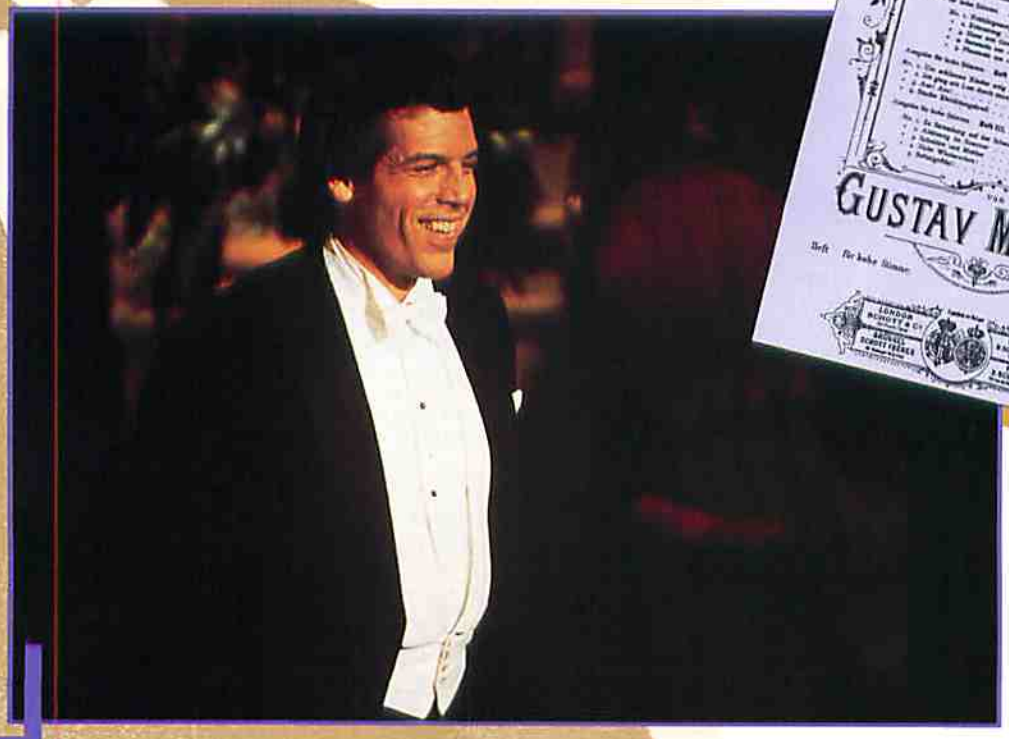
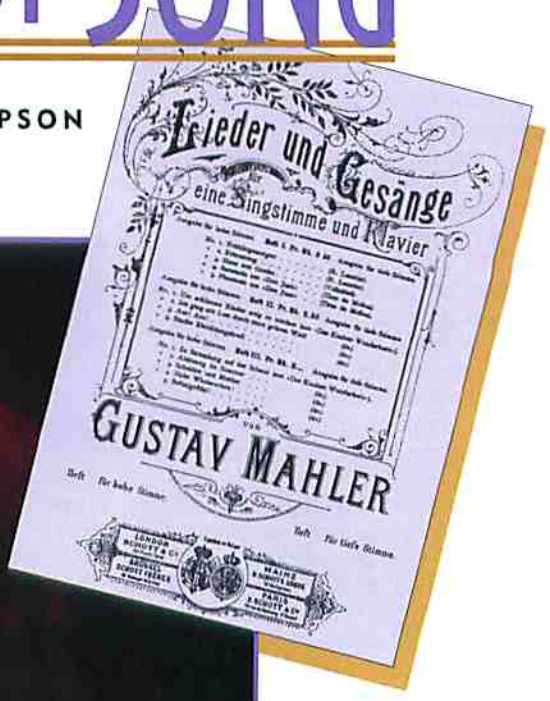
Study

German romantic lieder

LEXICON of SONG

BY THOMAS HAMPSON





Have you ever had the feeling, while listening either in concert or to a recording of someone singing a song, that there must be more to it than that? I mean, what's the fuss about lieder, anyway? Pretty melodies or engaging harmonies and rhythms, highlighting the contours of a foreign language, are hardly reason enough to declare it an art form. And then there are the translations: brooks babbling, flowers talking, young lads and tender maidens erupting in endless outbursts that range from euphoria to weeping. Sometimes rhyming, sometimes not, mostly what seems to be convoluted thought....

Today, song is almost always referred to by the composer's name, with respectful reference to a poetic source, and therefore appears readily definable in terms of style. The problem with the word *style* is that it usually has more to do with the description of how a body of works has been perceived through time than with why, or from what cultural impetus, the work was conceived. With song, we start having a catch-all notion that generalizes this fascinating genre far too much. Song, being a sort of metaphor for the human story, becomes a doorway to one's own personal experience. The languages involved, and the musical forms they require, are merely the prisms through which the human story of passions and actions is filtered. What fascinates me is that regardless of a song's origin — ancient or Shakespearean, medieval French or German, whether it derives from folk poetry or Goethe, Schubert or Wolf or the Irish Bards — the story of why we do what we do remains constant, and the world of symbols of how we have done it becomes a great detective narration.

One of these detective epochs of our story through song was the era of Romanticism and the German lied. From this period sprang forth one of the richest collections of metaphors, symbols and images known to the musical and literary world. It was, for all intents and purposes, what the historian Paul Johnson has termed "the birth of the modern," and certainly the awakening of the now all-consuming "I" of our contemporary human condition.

STUDYING THE ORCHESTRAL AND PIANO VERSIONS OF THE SONGS OF MAHLER (BACKGROUND) HAS OCCUPIED HAMPSON IN RECENT YEARS

and its symbols

In recent years, eminent philosophers such as Joseph Campbell and Bruno Bettelheim have brought a new awareness to the uses of myth, legend and fairy tale. In their writings and lectures one finds explanations of many symbols necessary for deeper appreciation of such seemingly obvious stories as *Mother Goose* or Zeus' seduction of Diana. This kind of iconography has been seriously neglected in the discussion of the poetry of the German Romantic lied. Actually, much of what we now take for granted, such as the use of numbers and natural phenomena, is the very same kind of road map we need to explore this particular poetry.

Among many books on natural symbols and their meanings is the work of Werner Danckert, a German philologist, who in the 1950s and '60s collected and sorted by *use* the myriad poetic devices that in German are called *Bildersprache* — literally, the picture/sign-language of German Romanticism. From his four incredibly detailed volumes we can build a sort of dictionary of associations to be used when reading this poetry of song. These associations should always be in the back of our minds while reading or listening to the poems. First, there are the colors:

• WHITE (*weiss*): a word meaning light, happiness, joy, virginity, the Yin color, but also meaning the "other side" — eternity, the afterlife, ghostliness. A *snow-white hand* could signify an invitation to death or to the afterlife, or could symbolize one who is dead among the living, or even a virgin, a purity of encounter, etc.

• GOLD (*gold*): a heavenly color — sun, also earthly possessions; valuable but temporary existence. Examples: *gold evening light*, temporary but illuminating; *on gold leather-painted*, an image of great personal significance but somehow fleeting or even impossible to possess.

• BLACK (*schwarz*): always a contrast to another existence; i.e., sadness to joy, death to life, etc.; also demonic, the color of Saturn, which brings in an erotic dimension — for instance, a *schwarzbraune Magdelein*, a black-brown (brunette) girl.

• BLUE (*blau*): eternity, height and depth, longing (for example, *blue flowers*), purity, mourning, deity; but also can signify a misleading or lying light, such as *Irrlicht* or *blaue Funken* (blue sparks).

• RED (*rot*): life, passion, love, blood; also battle, death, sin. Examples: flames, red lights, again a brunette with red lips.

• GREEN (*grün*): vegetation, growth, fertility, life, hope, springtime; again a basic connotation of passion, motivation, energy and erotic desire. The negative side would be snakes, seduction, possessiveness, psychosis.

There are numbers, as well:

• THREE (*drei*): the magic number, as in *three wishes*; a complete number, cadential, associated with wholeness; used in Masonry (e.g. *Die Zauberflöte*).

• TWELVE (*zwölf*): the star sign of the animal kingdom; an old Hebraic number (apostles, disciples, tribes of Israel), but also twelve giants.

And the elements, plants and animals:

• FLOWERS (*Blumen*): They can typify innocence, beauty, purity or sexuality, or serve as a metaphor for the soul or the Underworld. Talking flowers could express a defense of the innocent, or an invitation of the sexually aroused, or an objective comment from the world of beauty and aesthetics, but they might also voice an unconscious longing for the esoteric or for sexual fulfillment.

• ROSE (*Rose*): love, death, Paradise, as in Robert Burns' "My love is like a red, red rose."

• LILY (*Lilie*): light, purity, even virginal sexuality, as in Heinrich Heine's *Die Rose, die Lilie, die Taube, die Sonne*.

• CYPRESS (*Zypresse*): long life, immortality, but more often the bouquet of mourning — death.

• FOREST (*Wald*): the border between reality and imagination, between known and foreign, a no-man's land; the place of the unconscious; examples: *to long for a forest hill* could signify a perception of the unfathomable, or an escape, or impending insanity.

• DOVE (*Taube*): fertility or birth or conception or a bride.

• NIGHTINGALE (*Nachtigall*): a very old symbol of love, the announcement of love, a Cupid-like messenger; the bird of the Romantic. A *chorus of nightingales* or a *nightingale in the distance* could portend imminent love or death or longing for these states, or it could even be simply atmospheric.

• SNAKES (*Schlangen*): the antithesis of heaven, the harbinger of death, but also a sign of wisdom and life. You can have the staff of life (the doctor's symbol) or a fateful, death-knelling snake bite, as in Heine's *Dichterliebe*. Contrary to popular assumption, however, it is never a reference to a person's character.

• FLAMES, FIRE (*Flammen, Feuer*): passion; a galvanizing element either in creation or destruction.

• WATER, SPRINGS (*Wasser, Quelle*): eternity, the source of life, purification.

The list is as endless as nature or life is complex. But that's the point, isn't it? That's why we have poetry — to articulate the landscape of existence seen and unseen, heard and unheard, imagined or real, comprehended or intuited.

Two more powerful poetic symbols merit special mention: DREAM (*Traum*) and WORD (*Wort*). These typify the great awakening from the unconscious to the conscious, from the uncomprehended to the clarified. Folk poetry, found in collections like *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (The Youth's Magic Horn) and the poetry of the early Romantics set up a kind of laboratory of human behavior. In their fairy tales, ballads and legends, all heavy with symbol, they describe the consequence of thought to deed. Through an elaborate use of language's third person, singular or plural, they attempt to objectify indefinable, undependable human behavior.

Let's take, for instance, a well known poem from the *Lyrisches Intermezzo* (Lyrical Intermezzo) in Heine's *Buch der Lieder* (Book of Songs), "Die Rose, die Lilie, die Taube, die Sonne":

Die Rose, die Lilie, die Taube, die Sonne
Die liebt ich einst alle in Liebeswonne.
Ich lieb sie nicht mehr, ich liebe alleine
Die Kleine, die Feine, die Reine, die Eine;
Sie selber, aller Liebe Bronne,
Ist Rose und Lilie und Taube und Sonne.
Ich liebe alleine
Die Kleine, die Feine, die Reine, die Eine.

(The rose, the lily, the dove, and the sun,
I once loved them all with wondrous bliss.
I love them no longer. I love only
My petite, fine, pure, one darling;
She herself is the fountain of all love,
She is rose and lily and dove and sun.
I love only
My petite, fine, pure, one darling.)

This is a seemingly simple little poem of love. What Heine does, however, is announce a new dimension of personal expression by using the symbols I've just been describing. Heine invokes nature's objects (rose, lily, dove, sun) and their implied symbolic use of love, passion; purity, virginity; bride, fertility; and the all-pervasive central life force. He gives them credit for his previous adoration but says that is not enough; he transforms them into adjectives for personal adoration; i.e.

"the petite, the fine, the pure, the one." She is herself the spring of love, of all natural things and their symbols. And *her* alone I now love.

The simplicity of the poem and the clever use of the third-person German pronouns *die* and *sie* (which can mean *the* but also *her*), as well as the way in which Heine makes a *person* the spring of nature, as distinct from nature's being the spring of the personal, were at the time revolutionary.

This kind of personalization was what separated the Romantic idiom from, say, legends and ballads, the poems of Goethe's time and the era of *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. A ballad like *Erlkönig*, with its fairy-tale atmosphere, also splashed into the Romantic ethos. Its present-tense story of a father riding in the night with his ailing child is both real — in its search to find help — and metaphysical, in its otherworldly confrontations, temptations and seductions. And then there is the futility of the effort to save a life whose end has come too soon.

Another great masterpiece of the *Bildersprache* and its many layers of thought is Gustav Mahler's "Wo die schönen Trompeten blasen." This song is actually a mixture of two poems from *The Youth's Magic Horn* that Mahler wed into a transcendental moment of Romantic symbol and imagery.

Wer ist denn draussen und wer klopfet an,
der mich so leise, so leise wecken kann?
Das ist der Herzallerlieble dein,
steh' auf und lass mich zu dir ein!
Was soll ich hier nun länger steh'n?
Ich seh' die Morgenröt' aufgeh'n,
die Morgenröt', zwei helle Stern'.
bei meinem Schatz da wär ich gern'!
Bei meinem Herzallerlieble!

Das Mädchen stand auf und liess ihn ein,
sie heisst ihn auch willkommen sein.
Willkommen trauter Knabe mein!
So lang hast du gestanden!

Sie reicht' ihm auch die schneeweisse Hand.
Von ferne sang die Nachtigall,
da fängt sie auch zu weinen an!

Ach, weine nicht, du Liebste mein,
Auf's Jahr sollst du mein Eigen sein.
Mein Eigen sollst du werden gewiss,
wie's Keine sonst auf Erden ist!
O Lieb auf grüner Erden.

Ich zieh' in Krieg auf grüne Haid;
die grüne Haide, die ist so weit!
Allwo dort die schönen Trompeten blasen,
da ist mein Haus.
Mein Haus von grünem Rasen!

(Who then is outside and who is knocking,
that me so softly, so softly can awaken?
It is your dearest darling,
get up and let me come to you!
Why should I go on standing here?
I see the red of morn arise,
the red of morn, two bright stars.
I long to be with my sweetheart!
With my dearest darling!

The maiden got up and let him in,
she bade him welcome, too.
Welcome, my fine lad!
You have been standing so long!

She offered him too her snow-white hand.
From far away the nightingale sang,
then began she, too, to weep!

Ah, do not weep, beloved mine!
After a year you will be my own.
My own you shall surely become,
as is no other on earth!
Oh love on the green earth.

I'm off to war, on the green heath;
the green heath is so far away!
Where there the fair trumpets sound,
there is my home,
my house of green grass!)

The song embodies a dialogue between feminine and masculine (anima and animus) in a narration of ballad form. Therefore we still have the laboratory of third-person storytelling, which manipulates a dialogue that is sometimes real and sometimes *Selbstgespräch* (self-dialogue). This is Romanticism in its purest form.

First one hears the knocking and the ensuing awakening of awareness. This awareness is as much a sexual one as it is derived from slumber. The animus begs entrance to the anima, pleading further, "Why should I wait any longer. I already see the dawn" or, in fact experience the *Morgenröt'* (morning's red light) — i.e., passion, love, sexual arousal. Therefore, "I wish to consummate this togetherness and awakening with the *one* — the *all* of my loving heart."

The anima awakens, arises and allows him to enter. She welcomes the union and acknowledges the struggle of passion now released. She stretches before him her *snow-white hand*, and immediately the *nightingales* begin to sing. Remember now the symbol of encounter from the other side, seen either as death or eternity, at the same time that it is pure and unique — a blend of life and imagination. The anima begins to cry. Her tears, it seems to me, articulate the separation from innocence to the actuated, from virginity to maturation, from assumed life in an immortal sense to knowledge of mortality itself.

Now the anima and animus move from the vapor of symbol into the light of lovers' dialogue. He cajoles and comforts her in

her sorrow, promising an eternal love measured by total possession in real time. Hers is unique to anything that has gone before in nature or in reality. And as the mist of symbol creeps back in, he declares her his love from the *green earth* — i.e., from all life and its sources and manifestations through nature.

The animus, galvanized by this union, now embarks on his inevitable journey to his *war, battle* on the *green heath* — the heath of life that is so far and wide. This journey is now a metaphysical one that we all share. It encompasses our personal struggle with life's ebb and flow and vastness, the end of which ever remains a mystery. But now his mystery — or our mystery — in the union of the anima and animus — of real and imagined — is sought there *where the fair trumpets sound.* The symbol of a new experience or reality calls forth. *There is my home, my house of green grass.* This house has many symbolic possibilities: a grave or a return to nature, or the union of all that is natural or even, in its purest form, death and life in perfect harmony.

Mahler, his genius of musical language notwithstanding, has created a textual feast of metaphor and symbol that beautifully visualizes the swirling, mingling contraries of instincts, passions and realities that make up life. Mahler was considered a neo-Romantic who, along with his contemporaries like Strauss and Wolf and with poets like Liliencron, Dehmel, Birnbaum, Falke, Dahn, at the close of the nineteenth century realized the potential for the imagination of the Romantic in the personal experience of the contemporary.

In doing so, these fin-de-siècle artists brought full circle the development of the poetic experience that had begun in the first bloom of Romanticism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. With such poets as Herder, Goethe, Uhland, Heine, Eichendorff, Müller, Mörike and Geibel, natural *things* started to be animated, then came alive and ultimately became the very substance of each person's existence. With increasing intensity and urgency, the great "I" was born. The "I" that said: "I hurt; I feel; I'm hungry; I'm angry; I kill; I lust; I love; I am the center of Nature; I am Nature; I am divine; I am not a machine; I live; I die; I am the past, present, future, and the not yet dreamed of."

Sound familiar? Yes, you're right: it's the foundation of much of the poetry of Whitman, Emerson, Dickinson, Burns, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Baudelaire, Hugo, Goethe, Eichendorff, Rückert, Heine. Heine said of himself, "I am the last of the Romantics and the first of the moderns." With this statement began a new expression, a new vitality of self-exploration, eventually leading to the birth of psychoanalysis some eighty years later, and igniting in the nineteenth century a musical bonfire whose flames still warm our backs as we face the twenty-first. *Word*, which also has the double impact as the symbol of magic or creation as well as its conveyor, became the ultimate link between dream and reality — the described and the experienced — and this new, great "I," with its *Doppelgänger*, or alter ego, the imagination.

The new levels of musical creation made possible by such devices as metaphor, irony, simile, narration and dialogue started to become apparent in works as early as Beethoven's but came into the divine light of inspiration with Schubert. The world of lieder, from Loewe, Zumsteeg, Schubert and Schumann through Franz, Mendelssohn and Cornelius to Brahms, Strauss, Mahler and Wolf, exploited this new individuality of the human experience in unique musical voices.

We hear today a great shouting of individualism and rights — a proclaiming of the *new age*. I wonder sometimes if these declarations are not more searchings than proclamations. Every age has inherent in it another new age. As one can see from this all-too-brief discussion of the Romantic era, from the Enlightenment to the present, individualism has more often been a protest against an external world created by the very individuals whom that world comes to dominate.

The world of song — born of poetry and thought, regardless of epoch or language or musical form — brings to the reader/listener an invitation of shared existence. If, as C. S. Lewis has it, "We read to know we are not alone," then it seems to me we *sing* to establish a kind of radar contact with that imminent community — a community of thoughts, words, emotions, music and experience, all of which are personally inhabitable through the kaleidoscope of song. *What* you see is a reflection of life. *How* you see it depends on the agreement and melding of poet, composer and recreative artist. The ultimate meaning it has is an individual experience of one's own imagination, tooled with one's own iconography, in search of one's own clarification.

This seems to me to be worth a great deal of fuss! □

MR. HAMPSON *performs frequently in recital; he has recorded songs of Barber, Copland, Foster, Ives, Carl Loewe, Mahler, Rossini, Schubert and Schumann.*