

## Classical Arrangements

There is something remarkably persistent about the urge to turn popular songs into instrumental “classical” pieces. As if a string quartet or an orchestra automatically adds depth. Especially with vocal pop songs, this often has the opposite effect, it backfires. It adds nothing and relies purely on recognition. Superficial background music, like in a hotel lounge.

E.g. take *Yesterday* or *Here, There and Everywhere* by The Beatles, songs that are frequently arranged or any other arranged song for (instrumental soloist and) orchestra. In the original performances, the strength of it lies precisely in the vulnerable elasticity of Paul McCartney’s vocal line. He pulls words just behind the beat, lets certain phrases linger for a moment, pushes others forward almost casually, i.e., the melody breathes. Another characteristic of the pop song is the grace note (a musical ornament in which one or more small (written) notes directly precede a principal note). Pop music lives from tiny inaccuracies that are not mistakes at all, but human movement.

In many “classical” arrangements, exactly that element disappears. The music is neatly divided into measured boxes of four (or three) beats. Everything is rhythmically correct, everything sits perfectly in time, skillfully arranged and yet, it sounds dead as a doornail. As if the performers are afraid to let the music wobble. The pulse becomes mechanical; the melody turns into a series of tidy note values. What was originally elastic, intimate, and fragile is turned into something sterile.

Perhaps this is because pop music often depends far more on timing and the original sound of the singer than classical notated music does. The notes themselves are not the most important thing, but the way they are placed. Singing a fraction too late can evoke melancholy; entering slightly too early can create tension. In a well-behaved classical arrangement, that freedom is often exchanged for discipline. The result is technically polished but emotionally meaningless.

With a song by Franz Schubert, things are different. His music is, by origin, already more firmly embedded in a developed formal tradition. The phrasing is refined, but also more explicitly notated, more articulated within the composition itself. A classical ensemble has to do less “translation” there; the material is already built for it. But with the above mentioned pop songs (and many others as well), this kind of approach removes the very heart of the music and turns it into a tasteless expression.

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