

Songs from Baudelaire: towards a thick description of poetry-as-song

When Charles Baudelaire published his *Fleurs du mal* in 1857, he could hardly have known what lay ahead. A literary scandal, leading to a trial and a conviction, prompted him to produce new poems and new forms. Prose poems emerged as he also worked on a second, expanded edition of his verse collection published 1861, and eventually a third edition which he was never to complete (published posthumously in 1868). As his poetry began to make its mark on the literary landscape, composers and songwriters began to set his poetry to music, from the first documented setting of ‘L’Invitation au voyage’ by military band composer Jules Cressonnois in 1863 to the most recent settings, such as a set of songs by pop singer François Atlas (whose album *Les Fleurs du mal* was released on 14 September 2018). Collated, documented and analysed over 4 years by the *Baudelaire Song Project*, we can reveal that Baudelaire’s 200+ verse and prose poems have inspired over 1,600 song settings so far, in 25 languages, across 40 different musical styles, by artists from 50 different countries globally.¹ The full dataset is scheduled for release on 15 March 2019 (and will be previewed during this seminar, alongside a prototype SongViewer tool which uses digital data to visualise structural components of poem and song).

Filtering, analysing, and understanding how and why composers and songwriters have been attracted to Baudelaire is a substantial undertaking, which continues to yield fruitful results as the rich dataset is interrogated and analysed through different critical lenses. A key analytical approach is to work towards a ‘thick description’ of a specific song, or a small group of songs by the same composer/songwriter, to gain deeper insights into an individual’s responses to Baudelaire’s poetry. This ‘thick description’ approach, in the context of the *Baudelaire Song Project*, exploits four different stages of analysis, using the combined artefacts of poem + music, in their different material forms (e.g. notated score, audio recording, paratexts, performance information). In all instances, the literary text and the musical text are considered as a joint product, despite the poems preceding the songs by their prior publication in *Les Fleurs du mal* in 1857–68. In order to prepare the different analysis phases, the research team draws on the resources of the Pléiade edition of Baudelaire’s complete works (edited by Claude Pichois, 1975–76) as well as digital textual analysis tools, such as open-source text analyser Voyant Tools, using these alongside further digital tools for score and performance analysis, including an Excel proforma designed by the team, and Sonic Visualiser.² The four thick analysis stages are:

1. Schematic analysis of poems selected for setting to music (outline framework)
2. Statistical analysis of the score using five text-setting parameters: (i) metre/prosody; (ii) form/structure; (iii) sound properties/repetition; (iv) semantics/word-painting; (v) live performance options)
3. Time-bound analysis of recordings (using time-stamp layer data in Sonic Visualiser)

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² Voyant Tools has been developed by researchers at McGill University and the University of Alberta, Canada as a web-based text reading and analysis environment. See: <http://voyant-tools.org/docs/#!/guide/about> (accessed 15 August 2018). The *Baudelaire Song Project* Excel spreadsheet song analysis proforma is available in all of our data tables, and we encourage other researchers to use and adapt the proforma for other song corpora. See: www.baudelaire song.org/data-tables/ (accessed 15 August 2018). Sonic Visualiser is an application for viewing and analysing the contents of music audio files, developed by the Centre for Digital Music, Queen Mary, University of London. See: <https://www.sonicvisualiser.org/> (accessed 15 August 2018).

4. Contextual analysis, including composer interviews, publication details, paratexts, recordings, performances, programmes, orchestrations, as appropriate

The ‘thick description’ approach has arisen organically from the object of study, but exploits the inherent interdisciplinary richness of the research endeavour. Building on foundational work in ethnography (Geertz 1973), recent developments in the humanities from new historicism to musicology have sought to deal with ‘complex sensory phenomena’ (Eidsheim 2015: 1) via an analysis of the embedded networks and contextual source materials that underpin a work of art.³ While much is already known about the historical, social, political, and cultural contexts which shaped Baudelaire’s own poetic production in the mid nineteenth century in France, balancing this knowledge with what we are able to access regarding song settings of his poetry is not always straightforward. Ideally, we would have access not just to a score and a recording, but also to broader source materials, either in the form of correspondence with publishers or concert promoters, or composer or performer interviews, which might reveal, for example, the impetus for setting Baudelaire to music (e.g. a commission, a personal preference, access to a specific copy of Baudelaire’s poems), or the choice of a particular poem (e.g. links with other settings of the same poem by other composers, thematic, structural, or emotional properties of the text which particularly appealed). Taking our cue from the concept of the ‘thick event’ developed by Nina Sun Eidsheim, the *Baudelaire Song Project* research team proposes that ‘engaging the music itself—and the voices, artists, and musicians themselves—may bring us closest to the knowledge about the music’ and, crucially, also to the poetry by Baudelaire which is integral to its design (2015: 182). Using this approach allows us to consider the songs not just as settings of poetic texts by a key nineteenth-century French poet (‘the work’), but also as a series of events (‘related phenomena’) shaped by performance, recording, and audience reception. Considering both the work and its related phenomena prompts a fresh understanding of the underlying poetic texts as they are brought into continually renewed aesthetic contexts.

References

- Baudelaire, Charles (1975–76) *Œuvres complètes*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard).
Eidsheim, Nina Sun (2015) *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press).
Geertz, Clifford (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected essays* (New York: Basic Books).

³ Eidsheim proposes the notion of a ‘thick event’ to account for the liveness of a musical performance (2015: 181–83).