules (parallel fifths and octaves). This makes the harmonic progression more tense and prevents the chord effect from feeling empty and rigid. The chord in the fifth measure is the second inversion of the subdominant second-seventh chord of the VI degree, "V" giving the music a harmonic major color, with A in the inner voice forming a semitone progression with other chords, B to A'-A-G, before moving to the main chord in the sixth measure. In Figure 1 that the measures 6 and 7, the melody part

in the uppermost voice of the piano distributes the tones of the main chord to the higher voice, using octave leaps in pitch, coupled with the sustained tonic C, greatly enhancing the colorfulness of the music.

2.2. Lyric and Melodic Features

The first song in Op.27, "Ruhe, meine Seele," combines the poetry of Karl Henckell with Richard Strauss's composition. The lyrics of this song are derived from the poetic work of Karl Henckell, which is characterized by its profound emotional expression and rich imagery. The poetry, through the depiction of tranquil natural scenes, conveys a sense of inner peace and a longing for the repose of the soul, directly and passionately expressing the protagonist's unbearable yearning for love. The entire song is in 4/4 time, conducted at a slow tempo (*langsam*), with the melody using stepwise motion to express a calm mood. However, the accompaniment part is not the same; it uses dense chord stacks and ambiguous tonality throughout to create a suppressed and tense atmosphere, perfectly capturing the mood from the impending storm to the sudden onset of a downpour[4]. In Figure3, as shown in the score of "Ruhe, meine Seele," measures 14-19. This section must be in one column.

The image shows a musical score for the song "Ruhe, meine Seele" by Richard Strauss, measures 14-19. The score is written for voice and piano. The vocal line is in G major, with lyrics in German. The piano accompaniment features dense block chords, primarily octaves and fifths, creating a vertical texture. The dynamics range from *pp* (pianissimo) to *p* (piano). The tempo is marked *langsam* (slow). The score is in 4/4 time.

Figure 3: "Ruhe, meine Seele," measures 14-19

In Figure3 of "Ruhe, meine Seele," measures 14-19, the arrangement of the piano part's block chords forms a vertical stacking of octaves and fifths, creating a vague timbral color with a sense of space. This perfectly highlights the tranquil atmosphere of this section, which aligns perfectly with the lyrics expressing "Rest, my soul."

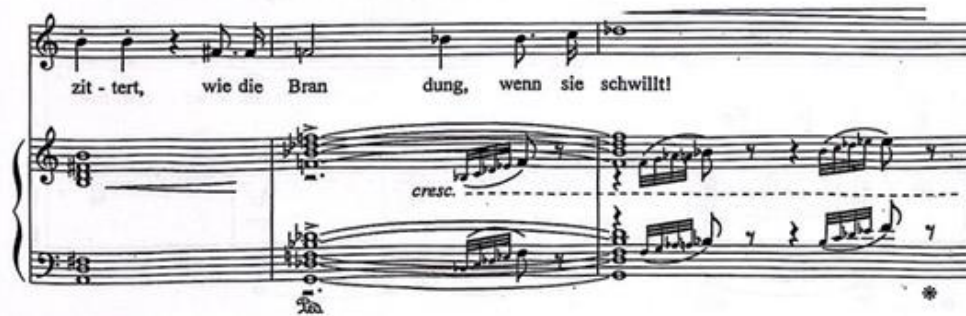


Figure 4: "Ruhe, meine Seele," measures 23-25

In Figure 4 of "Ruhe, meine Seele," the phrase "wie die Brandung, wenn sie schwillt" (as it swells, like the surging waves) is approached by the composer through stepwise melodic progression, building up layer by layer to a climax, and using sustained notes to vividly portray the poetic imagery of the lyrics and express the inner emotions. The piano part continues to employ block chords, but introduces a series of 32nd notes in the middle, effectively illustrating the surging waves depicted in the lyrics like splashing wavelets.

2.3. Voice Part Features

Richard Strauss's "Ruhe, meine Seele" (Op.27, No.1) demonstrates its unique characteristics in art song composition through its voice part treatment. While inheriting the functional harmony system of major and minor keys from the classical period, it adds new colors to the harmony through techniques such as closely stacked third chords, complex appoggiaturas, sustained chord tones, tonal expansion, and chromatic usage, making the vertical harmonic structure more complex and the progression more tortuous and unexpected. Breaking away from the traditions of classicism, it perfectly combines piano accompaniment with poetry and melody. The piano accompaniment is no longer a simple accompanying role but an integral part of shaping the musical image, perfectly blending with the vocal parts. The song is filled with poetic and dramatic ideas in the piano accompaniment. Without the rich accompaniment, singing the melody alone sometimes leaves you grasping for the essence. Therefore, performing Strauss's art songs requires a tacit understanding between the singer and the accompanist to jointly complete the expression of the work's emotions and the creation of its artistic conception.

The first work in Op.27, "Ruhe, meine Seele," does not have an independently exquisite piano accompaniment. Its main significance lies in creating an atmosphere. The piano part consistently uses long-beat block chords, creating a suppressed, quiet atmosphere for the song. The vocal part's melody floats over the block chords of the piano part, gently narrating. In the 7th measure (as shown in Figure 5), the vocal part holds a long note on C#1, and the piano part plays c2 and e2 in the octave above, continuing the melody of the vocal part. In the 8th measure, the piano part still uses a block chord with C as the highest note, which not only echoes the end of the first melody but also closely connects with the second melody. As shown in Figure 6, measures 23-25 of the work, the vocal part smoothly progresses to D flat and sustains on this note, and the piano part adds an octave combination of block chords, filling in the long notes of the vocal part. Richard Strauss skillfully uses this fittingly expressive treatment in the piano part, which excellently sets off the vocal part. This call and response between the piano part and the vocal part reflects the "duet" relationship between the two voice parts.



Figure 5: "Ruhe, meine Seele," measures 7-10.

Figure 6: "Ruhe, meine Seele," measures 23-25

2.4. Melodic Characteristics

The first piece in Op.27, "Ruhe, meine Seele," predominantly utilizes whole-note chords in the piano part to convey a soothing emotion throughout the composition. The melodic line begins with chromatic pitches and a rhythmic pattern of eighth and quarter notes, progressing smoothly with few large leaps, resembling the intonation of reciting poetry as if calmly narrating. In Figure7, the work extensively employs repeated pitches, dotted rhythms, and long-short patterns (such as measures 16-19 and 21-23), giving the music a heavy tone that reflects the ebb and flow of emphasis.

ru - he, meine See - le, dei - ne Stür - - - me

gin - gen wild, hast ge - tobt und hast ge -

zit - tert, wie die Bran - dung, wenn sie schwillt!

pp *p* *cresc.*

Figure 7: "Ruhe, meine Seele," measure 16-19 and 21-23.

The repetition of pitches is akin to a semi-singing, semi-speaking style, with each pitch corresponding to a word, while the left-hand piano part largely maintains a single chord, the hidden melodic lines within the chords proceed in sync with the vocal part. This piece frequently uses block chords in the piano accompaniment for support, and the rhythmic variations in the vocal part enhance the melodic sense of the repeated pitches, similar to a semi-singing, semi-speaking style, highlighting the narrative characteristics of the melody.

3. Performance Practice of "Ruhe, meine Seele"

3.1. Language and Articulation

When performing Richard Strauss's "Ruhe, meine Seele" (Op.27, No.1), the handling of the language is crucial. The lyrics of art songs typically employ lyric poetry, and the performer needs to convey the mood and emotion of the poetry through clear enunciation and pronunciation. In German art songs, standardized articulation is the foundation of emotional expression. The emotions in the song are not only reflected in the melody but also in each word of the lyrics. Language is very

important in singing; if the language is not accurate, the content will not be easily understood, and the audience will find it difficult to grasp the intended meaning of the song. Imprecise language during performance can greatly hinder the creation of musical imagery and atmosphere. In the performance of German art songs, the accurate pronunciation of German words and letters is very important. Since some German words are relatively long, achieving clear pronunciation can be relatively challenging. [5] Before singing German art songs, it is necessary to learn the basic rules of German pronunciation. German pronunciation has the following characteristics: (1) German vowels are very rich, with 16 simple vowels and 2 compound vowels. When singing, the purity and fullness of the vowels must be maintained. Attention should also be paid to compound vowels (ai, ei, au, eu, aeu) during singing; the initial sound of a word must be pronounced clearly and a bit more forcefully, while the final sound should be lighter, not drawn out, and cleanly finished [2]. (2) There are 20 consonants in German, including 6 compound consonants. In singing, consonants should be pronounced quickly and clearly, without omitting or swallowing sounds, and should not be vague. The first consonant should be pronounced lightly, and the final one a bit more forcefully. (3) Pay attention to omissions and ligatures within words. (4) German grammar has rules for gender, number, and case, and the endings of lyrics will change according to these grammatical rules. Therefore, when performing, it is crucial to pay attention to the distinctions in word endings; if mispronounced, the German will not be pure, and the language will be inaccurate. Thus, the clarity and accuracy of articulation are very important. Additionally, words should not be connected in a way that they run together. [6]. (Figure 8)



Figure 8: "Ruhe, meine Seele" measures 1-7.

In the phrase "sanft ent-schlummert ruht der Hain," the words are relatively long and consist of several vowels and consonants. To articulate such a sentence clearly, the singer needs to elongate the pronunciation of the vowels and shorten the duration of the consonants to make the sentence smoother and more naturally pronounced. "San-ft ent-schlu-mmert ru-hlt der Haint." For example, with consonants, the final 'g' in 'regt' should be pronounced lightly, while the 't' should be emphasized.

3.2. Timbre and Tone Color

In the classic Chinese work "Yue Ji" written over two thousand years ago, the viewpoint was proposed that "all music originates from the human heart." Music is an art form that is particularly good at expressing people's inner feelings about real life, especially emotional attitudes. For singers, the handling of musical speed, language, dynamics, and other aspects is aimed at expressing emotions. During performance, changes in timbre allow people to directly feel the changes in mood and emotion [7]. For example, a soft timbre is used to express a quiet atmosphere and deep emotions; a high and loud timbre is used to express a warm atmosphere and angry emotions, and so on. Op.27 is a work composed by Richard Strauss for his newlywed wife, and all four musical pieces are on the theme of love, describing different love stories. The change in timbre during performance needs to be based on the content and context expressed by the song.

Firstly, before singing the song, determine the timbre used throughout the piece based on the content and emotions expressed by the song. For example, the first piece in OP.27, "Ruhe, meine Seele," is an expression of deep love. Therefore, a slightly darker and fuller timbre is needed, which is conducive to expressing the deep love hidden in the protagonist's heart.

Secondly, all four works have places where the mood changes between songs. At the emotional transition points, the timbre must be changed to express the emotions. For example, in Figure9, in the first piece "Ruhe, meine Seele," the lyrics from measures 14 to 16 express "Ruhe, ruhe, meine Seele (rest, my soul)," where the piano part uses vertical stacking of octaves and fifths to create a peaceful atmosphere.

The image shows a musical score for the song "Ruhe, meine Seele" by Richard Strauss. It consists of two systems of music. The first system covers measures 11-14, and the second system covers measures 15-16. The vocal line is in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The lyrics are: "Son - - - nens - schein. Ru - he, ru - he, meine See - le, dei - ne Stür - - - me". The piano accompaniment features vertical stacking of octaves and fifths, creating a peaceful atmosphere. The dynamics range from *pp* (pianissimo) to *p* (piano).

Figure 9: "Ruhe, meine Seele" measures 11-16.

Therefore, the singer should use a more gentle timbre when singing. In Figure10, when the song progresses to measures 22-25, "wie die Brandung, wenn sie schwillt" (when it swells like the surging waves), the melody progresses step by step, building up layer by layer to the climax of the song. At this point, the singing should shift to a slightly brighter timbre.

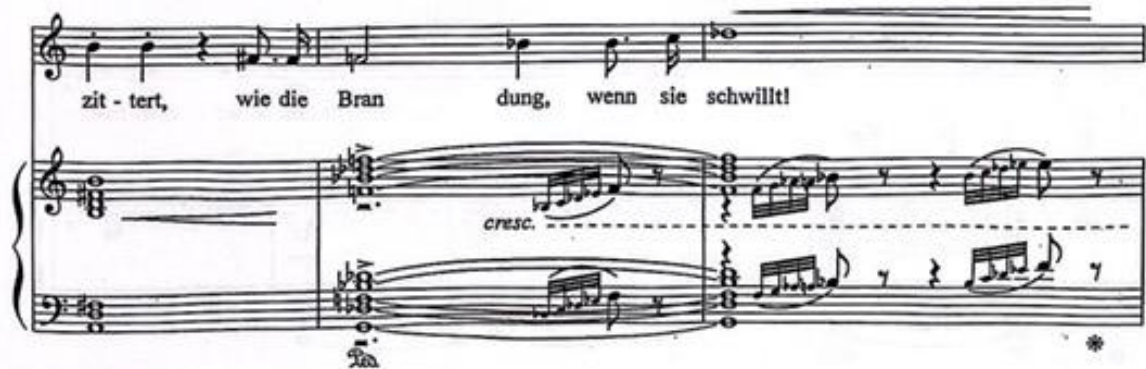


Figure 10: "Ruhe, meine Seele" measures 23-25.

3.3. Vocal Phrasing

Richard Strauss's art songs contain an astonishing power, which is reflected in the perfect combination of poetry and melody, as well as the flexibility of the melody. Some of Strauss's works are akin to arias, rich in singability and melodiousness, and often utilize long phrases to express music. The "Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music" explains the division of phrases as: "The art of phrasing by a performer has an innate quality and is often one of the ways to distinguish an artistic master from a performer with less inspiration, applicable to conductors, singers, or instrumentalists." [8] In the "Encyclopedia of Music," it is stated: "In vocal music, phrasing is achieved through delicate singing techniques, such as correct onset, various changes in dynamics and melodic emphasis, and reasonable breathing." It is evident that the proper division of breathing positions in long phrases is an essential prerequisite for the expression of musical emotions. In this work by Richard Strauss, the use of long phrases is frequent. How to divide the breathing positions in long phrases is very important [9]. Based on the study of linguistic patterns and audio materials of singers' performances, combined with my own experience, I propose some suggestions for breath control between long phrases. (Figure 11)

Figure 11: "Ruhe, meine Seele," measures 21-25.

4. Conclusion

"Ruhe, meine Seele" is a work brimming with emotion and artistic charm. It not only showcases Strauss's creative talent but also leaves behind a valuable musical legacy for future generations. Through the performance and study of this song, we can gain a deeper understanding of Strauss's artistic world and the unique charm and value of the art song genre. After an in-depth analysis of Richard Strauss's "Ruhe, meine Seele" (Op.27, No.1), we can conclude that this song is not only an outstanding representative of Strauss's mid-period art songs but also a paragon of art songs from the Romantic music period. With its rich harmonic colors, exquisite voice part treatment, and delicate grasp of language, it can help master the methods of performing the work, enable performers to fully experience the charm of art songs, and contribute to enhancing the performer's skills.

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