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Revealing Robert Owens: A Study of Compositional Style and Performance Practice in the Song Cycle Heart on the Wall

Jamie M. Reimer

The songs of Robert Owens (b. 1925) constitute a relatively unknown body of twentieth century American music. Born in Denison, Texas, and raised in Berkeley, California, Owens has written the majority of his vocal music since moving to Munich, Germany in 1958. His work appears in anthologies of songs of African American composers, but has not yet been widely recorded or performed. The material presented in this article results from interviews conducted by the author during a residency and subsequent performances with Mr. Owens in 2007.

Owens's songs reflect two major artistic influences in his life: live theater (he is also a professional actor) and early Romantic German lied. His ability to understand and set texts of superb poets, married with a modern interpretation of the German compositional style, produces songs that are both distinctly modern and evocative of a beloved catalog of vocal repertoire.

The majority—and most widely recognized—of Owens's songs are settings of the poems of Harlem poet Langston Hughes. Owens, however, did not choose these texts merely because they were written by a fellow African American; in fact, he prefers that his music not be categorized or interpreted through the lens of the African American experience. He also has composed songs to poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Hugo von Hoffmansthal.

An American expatriate now residing in Munich, Owens's compositional style is a reaction to the classical training he received in Paris and Vienna.

I didn't study composition. I studied the things that one does as a musician—harmony, structure, those things, but as far as going to classes by this professor, that professor, they wanted me to do that in Vienna, too. But they always wanted you to sound like their sound.¹

His knowledge of the evolution of Western music allows Owens to understand formal compositional rules and at the same time conceive ways to break them. The result is a harmonically rich style rooted in simplicity and clarity.

Owens's approach to composition is comprised of four specific elements: creating a musical atmosphere for poetry in the piano accompaniment; use of modulation as an expressive tool, rooted in a moving bass line; develop-
ment of unique formal structures; and avoidance of thirds, both in the melodic line and through avoidance of simple triads in accompaniment figures, focusing instead on seconds, fourths and sevenths of varying qualities. Owens claims that he did not consciously seek to develop the "Owens method of composition," but instead tried to find something that he didn’t hear in other Western art music.

Owens’s song composition is closely tied to his love and understanding of language and to the underlying emotional power present in poetry. It is through his understanding of the poem's emotional intent that Owens discovers the compositional seed from which an entire song will blossom. In order to completely absorb the poetic intent, Owens reads each poem repeatedly, sometimes rereading it for weeks at a time, prior to writing any music.

He is particularly fond of composing song cycles because of their multifaceted emotional character. His song cycles challenge singers to discover the many different emotional colors of the singing voice as they address the many poetic subjects present in each performance.

Unique to Owens's process is the order in which he composes elements of the song. Rather than beginning with the melodic line through which the text will be delivered, Owens turns first to the piano. He believes the piano is the instrument by which the essence of the poem will first be understood. In addition to harmonic foundations, the rhythms and tempi that he employs in each song create an aural atmosphere for the poem. Rhythm, in combination with the harmonic environment established in the accompaniment, reveals Owens's interpretation of each poem he sets to music.

Embedded in his accompaniment figures are elements that will inform the melodic line, although sometimes the melodic line appears to relate little to the accompaniment. According to the composer,

It is always a new experience, according to what the words waken in me—the emotions, or the point of view of the message, or the point of view of the atmosphere... And that is based upon the rhythm in the accompaniment. And the accompaniment becomes something on its own, and the voice goes its way, and then it is a collaboration of several things.  

One of the "several things" that shapes Owens’s songs is his use of harmony. Modulation is of primary impor-

tance in his music, and he cautions that all interpreters of his songs make careful note of the points at which modulation occurs, and how those moments reflect the emotional intensity of the text. In Owens’s music, it is very important to be aware of continuous modulation and the emotional implications of these modulations.

Modulatory passages occur when Owens is thinking about sounds and colors present in the orchestra, and attempting to write those sounds into piano accompaniment. "One has to think of orchestras, rather than just voices, they are all important. This makes it more complicated for the pianist because of the modulations—these are all nuances..." Because of this careful attention to modulating harmony, it is advised not to transpose his songs.

Several of the songs have distinct sections, though few may be considered to adhere to strict formal constraints. He develops the form of each song independently, concentrating on the unfolding of the emotional journey through the poem. While he strives to maintain each poem in its original form without repeats of individual phrases or stanzas, he admits, "If you have a short piece, it’s just one thought, so you have to repeat for the sake of the song structure. But in [song] cycles, you can have just one thought, one sentence..." Without constraints of formal structure, Owens is free to compose melodic lines that serve solely the poetic text and the emotional purpose behind the text. As previously mentioned, his first concern is the musical environment via the accompaniment, which can be sculpted around the need to sustain a particular pitch or syllable, or to repeat a section of the text.

Owens’s melodies are often beautifully lyric—his melodies have been compared to those of Schubert—but if the text requires, they can be angular and awkward to sing, particularly those of the Hughes settings.

In order to express the raw emotion of some of the poems, Owens opts for striking intervals such as augmented fourths and minor sevenths. While these melodies may appear daunting at first glance, they become more organic and easy to sing when Owens's interpretation of the poetic intent is clearly understood. Owens cautions singers not to rely solely on the music to do the work of expressing the poems, suggesting that

... these words, the adjectives, they express something and it has to be expressed in the voice, otherwise you could just be saying...
anything. And therefore, to color these, sometimes it's in the interval, sometimes it's in the harmony, but it has to be in the voice also. And there where you start tasting your words; when the words are tasted, then it becomes part of the voice.  

The complexity of Owens's songs may lead one to believe that he spends great amounts of time laboring over harmonic colors and rhythmic effects in order to perfect his communication of text. In reality, the greatest amount of his compositional time is spent understanding poetic intent, and the rest is inspiration. Owens rarely edits his songs once they are on paper. He feels that the artistic impulse is the truest form of composition, and chooses to trust that the inspiration to put his pen to paper will result in the creation of the sound he wants to hear: "So I then realized this is the inspiration that one has at the moment. You put it down, whether it be words, music. If you have this inspiration, you put it down. If you don't do it in that moment, you forget it."  

As if they were kindred spirits, Langston Hughes's comments about writing poetry agree with Owens's assessment of composition: "I did not consciously compose this poem. It came to me, and I simply wrote it down, and wondered where it came from, and liked it. Possibly I liked it because it was not contrived, inception having been outside myself."

While Langston Hughes's literary and cultural reputation was relatively unknown to Owens at the time he was composing the Fields of Wonder cycles, it is necessary to place Hughes in his proper context in American literary history. Widely recognized for his social and political commentary on the situation of the African American in the United States, Langston Hughes was hailed as one of the strongest representatives of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and an influence on generations of African American artists. According to Hughes scholar Stephen Tracy in his book A Historical Guide to Langston Hughes, Langston Hughes was perhaps the most wide-ranging and persistent black American writer in the twentieth century. From the Harlem Renaissance of the early twenties, to the Black Arts reorientations of the sixties, his short stories, novels, dramas, translations and seminal anthologies of the works of others at home and abroad helped unify peoples in the African Diaspora.

Hughes's collection of poems Fields of Wonder, published in 1947, represented a dramatic departure from his highly opinionated and socially motivated poems and essays.

Inspired by his work on the Street Scene lyrics, the new collection would be called Fields of Wonder and contain only "lyric" poems—verse without reference to race and politics. . And the word later appeared on the dust jacket of the volume.

The critical response to Hughes's foray away from political commentary was mixed. Biographer Arnold Rampersad believes that "in spite of its lyric ambitions, Fields of Wonder negatively endorses the poetic power of Hughes's racial and political sense, which endowed him with also his entire distinction as a poet." The 1947 New York Times review of Fields of Wonder by Hubert Creekmore charged the poems were "largely derivative of Emily Dickinson, Stephen Crane, and E. A. Robinson. Although the poems have a certain appeal, they lack the unique quality Hughes projected in his Harlem verse."

Hughes acknowledged that lyric poetry was not his primary genre for writing, although he found the exercise interesting: "Beauty and lyricism are really related to another world, to ivory towers, to your head in the clouds, feet floating off the earth." The African American community, however, embraced Hughes's new approach to poetry. Mainstream publications also reviewed his fresh approach in a favorable light, including the Christian Science Monitor: "[Hughes is] penetrating, compassionate, mellow in his cynicism, with the most skillful and practiced hand, and an unerring poetic insight."

While the lyric and nature-infused poetry of Fields of Wonder appeared to be a departure for Hughes, the volume contained several early poems. "Heart" and "For dead mimes" (both of which are included in Owens's Heart on the Wall) were written in 1922 and 1923, and "A House in Taos" in 1925. Early in his career Hughes was already experimenting with the power of nature to highlight the pathos of human life. Owens's interest in these words stemmed from the depth of emotion Hughes invested in each group of poems, unhappy or despairing though they may be. It was the raw honesty of these poems, the economy of words and the efficiency of purpose that provided fertile ground from which Owens could cultivate his songs.

The song cycle Heart on the Wall is comprised of five songs for soprano and piano: "Heart," "Remembrance," "Havana Dreams," "Girl," and "For dead mimes."
cycle was commissioned for American coloratura soprano Mattiwilda Dobbs, but she never performed it. It was premiered instead by soprano Rhea Jackson in 1961 in Hamburg, with the composer at the piano, and was subsequently orchestrated for Felicia Weathers. According to Dr. Darryl Taylor of the University of California-Irvine and a frequent collaborator with Robert Owens, this cycle is the most commonly performed of all Owens's works for voice.

"Heart," first in the cycle, retells the story of Pierrot, the beloved harlequin from the commedia dell'arte tradition. Hughes describes the pathetic scene of Pierrot displaying his heart on the town wall, only to have it ignored by the townsfolk. Shamed, he hid his heart away from the world forever. While the poem tells a sad story, Owens reminds the singer that this is the story of a doll, not a human, and should not be sung as if the situation were reality. He suggests that the accompaniment figure is "one of giddy joy and (the vocal line) should be sung with love, as lightly as possible."17

The ascending, syncopated right hand of the piano seems to bubble over with Pierrot's excitement at sharing his love with the townsfolk (Example 1). When the voice enters in the third measure, it is with similar joy and effervescence.

According to Owens, the second section, which details the public's ignorance of Pierrot's most personal and vulnerable gift, is more "monotonous and menacing in tone."18 The music modulates from a bright C major in the opening to a pathetic A minor, highlighting Pierrot's disappointment and heartbreak (Example 2). At the point of modulation, Owens suggests the vocal color must be darkened, incorporating "a little more realism, expressionism."19

A return to the original accompaniment figure and key reminds us that though the story is sad, it is about a doll, much like a child's fairy tale. The A₅ in m. 32 should be sung as an echo, as if one is hearing the distant beat of Pierrot's heart. Owens urges caution in learning the correct intervals in the final two phrases of the song as he rarely uses the interval of a third in the vocal line, preferring the color of seconds and fourths. The conclusion of the song features Hughes's moral, "Now people wonder where his heart is today," enhanced with the highest tessitura of the song, floating over the buoyant accompaniment as it evaporates into Pierrot's imaginary world.
“Remembrance” contrasts the imaginary world of Pierrot with the weighty realism of humanity. From bright C major Owens abruptly transitions to a dark C minor, heavy and plodding as befits the serious nature of the poetry (Example 3). Typical of Owens’s compositions, the initial accompaniment figure is maintained through the first half of the song, providing a weighty, solemn environment for the vocal line. Owens suggests that the singer put “a little bit of weight on each note.” He is very concerned with clear enunciation of the text, even in a rather high tessitura. He repeats the opening text twice in the first section before stating the whole poem in the second section.

The first section of “Remembrance” is an excellent example of the composer’s gift for unconscious text painting. (Owens claims that he does not concentrate on highlighting particular words as he composes the vocal line, but instead writes a melody that he finds beautiful over the accompaniment environment.) However, the use of triplet figures on “wander” and the descending sixteenth note scale figure on “through this” suggests a feeling of drifting through the world, not noticing the beauty that surrounds us. He saves the highest, longest pitches (G5 and A5) for the word “roses” in each of the two sections, as if their beauty is the pinnacle of the life experience.

The original vocal melody, slightly modified, begins the second section, this time accompanied by a rolling triplet accompaniment figure (Example 4). The urgency of this section is enhanced by Owens’s suggestion of poco piu mosso at the third statement of “To wander through this living world,” building toward the climax “roses” on an A5—a major seventh above the bass.

Owens develops a new melody for the final thought of the poem: “is to remember fragrance where the flower no scent encloses.” It sits in a precarious area of the soprano voice—the secondo passaggio—and features

Example 3. “Remembrance,” mm. 1–4; used with permission.

Example 4. “Remembrance,” mm. 11–12; used with permission.
narrow half-steps and a dramatic tritone at “encloses” (Example 5). This compositional choice results in a sense of urgency and intensity, and highlights the poignancy of beauty missed and opportunity lost. Even the final resolution of a downward perfect fifth to D₅ results in dissonance over a C minor seventh chord that then resolves to a B₁ major ninth chord. Though rather unexpected, the final chord provides stability to the song, almost implying that the poet’s advice has been heard and heeded.

A “rough and raucous sort of thing” is how Owens describes the third song of this cycle, “Havana Dreams.”²¹ The somber nature of “Remembrance” is immediately jolted into the flamenco-inspired world of Havana, Cuba, with its seedy bars and sultry flirtation. Owens establishes this environment at the onset of the song with driving triplet eighth note figures and a heavily accented vocal line (Example 6).

Owens suggests that the vocal performance be “quite hard and realistic—the flamenco is not so beautiful,” conveying an underlying desperation in the search for this “Havana dream.”²² The accented duple figure in the vocal line further emphasizes the harsh reality of these worldly dreams. The “ahs” are a vocal representation of the swirling flamenco and finally succumb to the seductive triplet figures, obscuring the reality of poverty and despair. The accompaniment and voice align in lush chords at each statement of “Maybe—nobody knows.” “Knows” is extended with a fermata on a G₅, the seventh of the A₇ chord below it, resisting the inevitable return to the flamenco rhythm. The second “ah” begins like the first, but then hangs unaccompanied as the flamenco underpinning falters below it.

Owens then introduces a “very seductive and sensual” environment for the second half of the song.²³ This statement of “But nobody knows if that is so” is surrounded by block triad and seventh chords built on a descending bass line, leading into a lilting waltz, devoid of the frenzy present in the initial flamenco figures (Example 7). Here, the images are those of beautiful things—a woman’s face, a silver lace fan, a Vedado rose—and graceful eighth note triplets tied to half note chords create an otherworldly feeling. Each of the phrases ends with a languorous fermata, clinging to
the beautiful images, suspended over minor seventh and ninth chords.

Hughes then asks the question—"Who knows?"—in Spanish, the language of Havana: "Quien sabe?" which Owens scores on insistent E5, a sudden leap of a minor seventh from the previous pitch. The attempted return to reality is subverted, however, by the return of "ah" on the highest pitches of the cycle, sung in a "joyous" way, with blatant disregard for the dismal reality of the first half of the song. The final "Who really knows" is deliberate—each syllable is scored with a fermata—and "knows" hangs triumphant over the return of the flamenco figure.

In order to communicate the light, airy feeling of the poem, Owens chooses a waltz figure for the accompaniment of "Girl." Throughout the "prologue" of the story, he still incorporates seventh chords, but they take on a light, fresh feeling in the waltz format. Though the poem tells of the girl's unfortunate death, the listener seems to know that this story will not end sadly. A preview of the girl's bright spirit is evident at the "ah" figure in mm. 34–38.

When the story of the girl's death is revealed, Owens leaves the waltz figure for a persistent, rolling eighth note pattern, propelling the story forward (Example 8). A lyric vocal line tells of the girl's tragic demise and burial. Her voice seems to rise from the tomb in m. 66, floating above the accompaniment, hovering around D5 and E5 as she speaks confidently of her rebirth. The waltz theme returns in recollection of her laughter at m. 74 with the "ah" figure. Another example of Owens's unintentional text painting occurs in mm. 95–97 as the ascending and descending eighth notes illuminate "sway in the breeze." While this is by far the longest song of the cycle, "Girl" is the most accessible of the songs for an audience. Its spirit of hope and rebirth, combined
with the lilting waltz figure, makes this song both a joy to sing and to hear.

For the conclusion of Heart on the Wall, Hughes returns to the story of Pierrot, specifically, the end of his story. Here are composer's and poet's dramatic skills at their finest. Hughes's text is an elegy for the dead Pierrot and his companion Pierrette, drawn in striking detail: the dolls are covered by "crimson snow." Hughes wishes that they rest forever together, undisturbed by the world that shunned them. Owens's music in "For dead mimes" is comparably dramatic, opening with an accented block D minor chord, a sharp contrast to the bright A tonality that preceded it. The tempo Grave enhances the drama, and Owens suggests that the performance be "Turandot-esque" in color and weight. Owens offsets each phrase with a rest on the downbeat, opening space for the dirge-like block chords (Example 9). The drama builds with the increasing dynamic level, beginning at mezzo forte, the second section at forte, and concluding with the final statement at fortissimo as Pierrot's name is proclaimed. A deceptively simple song of only thirteen measures, the weight of each chord combined with the high tessitura creates a theatrical and striking conclusion to Heart on the Wall.

The immediate impact of Owens's music is that of a colorful world of sound coming to life. His ability to capture the essence of each poem in sound is perhaps his greatest compositional gift. While the music Owens creates is striking and effective, it should never obscure the communication of the text itself. Owens often speaks of poetry that takes him to "other spheres," and it is through his music that he takes singers and audiences with him on the journey.

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NOTES

1. Interview with Robert Owens, Lincoln, Nebraska, September 14, 2007.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 133.
15. Rampersad, 130.
16. Ibid., 131.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.

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