

Characteristics of key signatures

Does the character of sung music change in transposition?

By
Katariina Holma

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Supervisor: Christine Morgan

Examiner: Stina Ancker

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Introduction and background

In my imagination, there has always been a place for sound I can make with my voice. As an expressive power, I have felt a strong necessity throughout my life to make noise, and as a result of that, I have improvised songs on my own as long as I can remember.

After I got my first instrument, *kantele*, a plucked string instrument, I continued improvising also with different chords. When I reflect on that today, I notice that I have always known which harmony I want for my melodies. And if any text came to my mind, that was meant to fit in the form of the melody. The melody together with a harmony was meant to be the main message of my improvised songs.

I consider my ways of learning and understanding new music exactly the same even today. Text is usually the last thing after rhythm I get interested in, and I especially enjoy harmony and how different melodies build layers in the music we hear from the orchestra. I'm drawn into listening to the story which the harmony has us to tell before a text. To choose to play between different keys for my bachelor essay came from the same interest and need to understand harmony. I wanted to know how transposing my repertoire affects my singing and artistic approach. Are there any significant differences in singing in different keys, or have I learned to think that some of the keys are better to be in as a flautist?

Purpose and research concern

Though I have a lot of opinions about the music I play and sing, I haven't ever questioned the composer's choice of which key they wanted to use in their music. Actually, I used to think quite the opposite. In classical music we have plenty of reasons to just look at the sheet music and play it as it is. We can argue that even that is enough of a challenge. And though we officially accept different keys especially for lied songs, we stick with one version and one key. I think that there is an unwritten rule that we are not even allowed to transpose songs, because we often carry this thought that we should first be technically ready for the piece in the original key before we sing it. My question is, however, what is there to find from transposing your repertoire? Can we find something valuable to our work if we just let ourselves play around and transpose our songs during our learning process?

One more interesting and intriguing angle to the idea of transposing sung material is *the doctrine of the affections*. This theory started among musicologists and got its name in the late 16th century, but was used by composers especially during the 17th and 18th centuries. Its purpose was to control and direct the emotions of audiences - to move the 'affections'. This theory was so commonly used that it had some of its impact left even during the 19th century. That span reaches a remarkably wide period in Western classical music. Because *affections* has its base in text, it naturally found its centre in vocal music. For example J. S. Bach took this theory very far and used the whole circle of fifths, 12 major and 12 minor keys, in his Saint Matthew Passion. In other words, he wrote a piece where he wanted us as listeners to go through all possible emotions.

We should also remember that at that time, before our modern tuning system, *equal temperament*, was developed, there were actual characteristic differences between keys and transposing wasn't as easy as today. That in mind, we can easily understand why some of the

keys are used more often than the others - composers knew which keys and tones made each instrument sound its best and gave the wanted character for the music. But how could all this possibly affect my artistic work as a singer and my voice as a “non-tunable” instrument?

The main questions I set for the transposition work were:

1. What does it mean artistically to me today to make noise in a specific key?
- 2.1 How does transposition affect the character of the material I work with?
- 2.2 How does transposition affect the character I am expressing with my voice?

Method

I chose three different arias, in three different major keys, from three different epochs to work with and to transpose around. All the arias were in major because I wanted the sound atmosphere to be as similar as possible between them. Martin Hellström played an electric keyboard so he could transpose easily to any key.

Material

The three opera arias to transpose into different keys were:

- Che farò senza Euridice* (1762) in C major, written by C. W. Gluck, where *Orfeo* pictures his pure love to Euridice and his eternal sorrow of losing her, his soulmate
- Mon cœur s'ouvre a ta voix* (1877) in Db major, written by C. Saint-Saëns, which paints a situation of two lovers' reunion, but one of them, *Dalila*, has vengeance and betrayal in her heart, and
- Let me look at you* (1998) in F# major by M. Adamo, where the character *Jo* is longing for home, back to her family and sisters

According to affective musical key characteristics, the symbol and character of the material is as follows:

- C major represents symbolically complete purity, and its character is innocence and simplicity
- Db major represents symbolically unusual feelings and is used in turning points in storytelling, only unusual characters and feelings can be brought out in this key
- F# major represents triumph over difficulty, echo of a soul which has fiercely struggled

J. S. Bach used these keys in the Saint Matthew Passion as follows:

- C major represents active love of Jesus
- Db (C#) major represents crucifixion
- F# major represents captivation and crucifixion

Hypothesis and my expectations

It is important to admit that I don't believe strongly in the theory of affections and its power to make us feel in a certain way in a certain key. I may guess wrongly which key I am singing in when improvising, because I don't have absolute pitch. Therefore I believed that transpositions are not going to change the message of the music, and if the message doesn't change in transposition, it won't affect my mood and artistic work either. I believed it is the story, the text and the situation, that set the music, not a specific key. And although I often get most emotional

in songs written in C major, I expect not to feel touched just because I transpose a piece into that key. After all, it is the composer who made the artistic choices, not the key.

My expectation was, however, that these two older pieces and their characters would get affected more than Adamo's *Let me look at you*. Because this modern aria doesn't follow tonality in a traditional way like the two other arias, I assume that Adamo as a modern composer hasn't given any weight to the theory of affections in his work, which leads me to a conclusion that the key F# doesn't symbolise anything for his music. Therefore transposing shouldn't change the character of the music easily either.

Vocally I expected that *Let me look at you* would be the hardest one to sing after a transposition to a higher key, because it's technically hard to sing for me. I also believed that I would feel myself vocally confined when transposing it larger jumps. Baroque oratorio arias I've sung often also in a minor second lower tuning, *baroque tuning*, and it has always felt good for me vocally. That's why I was looking forward to do the same with *Che faró*, which is a baroque opera aria. Overall I was expecting that transposing these big arias with a large register would be challenging for my voice.

There was one relevant thing which didn't pop into my mind before the transposition session at all, simply because I didn't expect it to be relevant. I couldn't imagine that the role character could be affected when I transpose the music.

Characterisation of the process and conclusions

Already during the transposition session with Martin Hellström I realised that my expectations for the work were partly too idealistic for me to answer my first question:

1. What does it mean artistically to me today to make noise in a specific key?

The short answer is, nothing. In my artistic point of view the sound itself doesn't mean anything, before we add a meaning to it. That is why the question is somewhat too abstract. Different sounds feel different in my voice, but the way I experience my voice is not directly proportional to my artistic work.

In an interview with the Swedish composer Mats Larsson Gothe, I asked him how he approaches his writing, tonality and the suspicion of writing in keys as a modern composer. For him the traditional approach of choosing a key is more or less just one method among others, though he admits that he thinks in keys, and not without. I could relate to how he explained that he knows where he wants to land in his music. Larsson Gothe used a lot of adjectives to describe his work, and if I understood him correctly when we talked about his newest opera *Löftet*, a darker tone for him sits lower in the register. I want to claim instead that for me as a mezzo soprano, a dark sound can be found technically anywhere in my register. That depends on which feeling and technique I load my singing with.

Because I've heard several modern composers' music, including Larsson Gothe's modern opera *Löftet* at the Royal Opera in Stockholm, I dare to argue that artistically we don't need *any* kind of key to expose a sound rich in content. I think the question is rather how I can as a singer make the music mine. Even Larsson Gothe said that he doesn't see a point in only singing what a composer has written. This would be tempting to *only* take as a freedom, but it

means also taking responsibility for the artistic process and 'moving the affections of the audiences'.

My second question I set for my work was about the possible effects the transposition would inspire in the music:

2.1 How does transposition affect the character of the material I work with?

Because the session gave me partly unexpected results, I had to attach one complementary question to my list:

2.2 How does transposition affect the role character/storyteller I am expressing with my voice?

It feels logical to think now that when music in an opera aria has a certain character musically, it is there to give the *role character* its power and its natural habitat. When this environment changes - even in a transposition - it automatically changes something in the character itself. The message of the music didn't change in transposition, but the new height of the melody was able to change my mood, my feelings and therefore my artistic approach to the role character.

It was not a surprise that Gluck's aria *Che faró* felt better for me in a minor second lower key, in B major (H major), but I was shocked at how big the difference was compared to the original. Suddenly I had a space in my body to open for different feelings in my sound. Likewise the sound resonating in my body had an opening effect so I could trust my intentions to be "bigger inside" - support and carry my voice through the impulses from the music. The key felt right for the male character *Orfeo*, because I could approach him through more variable feelings than before. One of them was anger. I could feel *Orfeo's* masculinity come into my voice. I felt physically stronger in the lower key, but could still play the character as mentally lost and devastated. I have never experienced *Orfeo's* character like that in C major and I know it must be because of my *passaggio*, the shift in a voice register. It was now "higher up" in the melody when transposing downwards. These sensations I found in my body, I tried to use right away in the original key but it wasn't possible. It hurt in my throat and felt unnatural, I experienced it impossible to be angry. In C#/Db major I had easier times with my *passaggio* too. I think I sang beautifully, but in the higher key it felt even more like I was singing above my feelings and not in them.

Did Gluck write the aria *Che faró* in the wrong key? Certainly not. From around 1762, when the opera *Orfeo et Euridice* was performed for the first time, the standard tuning for orchestra's has risen from A415 to A440 (which makes 35Hz increase). In other words, the key Gluck chose for the aria *Che faró* sounded approximately a minor second lower when he heard it performed, in our B major.

In the aria *Mon coeur* I found more freedom in my voice in a minor second higher key, D major, certainly because my muscle memory wasn't working against me and reminding me of the places which were difficult to sing before. I forgot to think about my *passaggio* and found lightness in my voice and freedom to follow the music. On the other hand, *Dalila* as a role character is, among other things, a dangerous intriguer, and I lost some of that in the higher key. I felt more threatening in the original key, Db major. The C major version, in a minor second lower than the original, was instead all too low, and I didn't feel as powerful and

seductive as I think Dalila should be. I believe that the composer C. Saint-Saëns must have been conscious about his choice of a key, according to how well symbolism of the affective musical key characteristics fits in the aria, but the real magic and character of the piece and his handicraft comes from his awareness of the woman's voice and its registers. It needed just a minor second jump to a lower or a higher key when I already experienced Dalila's expressiveness changed, caused by the shifting in the melody after the transposition, so that my passaggios were suddenly in another place in the phrases. I think it symbolises delicately the effort Dalila needs to mobilise catching her prey. Her attempt can't be too outrageous, nor too modest, not too high and not too low, but every timbre in between them is to be used.

The character of the modern aria *Let me look at you* was indeed not as easily affected by transposition as the other two. Reasons for that I can only speculate about. Maybe it was because the piece modulates slightly so that a strong tonic, a feeling for the first note of a scale, is missing. Or maybe it is because the piece is written during our modern time where an equal temperament in tuning has become a norm. It shouldn't actually be possible for us to hear and sense any differences between tempered scales. All the scales are nowadays *equal*. If that is where a modern composer is referring to, then it shouldn't matter in theory in which key and scale we play or sing his music. I can't decide if that's a good or a bad thing. It was fun and surprisingly easy to transpose the aria, even big jumps up and down and use my whole register when searching for the limits of the character. But either the role character is really flexible in *Let me look at you*, or I haven't understood who the character Jo is, or I understand her too well, or - maybe - the handicraft of writing consciously for a voice fell under the table and went partly missing during the 20th century when new ideas and theories took place after the Romantic era.

Discussion

I learned more from this experience than I expected. First of all, the character of sung music does change in transposition, and it can change a lot. The biggest reminder was, though, how important it is to let go of the sheet music as fast as possible and try to build the music also as a resonance around and inside me, and not only as something I can read. Because I've been reading sheet music nearly as long as text, it enables me now actually to start to remember music that I sing faster by heart. Otherwise there is a risk that I overanalyse my work and don't give it a go. I need to use sheet music as a colleague instead and not as an employer. The music is written in the staves, but the most important is not - my voice and expression.

Another big observation was that my voice is not limited in any way. Like in sports, racing with my voice is about trusting my body and not letting doubts come in the way. Role characters or music may be limited to a certain form, but not me. I should challenge my voice more and maybe play with pieces which are not written for my voice type as an exercise to free my brain from any fears (and passaggio) because I am capable of more than what I've learned to imagine when staring at my sheet music. I could transpose the modern aria bigger jumps than I had thought. Transposition helped me find the lines and phrases better in the other two pieces too. That showed me that I am capable of more than I used to think.

To transpose music I know well could even expose some associations I've created in it. I started to wonder for example why I feel like I would be interpreting an old person if I'm singing

lower in my register. Is it only because that is the stereotype in every opera ever made? It was also interesting to realise how strong associations we build around the sounds we hear from an instrument. It took a while for Martin Hellström to sit down on his piano bench again after the very first time he had changed the pitch of the keyboard, and the noise didn't fill his expectations of how the instrument should sound under his fingers.

I'm sure I'm going to use transposition in my practice a bit more after this, as an exercise to reveal the possible places in phrases where I've been working against myself and clinging on to my passaggio. It can make it easier to find a flow in phrases. The transposition session reminded me also to trust more that the harmony I can hear and feel through my body is a good guide to musicality. I just need to listen, but I *need* to listen. That is easy to forget when singing, not to mention all the other things an opera singer often should do at the same time. Next time I'm working on stage I want to play with the idea of listening all the time. How do I make it possible to discuss at the same time when I listen, to sing and still listen?

To be curious in the same way every day as when testing something new is not realistic or even necessary, but I am glad I could find so many new interesting aspects and thoughts to my future practice from as simple a thing as transposition. It is huge to realise that my body knows (most of the time?) what to do when I set a curious goal for it, a phrase. I think every singing teacher I've had has at some point said that I can't go for the result, but should go for the process. It's maybe the hardest task to accept that my voice is not ready as an instrument, and I can't know for sure what's coming out when I sing, but the sensation of testing and even improvising is more fun than being afraid of failing a simple task. That takes me back to the joy of creating while singing which I already had as a kid.

I have to admit that I'm not any wiser about the meaning of affections and characteristics of key signatures than before. The mystery of how we sense differences between keys and get affected by them is surely going to stay unsolved as long as we can properly answer the question why we get affected by music itself. As an perplexing example of this, Mats Larsson Gothe referred to C major as a pure scale and said that in his opera *Löftet* the wedding scene is in G major - which symbolises true friendship and faithful love - although he wasn't aware of the theory of affections and all the detailed symbolism behind the different keys before I told him. I imagine that something just felt right for him to write the love scene in G major.

To be affected by music is one of the most wonderful things in life and at the end of the day it doesn't matter if we know how or why it happened. It is more important that we can get affected. Reasons behind it are always going to stay partly as a lovely mystery.

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