In 1984 I published a chapter on the art song, simply entitled “Song,” in my first book, *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After* (University of California Press). The chapter aimed to replace the traditional understanding of song as a harmonious fusion of words and music. With art song in particular, defined as the setting of preexisting poetic texts to music, that aim required shifting the ground of attention from the resemblance between text and music to the differences between them. The chapter prepared this shift with a general consideration of song and then delved into the consequences with a series of examples drawn from the classical repertoire, especially the German Lied—arguably the first fully independent genre of art song.

The chapter has had a fortunate reception, but as time has run on I have found myself, like many other authors, wondering what the same chapter would sound like if I had written it “today.” The publication in 2017 of a collection of my writings, *Song Acts: Writings on Words and Music* (Leiden and Boston: Brill Academic Publishers) gave me the opportunity to give that idle question a real answer. The revised text, under the title “Song Reconsidered: Words and Music, Music and Poetry,” can be found online for easy perusal via the digital depository of Fordham University, where I teach.¹ For reference and citation, please consult the Brill volume, [http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/books/9789004342132](http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/books/9789004342132), which also contains a general preface outlining the reasons for the changes in this and several other chapters. The individual chapters of the volume are available for download from the publisher.

¹ Incidentally, this text corrects a small error about a song by Schoenberg—no. 3 of *The Book of the Hanging Gardens*—that crept into the version published in *Song Acts.*
The present short supplement adds a few ideas for which the revised chapter had no room. The first and last entries are theoretical reflections; those in between provide further comments on a pair of famous Lieder by Schubert that receive close scrutiny in the chapter.

--In interpreting the art song, and (with due allowances for differences of genre) in interpreting song more generally, we can choose to focus either on what the song aims to accomplish relative to its text or on the state of mind projected as the origin of that aim. In other words, we can focus either on the act of utterance or on the subject-position of the figure who makes the utterance. (The subject-position is a historically situated frame of reference in which particular feelings and attitudes become available.) Both focal points are always theoretically in play, but in practice attention to one draws attention away from the other.

In focusing on the song as act, as “song act” in parallel to “speech act” (an utterance that does something in being uttered), we enter the field of text-music relations: the interpreting, reimagining, appropriating, refashioning, incorporating, and so on, of text by music. The chapter takes this field as primary. The act may stem from multiple sources in any combination: the song’s protagonist, the piano part, the agency of the song as a whole, or the singer. The primary scene of action may be either an actual or possible performance of the music or the plan of the music performed. The venues always overlap, but they often jostle for priority. The song in this aspect functions as a model of significant action in a particular milieu, as one agent or another accomplishes an end, or tries to, by rearticulating the poetic text. The action may concentrate on what the music does either to the text or through the text or both.

In focusing instead on the subject-position from which the act issues, we enter the field of identification and the wide accompanying panoply of wishes, fantasies, memories, pleasures, and pains. The song in this aspect gives the listener leeway to identify with any, all, or none of the
subject-positions involved in it or in its performance. For any given song, the listener, interpreter, or performer (who may be the same person) must make an individual decision, based either on the song's expressive behavior or its cultural and intertextual resonances or both, on how and how closely to become involved with, how and how much to embrace or alter, what they hear as the song’s habit of being.

These two modes of interpreting the Lied clearly overlap in practice and it would be pedantic to try to separate them too cleanly. But the two modes would seem to have different primary purposes. The song-act mode is interrogative, destabilizing, and potentially critical--practically if not always conceptually--of ideological persuasions, though always subject to correction by them. The subject-position mode is usually more compliant, a mechanism by which the work of ideology gets done, though sometimes at the cost of being subverted from within. The song-act mode probes or extrapolates from the text’s lyric imagery; the subject-position mode invites the audience to yield to the imagery with little or no reflection. By being sensitive to the interplay between these modes, we can grasp the social positioning of the text’s lyric imagery and the music’s response to it without either sanctifying or vilifying the results.

In their uneasy coexistence, these tendencies surrounding the art song make explicit a fluctuation latent in all song between the dispersal and concentration of the sense of self. Song is transpersonal; in principle anyone can sing to anyone else. Yet sometimes song is as personal as can be; in the right circumstances, it seems to address the listener in the listener’s most intimate core.

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2 On this topic see Subjectivity in European Song: Time, Place, and Identity, a special issue of Nineteenth-Century Music (41:1, Spring 2017) edited by Benedict Taylor and Ceri Owen.
"Gretchen am Spinnrade." The Gretchen of Goethe’s Faust sings this lament at her spinning wheel after the thoughtless Faust has seduced and abandoned her. Schubert’s setting, my chapter suggests, reverses the emotional logic found in the poem. The song finds anguish where the poem finds relief. Schubert thus rewrites the text in the process of incorporating it into a work of music—something typical of him and exemplary for the subsequent fortunes of the Lied.

But perhaps Schubert is not alone. Perhaps he found (as so many artists do) that the characters he has imagined have their own agency. As well as Schubert, Gretchen may be taken as the original artist who rewrites Goethe’s ballad and in so doing becomes the owner and author of her own story. The song concludes with unauthorized repetitions of the poem’s final verse, together with the concentration and ultimately the rewriting of the verse itself. These changes become an explicit vehicle for the strange animation of Gretchen’s fictional voice. Her utterances, and the elaborations and intensifications that the accompaniment brings to them, may be taken as affirmations of the self in suffering, by suffering. The affirmations answer a shocked silence that follows a climactic outburst at the song’s center on the word "Kuss" (kiss). The spinner becomes her own Fate at the wheel, and her spinning resonates with the ancient idea of weaving as the feminine form of art or storytelling par excellence. The migration inward of the spinning figure heard throughout, from an imitation of the wheel to an echo of wheeling emotion, dramatizes this process. Each increase in desire is an increase in despair, and vice versa. Gretchen is someone formed by, appropriated by, a desire that cannot be legitimized. And this observation returns us to the repetitions at the close, which, climaxing on the words "vergehen sollt" (should swoon away, expressive of Gretchen’s despairing desire) act as the
means of an (impossible) attempt to master trauma in retrospect: to be present at one’s own disappearance.

Schubert's capacity to imagine feminine subject positions such as Gretchen's renders the sex of the singing subject indeterminate both in itself and in relation to sexuality. Is the voice one hears in this song (not the timbre, but the subject-voice) a man’s or a woman’s? What sense does it make to ask? One can identify with a sexed position either with or without identifying with the sex of the position. Schubert avoids putting his women in quotation marks, so to speak, and therefore keeps the question open. His practice also tends to identify the indeterminacy of the subject in relation to the symbolic order—the principle that the subject cannot avoid symbolic imperatives but also cannot be fully captured by them—with the difference between a sex and a sexed position. The difference yields the space of indeterminacy in which desire appears. One can, however, only desire a sexed object (at least we used to think so), even if the sex of the object is mixed or fused. Is the way that one occupies a position of identification an ideologically influenced back-formation from the sex of the object of desire? And is this true (if it is true) only after the sex of those whom one desires becomes constitutive of the subject's character, or is it true, albeit differently, in general?

--"Erlkönig." Goethe wrote the ballad on which this song is based for one of his plays. The song is to be sung onstage, as if it actually were an old ballad, by the female protagonist. The effect is one of distance: the narrative is about the desperate, and futile, effort of a father to save his son from the clutches of a figure that the son regards as a kind of wood demon and the father dismisses as a hallucination. The text is grim but detached, all the more so when sung as if the singer were indifferent to what she is recounting. Schubert's setting goes against the grain of these ironies and presents the ballad as a tragedy, deliberately making a “mistake” about its
genre. Accordingly, in the music both the father and the demonic “Erlking” are the son’s antagonists. At crucial moments, including the turning point when the Erlking strikes, both the father and his supernatural counterpart cadence loudly to D Minor, thus enlisting themselves in league against the son, who obviously doesn’t stand a chance.

Schubert’s breaking down of Goethe's detachment can be read as a kind of cultural protest. It might be possible to find in this song, and in its popularity, a paradigmatic “paternity case” or “paternity suit” in which the father-son bond as a cultural idea is subjected to sharp scrutiny and critique. The obvious question would be why this issue should take such cultural priority. A start on an answer might be found in the analogous paradigms of Antigone and Hamlet as models of tragedy in Hegel’s Lectures on Aesthetics and Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship, respectively. The issue is the relationship of the family to the state and the impact that the stringency of that relationship has on the individual psyche. If, and insofar as, paternity becomes the deputy of state power in the form of cultural authority, it becomes an impossible relationship played out in a life-and-death struggle between father and son--the cultural matrix that Freud would subsequently make famous by generalizing it as the Oedipus complex.

In this connection it makes a difference whether a man or a woman sings Schubert’s "Erlkönig." The poem’s narrative divides among four voices, those of the father, the son, the Erlking, and a narrator. Schubert’s setting is notable for the precision with which it discriminates among both the voices and their accompaniments: frantic for the boy, blandly reassuring for the father, seductive for the Erlkönig, frantic again for the narrator, who is also the boy’s advocate. Sung by a man, the song is a tragedy in little, the tale of a fatal clash between embodiments of the good father and the bad. But the tragedy is deconstructed when a woman
sings the song, because in that case the gender identity of the performer enters the song through the song’s presiding voice: the narrator’s. The other voices are ventriloquisms, no matter who sings, but the narrator sings in propria persona.

Unlike the others, the narrative voice has no textual gender, and so it assumes the gender of whoever performs it. Sung by a woman, the song is both a lament and an accusation. It relentlessly exposes the father’s failure—the failure of traditional paternity—to nurture, to sympathize, to question assumed certainties. In this context the cries of the boy also express the helplessness of a mother notably excluded from the dramatic situation. When the boy’s voice is heard, it sounds in the register a boy would share with a woman, not in the masculine register the boy will not live to acquire.

This critique is present as a subtext when a man sings the song, but when a woman does the singing the subtext comes into the open. And although the female voice that draws it out cannot escape the stereotypes that cling to the subtext itself, the difference that gender makes remains impressive—and irrepressible. The result in any given performance by a woman is indeterminate. The tragic and accusatory presentations may appear in a kind of counterpoint, or they may assume different shades of prominence, or one may overwhelm the other. What will not change is that the gender of the voice makes a difference to the meaning and expressive force of the song.

--“Song is transpersonal; in principle anyone can sing to anyone else. Yet sometimes song is as personal as can be; in the right circumstances, it seems to address the listener in the listener’s most intimate core.” The right circumstances do not involve the use of recorded song as acoustic wallpaper or manipulative underscore. Listened to attentively, recorded song can
elicit a replica of the feeling of being addressed. But recorded singing can always be neutralized; live singing almost never.

The paradox of song is that it intensifies the feeling of privacy by means of a public act. Song is always social. Even the maximally intimate space of a parent singing a baby to sleep depends on an extended network of cultural and textual traditions. At the other extreme, anthems create intense feelings of group solidarity, even in inappropriate circumstances. Nowadays British Rugby fans chant the spiritual “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” to pump up their teams--and themselves--in complete indifference to, or ignorance of, the song’s origin in the miseries of black slavery. When a song does engage actively with meaning, as art songs, following the mandate of their genre, generally do, the paradox becomes a palpable part of the engagement. The music bends meaning and in doing so makes it personal to both itself and the listener. Yet the exchange depends on a primary social act, the address of one person, exemplified by the singer, to another, exemplified by the listener. Exemplified—but also uniquely incarnated. Song realized fully is voice in the flesh.