

The Transcriber's Art - #39

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Song without Words, Op. 19, No. 1, (1829) by Felix Mendelssohn

“The essence of the beautiful is unity in variety.” —Felix Mendelssohn

Imagine an early 19th century, upper middle-class household with two bored children—a sister and her younger brother. With nothing else to do they challenged each other at the piano and, incidentally, invented a new musical form that would spread through the continent and across decades. Fanny Mendelssohn and her younger brother Felix were both musical prodigies and the dozens of Songs Without Words (*Lied ohne Worte*) that they composed became mainstays of the piano literature. Felix said, “People often complain that music is too ambiguous, that what they should think when they hear it is so unclear, whereas everyone understands words. With me, it is exactly the opposite, and not only with regard to an entire speech but also with individual words.”

I have always found little success in transcribing vocal music for guitar. Obviously the voice can sustain notes that would quickly die away on the guitar, but beyond that the voice has a richness, a fullness, and the continuously modulated articulation of speech that produce a connectness of the notes in a melody that the guitar can barely suggest. A similar challenge faces piano composers who wish to capture vocal style, and the Songs Without Words were the Mendelssohns' solution.

Many of the pieces have a three-part texture: a top melody line that is sometimes doubled at a fixed interval, a bass line whose notes move as the harmony changes, and a set pattern of quicker notes in the middle to fill in the harmony. This is the texture used in the first of Felix's compositions in this form, found in his Opus 19. The first phrase of the melody after a brief introduction shows the task facing the transcriber. (I have transposed the original from E major to D major and changed the octave so that it matches the guitar transcription on the staff below it.)

Figure 1

A literal transcription of these measures from the piano version is barely possible, and then only with very awkward fingerings and shifts, and by leaving a litter of arbitrarily shortened notes. Nearly all of the notes of the original can be played, but the result would do serious damage to the flow, the continuity and the beauty of the original. And in later sections even this heroic, if imprudent, approach falls apart. Instead of trying, and often failing, to retain every possible note in a misguided fidelity to the original, a better plan is to step back, take a breath and consider the options. The melody in its original contour is certainly essential—it would hardly be the same *Song Without Words* if the song were changed, and the bass line, with its inexorable ascent, is also clearly a vital component of the texture. But the middle voice offers possibilities for managing this piece on the guitar. The quotation from Felix Mendelssohn at the head of this article gives us a clue. For the middle voice, the “variety” is the changing harmony; the “unity” is the uniformity of the shape of the ascending four note arpeggio on each beat. While we cannot maintain the shape itself, the solution is to find another one that can be continued consistently through the piece. We would then be maintaining the variety of the harmony, and a unity of the shape.

The ascending arpeggio in the original is problematic in two ways. The first, lowest note is often close in pitch to the bass note—a combination that conveys richness on the piano but muddiness on the guitar. Second, the range covered by the four notes is difficult to accommodate. Ideally, the four notes would be allowed to ring through until the next beat. On the guitar this requires a string for each note and is just not possible to maintain consistently. Folding the four-note pattern into a smaller range is the logical solution. I tried several patterns with varying success. The first ones attempted to preserve four different notes in the pattern by

simple octave transposition of one or two notes. Figure 2 shows two of these patterns for measure one.

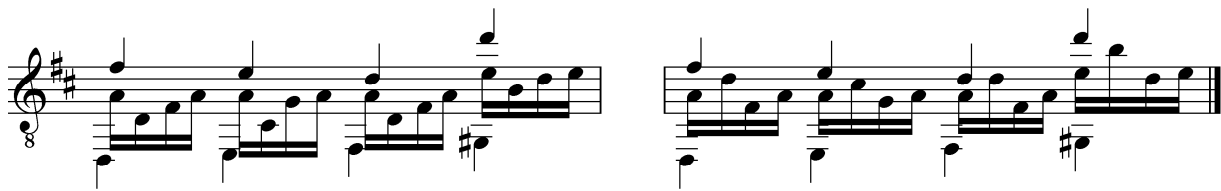


Figure 2

While some parts of these attempts worked better than the original, they still fell short of being practical. More drastic modification was needed and the pattern that you see in the bottom staff of Figure 1 soon emerged as the best candidate. This more radical condensing of the middle voice from four notes to only two risked diluting the harmony and so the selection of the actual notes within the pattern became the next critical issue. The principles of triadic harmony were the guide at this stage. The most common question was: Which note of the harmony can be left out when not all notes can be retained? Generally, the order of preference is to omit doubled notes, then the fifth, then the root, and, last, the third although the last two of these options are often less than satisfactory. If the seventh is also present omitting the third or the root becomes viable.

As an example, on the first beat of Figure 1 the chord is a complete dominant seventh chord. The root is in the bass and the seventh is in the melody. The third and the fifth were retained with a convenient, even idiomatic, fingering. The choices were not always so easy, however. On the second beat of the first measure, the harmony is the same dominant seventh, but this time in second inversion—a “passing 6-4-3” chord. Here the simplest solution was to omit the root of the harmony. Its absence is mitigated by the presence of the seventh, the clear dominant-tonic progression, and the strong contrary motion between the melody and bass.

A further consideration, and constraint, on the selection of harmony notes was the connection of notes between beats. Although the middle-voice notes are not contrapuntally conceived, the principles of chord connection are still relevant. Generally my goal was to have each note in the middle-voice arpeggios move the smallest possible interval from beat to beat. This makes the smoothest connections and prevents the harmony from intruding unnecessarily into the counterpoint between the bass and melody.

Always present in these decisions was, of course, the question of playability. A theoretically correct transcription that is too difficult is not useful. I have tried to keep the transcription within the technical resources of an intermediate player.

This article has described an orderly series of stages in the development of the transcription. In practice the process is always messier as each factor affects the available options in the others. Sometimes no satisfying balance can be found and the transcription must be abandoned, although on rare occasions this is only temporary until a solution emerges later.

Transcriptions preserve some things and change others. The best ones do so while fulfilling Mendelssohn’s recipe for beauty. If you have alternate strategies for transcribing songs with or without words, please get in touch.

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Song Without Words

Transcribed for guitar
by Richard Yates

Op. 19, No. 1

Felix Mendelssohn
(1809–1847)

Andante con moto

⑥=D

p

3

5

7

9

11

13

15

II

II₄

VII

VII

III₂

VII

II

II₄

II

II₄

f ⑤

p

dim.

②

1 2

17 *cresc.* III

19 ② VIII *f* *ff*

21 ② *dim.* ②

23 III V V₃

25 II₄ V₃ ⑤ *pp*

27 II₄ III II₄ III

29 II₄ *cresc.* *f*

31 VII *f*

33 II_3
dim. *p*

35 VII V
cresc. ⑥

37 ②

39 *cresc.* ② ④

41 II_4
dim.

43 II II_3

45 II
dim.

48 ②
pp