

Translating Words to Notes: An Interview with Trumpeter Luke Spence BY JAMES A. ALTENA

Trumpeter Luke Spence enjoys a multi-faceted performing career in the DMV (Delaware/Maryland/Virginia) metropolitan area. He is second trumpet with the Washington Chamber Orchestra, member of the Anima Brass chamber ensemble, and a freelancer with several other orchestras in the area. His performance activities have ranged from period instrument performances of Renaissance and Baroque music with the Washington Cornett and Sackbutt Ensemble to renditions of avant-garde repertoire with groups such as Stage Free and the District New Music Coalition. He is also Lecturer of Trumpet at Frostburg State University and Instructor of Trumpet at Frederick Community College (both in Maryland) and maintains a private studio as well. Spence earned his DMA (Doctor of Musical Arts) at the University of Maryland School of Music in 2020 with his dissertation *Preserving the Narrative of 20th Century Art Song: A Guide for Instrumental Transcriptions of Vocal Music*, in which he formulated a new approach to the adaptation of vocal songs to instrumental transcription by intensive research into the relationship between text and music in song settings by various composers. Now Spence provides auditory evidence to illustrate his theories with his new recital album, *Twentieth Century Art Songs: Translations for Cornet and Piano*, which brings him to the pages of *Fanfare*.

1) *First, let's look at your background a bit. Was your family a musical one? What led you to pursue a career in music, and to the trumpet in particular?*

I'm not sure how I came to music (much less *classical* music), considering that I am the only member of my immediate and extended family that is intimately involved in the art form. We listened to music growing up on the radio, in church, etc. but I wouldn't say it was a core value of ours. However, I'm extremely grateful that my entire family fully supported my musical endeavors straight from the beginning. I started out playing the flute in fourth grade, but quickly switched to the trumpet after being bullied for playing a "girl's instrument." When I reflect on it now, it really breaks my heart. I see how powerfully damaging that type of shame could be to a child, especially one that had yet to figure out he was queer. I wasn't consciously aware of it at the time, but I was constantly struggling to be true to myself whilst trying to blend in. I'm immensely fortunate and privileged to say that after that initial experience, music was typically a safe space for me. I also find comfort in knowing that this absurd notion of imposing a gender binary onto instruments is being challenged—albeit slowly. In the end, it was the right choice for me to switch, only because I took to the trumpet more naturally than the flute. From the moment I started learning the trumpet, it became the center of my life: often a source of comfort and liberation, but at times a source of great frustration. I've thought about this a lot and have come to realize that there was no "aha" moment for when I decided to pursue music as a career. I think it was always a given.

2) *You earned your Bachelor of Music (BM) at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music under Roy Poper, and both your Master of Music (MM) and DMA degrees at UMD under Chris Gekker, whom Fanfare also has interviewed. What in particular did each of these mentors teach you that still shapes you as a musician today? Are there any other teachers you had who exercised a major influence on you as well?*

I am so grateful for both Roy and Chris for what they've taught me over the years. In many ways I still feel that I am learning from their teachings. Roy was the protégé of Jimmy

Stamp, one of the great trumpet pedagogues of the twentieth century. While Roy has plenty of other influences that inform his teaching, learning the Stamp method from him was particularly transformative. Without sounding too religious or cult-like, there was something almost sacred about learning these teachings from someone who studied with this master. Roy helped me to develop a solid set of fundamentals that I now carry with me and pass along to my own students. Without this instruction, I don't know that I would have flourished with Chris. While Roy was rather "hands on" with his approach, Chris provided a wonderful balance that was critical during my graduate studies. Chris' calm, almost Zen-like demeanor and ability to make me feel competent and confident was immediately striking and attractive. I learned so much just by sitting next to him and hearing him play certain exercises; oftentimes, words were not needed. During my years at UMD he treated me more like a colleague than an apprentice. This took some getting used to, but ended up being exactly what I needed. Without saying it out loud, he taught me to become my own teacher by providing the space for me to explore myself, my own solutions, and my own artistry. In my opinion, this is the greatest gift a student can receive from a teacher.

I've had so many other incredible teachers in my life who seemed to know exactly what I needed at that point in time. Rich Lucas and Jeff Brodie were two of my earliest teachers who not only refined my technical skills but helped me cultivate my passion for music. They were, and still are, heroes of mine. Before Chris Gekker showed me that you could be a mentor and a friend, David Matchim role modeled this perfectly. During my *Angst-y* high school years, David believed in me at times when I did not believe in myself. The day before my audition at the Curtis Institute of Music, I remember wanting to cancel it because I wasn't playing my best. He gave me the pep talk of a lifetime and I ended up being a finalist the next day. He also introduced me to the genre of vocal transcriptions by recommending that I perform Schubert's "Ständchen" from *Schwanengesang* on my high school senior recital.

3) *In your "Teaching Philosophy" posted on your website (luke-spencertrumpet.com), you emphasize four points: self-expression, technique as a facilitator for expression, personalized instruction, and teaching students to be their own teachers. How did you come to regard these four points, rather than some others that might come to mind, as being particularly important for your pedagogy? Can you give some concrete examples of how you put them into practice?*

From my answer to the last question, you can probably guess how I arrived at certain elements of my teaching philosophy! In my opinion, self-expression is, and should always be, the main goal for creating music. I have no interest in music that is motivated solely by technique. Sadly, perfect technique is too often seen as the main goal, and I'll be the first to say that trumpet players have an unfortunate reputation for this. For me, I view technique as an essential tool for transmitting the musical ideas we have in our heads into sound that comes out of the bell. That's it! It can be very frustrating when we have a lot to say on the trumpet, but don't have the technical ability to do so. Regarding my third philosophy point, personalized instruction is a common theme with the best teachers out there. Humans are diverse in our ways of thinking, learning, and problem solving; it only makes sense for teaching to reflect that diversity as well. Finally, there's the notion of teaching my students how to teach themselves. I always tell my students, "You see me for one hour each week. This is (hopefully) just a fraction of the time that you spend on the trumpet each week. My job is to make sure that you know exactly how to problem-solve during those moments in practice sessions, rehearsals, and performances." I then usually joke that teaching my students not to need me isn't a great business model!

This part sort of relates to your next question, but I actually use singing in my lessons to demonstrate the ideas of self-expression and using technique as a facilitator. Our voice is the most innate, natural instrument we have, so it makes sense to use that as a pedagogical tool. If you can sing a passage accurately and convincingly, you have a much higher chance of playing it the way you want to. Oftentimes, students who struggle with phrasing, style, or technique just aren't hearing it the right way. It has to do with the sound concept in their minds. It's funny how both music and technique are often improved just through singing—two birds with one stone!

4) The first two of the four pedagogical points just mentioned lead naturally into consideration of your dissertation project and new CD release. Vocal songs are a particularly intense, intimate, and flexible medium for singers to express themselves, and much work (far more than most listeners likely realize) goes into fine points of placement and formation of lips, teeth, tongue, etc., for pronunciation, attack and release of syllables, etc.; breathing techniques; gradations in dynamics and accent; employment of legato, staccato, and tenuto; flexibility in rhythm and phrasing; and so on. Of course, these all have instrumental counterparts. How do you formulate correspondences between the two? And are those correspondences constant, or do they shift with different styles of music?

The longest and most in-depth chapter of my dissertation, "How Elements of Vocal Production Inform Phrasing, Articulation, and Timbre," was devoted to this very topic. We use many of the same bodily mechanisms—lips, jaw, tongue, glottis, etc.—for similar and wildly different purposes. For example, both singers and brass players use wind to initiate the sound; however, phonation (the primary source of vibration) occurs in the vocal folds and the lips, respectively. Perhaps the correspondence with the largest overlap between voice and trumpet involves the tongue. An incredibly intricate muscle, the tongue allows us to create a vast palette of shadings and articulations. There are limitations, of course, but the tongue typically holds the key to creating some of the most fragile, intimate, and compelling moments that you hear in the album.

The degree to which I employ these correspondences will change based on the different styles. For example, the languages of German, French, and English require incredibly different approaches in order to match the sound of it being spoken/sung. French is the most delicate by far; if you listen to Messiaen's "Le sourire", you will notice that many of my attacks use a very soft, almost muted tongue stroke. By contrast, works in English are more articulate and guttural. Libby Larsen's "Big Sister Says, 1967" uses some of the most punching, raucous articulations on the entire album. It's all a matter of appropriateness and what will convey the text/music in the best way. You're very right that most listeners likely don't realize all the effort that goes into song, and most listeners won't realize the amount of effort taken to get these results in my translations. Truth be told, I prefer it that way, as to not distract from the music. If my listeners are thinking, "Wow, that must have been difficult to translate into articulations", then they aren't really experiencing the music or the poetry to the fullest extent. It means I didn't do my job! I hope that my efforts come across subliminally.

5) In the liner notes to your new release, you write of "mirroring the thoughts and actions of a vocalist when necessary" in art songs and of "emulating aspects of vocal production whilst embracing the non-vocal qualities of the cornet/trumpet." When, in your view, is such mirroring necessary or not necessary? Which aspects of vocal production do instrumentalists always need to emulate, which ones are optional, and which ones if any cannot or should not be emulated? Likewise, what would you specifically identify as being the non-vocal qualities of your own instrument?

This is the most exciting part of the process, and by far the most personal and subjective. Since the music and text are of paramount importance, I let those aesthetics guide my decisions. Before deciding to emulate or not, I would ask myself, “Does this serve the music/poetry?” The result on this album, I believe, is a celebration of both the voice and the cornet: a marriage of styles and concepts that bring a fresh, compelling perspective to these songs.

I often start by speaking aloud the text in the original language to the best of my ability (or have a native speaker friend read it out loud). This gives me a sense of flow, meter/form, syllabic accents, rhyme scheme, alliterations, and other important sounds that are integral to the poetry. Then, of course, I’ll read (or create) the translations and write them into the score so that I always know, down to the syllable, what word is being conveyed at any given moment. As we know from great poetry, both the sounds of the words and the actual meanings are important, and thus, worthy of emulation at times. There are some (hopefully) obvious answers to what may be appropriate/necessary to emulate or not. Would it be musically advantageous to end a German “cht” word with a hard tongue-stop at the end of a tender phrase on the cornet? No, probably not. However, other questions can be more subtle and puzzling. I’ll give you two examples of how I aimed to convey the text: one by emulating the voice quite literally and one that embraced the qualities of the cornet.

In Libby Larsen’s “Boy’s Lips”, I used an extended technique for which I pressed down the valves halfway and slowly lifted up while playing. I did this a few times on words that started with the letter “w” in order to mimic a gentle “wah” sound on the text: “We knelt in the tickling grasses and whispered”. No half-valve glissando is written into the music, but the music is written in the blues style. I thought of the way a blues singer might scoop up to the words “We” and “whispered”. Without subtitles, you wouldn’t know that the word started with a “W”, and frankly it doesn’t matter. I only chose to do this to emphasize the bluesy, sultry nature of the poetry and music.

In the final track on the album, “Big Sister Says, 1967”, I abandoned the sound of the speech/singing altogether in favor of more impactful tactics on the cornet. This comical, chaotic, and slightly menacing song is all about the pain that women must endure in order to be “beautiful.” The music is in the honky-tonk style and the text matches the mood with lines like, “Gliding razor blades over tender armpit skin... bristles prick my scalp like so many pins... presses straight eyelashes bold upright with a medieval looking padded clamp” and so on. During the particularly painful lines, “Yanking a hank of my lanky hair” and “Ow!” I utilized a plunger mute and an extended technique called “flutter tonguing” in which I roll the letter ‘r’ while playing. I chose to let the wailing, snarling characteristics of the mute and tongue take precedence over what a vocalist might sound like on those words.

6) You make a point of speaking of your new approach to adaptation of vocal songs to instrumental versions as “translation” rather than “transcription.” Would you elaborate on the significance this distinction has for you?

The notion of classifying these as “translations” actually came up during the defense of my dissertation back in 2020. I believe it was Craig Kier, music director of the Annapolis Opera and director of the Maryland Opera Studio who coined the term. Brass transcriptions of songs are not new, nor is there a shortage of academic writings on the subject. However, to the knowledge of myself and my committee, there has not been a widely known or published effort to integrate the text into transcriptions in a manner this comprehensive. They felt that the word “transcription” didn’t fit the nature of the project, and I completely agree with that sentiment. I believe this approach to be much more than your typical transcription!

7) *The very formulation of this new approach of “translation” of vocal songs to instrumental guises seems to imply or suggest that you find previous practices for this to be significantly flawed, either in theory or practice or both. If so, how would you describe those previous shortcomings and your efforts to correct them?*

When it comes to the topic of physically transcribing songs, I am rather adamant in my opposition to it. Though it may be convenient to have a transposed part on a single staff without the original words, translations, and markings, I believe it to be a great disservice to the performers (both soloist and pianist) and the listener. It raises the potential for all involved to be robbed of vital context that is essential for experiencing the music the way it was intended. I believe some of the best vocalists are also musicologists in a way. They must study all parts of the score, understand the text/poetry in both the written and translated languages, and have sufficient historical knowledge of both the composer and the poet. The composers meticulously crafted every element of the text into their music; why should we not honor that as a performer? Maybe I’m a purist, but I believe that we should strive to get as close as possible to the authentic spirit of the music—not out of obligation, but out of musical satisfaction. I’m reminded of what musicologist Robert Donington wrote in an article on historically informed performance (HIP): “Pleasure, not duty, is the object of the enterprise.”

Now, this is all my personal philosophy, and I have no interest in publicly criticizing specific artists’ versions of these works. That said, I have listened to many underwhelming transcription performances over the years. These less-than-stellar performances often leave me puzzled and curious, rather than upset. It makes me want to know what their processes were.

8) *In working on your dissertation, did you listen extensively to recordings by great instrumentalists past and present playing transcriptions of art songs? If not, why not? If so, did you find that at least some of them were already doing intuitively what you have now formulated systematically? Or, in your view, has virtually everyone until now been missing the boat, so to speak?*

I’ve heard some incredible, even life-changing transcription performances. There are plenty of examples to note, but one that immediately comes to mind is Norwegian trumpeter Tine Thing Helseth. I heard her perform Grieg’s song cycle “Haugtussa” several years ago on a recital and was left stunned. In fact, most of the program contained vocal music transcriptions—it was a great source of inspiration for my project. I’m not certain to what extent, if any, she went to emulate the text with articulations etc., but the narrative was *clearly* conveyed in a very effective way. There were printed translations in the program, but other than that I have no idea what her process was. All I can say is that it was nothing short of awe-inspiring.

In short, I don’t think you need to approach transcriptions in the exact way I do in order to give a compelling performance. I’m sure there are plenty of beautiful performances that have little to no thought go into the text, and those performances are just as valid as mine. I have my tastes and my process, and while I invite others to explore my ideas, I respect the diversity of other artists’ processes and opinions.

9) *You have restricted the recital on your new CD to songs of the 20th century. Why? Is it simply that you have a special affinity for 20th century repertoire, and/or that such a restriction made the recital stylistically more homogenous? Or did the stylistic nature of composition of vocal songs change so markedly in the 20th century from the past that your theory and method of “translation” of such art songs either does not apply, or would require significant reformulation, for songs from the 19th century and before? Are there any periods or styles of*

music (e.g., medieval troubadour lyrics, Dowland lute songs, or sacred arias of Bach) for which your approach would not be suitable?

Frankly, the decision to focus on just 20th century works was made to narrow the scope of my dissertation. Originally, I wanted to include works for many different time periods, but quickly realized that I would not be able to give each time period the necessary thorough research. I even limited the languages to just German, French, and English in an effort to focus on quality over quantity. A tour of song throughout the entirety of Western music history would require volumes, which—who knows?—perhaps I may get to one day.

But why did I choose to focus on the 20th century, when the real explosion of art song occurred in the 19th century with folks like Schubert, Schumann, Wolf, and Brahms? For one, I did not want this project to only contain the music of dead white men. They are great, but we need to move on. The 20th century was an explosively creative period and, thankfully, we start to see a little bit more in terms of diversity. Both Alma Mahler and Lili Boulanger are masters of song. Learning and recording their music constituted some of the most challenging, humbling, and edifying work on the whole album. American 20th century music has even more diversity to offer. Of the four American composers that I selected for this album, only one (Charles Ives) was a white man. The works of Florence Price, Leslie Adams, and Libby Larsen are masterpieces in their own rights and highlight the equally compelling and diverse poetic voices of Louise C. Wallace, Langston Hughes, Rita Dove, and Kathryn Daniels.

The other reason I focused on the 20th century was because this project just had to include the songs of Gustav Mahler. As a trumpet player, it's not hard to figure out why I love Mahler, but once I discovered the *Rückert-Lieder* back at Oberlin, music itself took on a new meaning. I don't think there has been any singular work (or collection of works) that has changed my life as profoundly as this. It was hard narrowing down the five Rückert songs to just three for this album! These songs are so deeply personal and express the human condition sublimely. I even have the final words of "Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen" (I am lost to the world) tattooed on my chest over my heart in Mahler's original manuscript handwriting: "In meinem Lieben und meinem Lied" (In my love and my song). In many ways, I feel like my musical journey experienced its first coming of age with Gustav Mahler, so it only made sense to include these on my album—and as the beginning tracks, no less.

10) As someone who listens a good deal to historic vocal recordings, I am acutely aware of how styles of singing have changed at various times within the last 120+ years in which we have had recordings of songs. For example, up through World War I, many singers were trained to channel artistic expression entirely through refined technical means of vocal production, such as legato and sustained breath line. Then, when the verismo school gained ascendancy in the 1920s, many singers shifted to employing overtly emotive devices such as gulps, sobs, nasalization of tone, etc., for expressive effects. More recently, the HIP movement has led many singers of pre-Romantic music to eschew or minimize use of vibrato. And, of course, there are also influences upon singing of contemporary repertoire from genres of non-classical music such as jazz, rock, folk, and the musics of foreign cultures (Arabic, South Asian, East Asian, etc.). Does your method take all of these different approaches into account and suggest techniques for instrumentalists to produce counterparts in playing "translations" of art songs? Or is it suitable for creating instrumental "translations" of only some vocal techniques and styles but not others?

Very interesting question! My method does not consider all these approaches, although I don't see why it couldn't in the future. And it could certainly be a focus of other artists' transcriptions as well. The sky's the limit here! In terms of "modern" vocalists though, here are

several influential singers who have impacted my style of playing: Susan Graham, Jessye Norman, Marilyn Horne, Anne Sofie von Otter, Thomas Hampson, and Renée Fleming, to name a few.

11) Assuming that your theory and methods become more widely disseminated and adopted, what do you hope that ultimately will accomplish?

I already see some of my methods being adopted, which is pretty neat. I've seen videos of trumpeters playing song transcriptions with added subtitles (which is what my original dissertation project entailed—the videos can be accessed on YouTube). I've also had many discussions with colleagues who have asked me for help with transcription approaches, and had total strangers thank me for introducing new repertoire to them. I hope that this album will help my ideas become more mainstream in the trumpet/brass world and catch the attention of the vocal community as well. I'd love to see what other artists glean from my work and how they turn it into their own. Selfishly speaking, it would also be wonderful to be considered as one of the leading authorities on the subject.

12) Let's turn directly to your new release, Twentieth Century Art Songs. First, what was your reason for choosing the cornet over the trumpet to make this recording?

The cornet is considered to be the more “vocal” cousin of the trumpet. It has everything to do with sound! With its V-shaped mouthpiece and conical bore, the instrument produces a much rounder, warmer, and more intimate sound by comparison. Historically, cornet parts had the more intricate and “lyrical” lines in both orchestral and wind band music. There is one track on the album where I do use the trumpet, and that's on the second half of Charles Ives' “Soliloquy.” Due to the demands of the text and music, I wanted to get a more “in your face,” biting type of sound. The cornet just couldn't produce the sound I wanted. This highlights a huge limitation for the cornet, and underscores why the trumpet eventually became the predominant voice in orchestral and jazz music.

13) Second, as an illustration, please select one song from that release, go through the text here, and explain to our readers in detail precisely what you did with various words—even specific syllables, consonants, and vowels, if appropriate—to translate them into specific notes played in distinctive ways on your cornet.

Let's stick with Ives' “Soliloquy” since we are on the topic, and since it's the shortest song—only 11 measures! The first measure is quite long, unmetred, and cadenza-like. It contains the text: “When a man is sitting before the fire on the hearth, he says, ‘Nature is a simple affair.’” You can easily follow along with my recording while reading this because each note is one syllable. The melody in this measure is chant-like and only consists of two notes. There is no rhythm in the score, so I am literally hearing and shaping the syllabic accents of the words as I am playing them. Two-syllable words such as “sitting” “nature” and “simple” have a natural stress on the first syllable; however, the last two-syllable word “affair” has an accent on the second syllable. Speak this phrase out loud and you'll hear where the natural stresses lie. Other things to consider: the mood is warm and calm, so my articulations are fluid and light to reflect that. After a brief pause, the final section commences with, “Then he looks out the window and sees a hailstorm and thinks, “Nature can't be so easily disposed of!” I switch to the trumpet in order to communicate that forward, biting sound with harsh articulations. I employ some rather wide vibrato and dig into several glissandi to help convey the wild, brutal, and unforgiving characteristics of nature itself. The highest, and most severe note occurs in the second-to-last measure on the second syllable of the phrase “*disposed* of”. Marked with a heavy

accent, that “p” sound should be felt as a gut-punch, which translated to probably the heaviest tongue stroke I recorded on the entire album.

14) Third, while presumably the accompanying piano part undergoes no change in the translation process, the pianist surely also has a responsibility in that part to reflect aspects of the text, and to inflect his or her playing accordingly. Do you deal with that at all in your dissertation? How do you personally work that out with your accompanist, Andrew Welch?

I did not discuss this topic in my dissertation, but I imagine there must be a great deal of scholarly work devoted to this topic for collaborative pianists. The pianist’s job in this music is just as integral to the success as the singer. I couldn’t have chosen a better collaborator to work with on this project. Andrew Welch is a top-notch musician and superb colleague to work with. Most collaborative pianists are used to working with singers, so I think Andrew treated me just as treats any other singer that he performs with or coaches. To be honest, I’m not sure that there was much of a difference for him playing this repertoire—except perhaps having to pause a little less often for me to take breaths. You’d have to ask him! All kidding aside, it was a wonderful, smooth, and even educational process working with him. We are good friends who have worked together on numerous projects before, so it felt quite natural putting this together. I can’t tell you how grateful I am for his artistry on this project. He’s one of the most sensitive pianists I’ve worked with and has an infectious collaborative spirit. I hope we are able to create more recordings together in the future!

15) Switching to a personal note, how large is your private studio at this time? What is the proficiency level of most of your students? And how have you been coping with Covid-19 in maintaining your teaching and performance schedule?

Excluding my college students, my private studio hovers at around 20 students from all over the country, ranging from beginner to pro, and ages ranging from 10 to 75. I like to keep it around this number—any more than that and it gets tough to balance with the other parts of my career. But I absolutely love having this range of levels and ages; it keeps me stimulated and challenged in all the right ways. COVID-19 was initially catastrophic for my performing career, but it has bounced back somewhat recently. I’m enjoying the balance of teaching, freelancing, and working on exciting new projects (including an upcoming album) with my chamber group Anima Brass.

16) What plans and ambitions do you have for future projects and activities going forward? Where do you see yourself professionally ten years from now?

I’m committed to expanding the repertoire of the instrument, be it more vocal transcriptions, transcribing and commissioning new works for trumpet and harp duo, or commissioning new works for Anima Brass. There’s a lot of great music to be uncovered and written, and I intend to continue highlighting musical voices that have been underrepresented for far too long. In ten years, I hope to be a tenured professor of trumpet somewhere, even though institutions of higher education are cutting tenure tracks, positions, budgets, and entire programs left and right. I’m slightly anxious, but mostly excited to see where my curiosities continue to take me. Right now, I’m doing what I love and I’m able to support myself ... that’s all that matters to me.