

Antonín Dvořák and the Songs of His Time

By Richard Wigmore, from the program booklet of *Antonín Dvořák und Seine Zeit* Salzburg Festival, 2004

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Liszt & Schumann: A Passion for Schubert

Liszt and Schumann were in many ways musical and spiritual opposites. But one thing they did share was a passion for Schubert's songs, many of which were published in the decade following his death in 1828. Liszt's initial creative response was, typically, to make keyboard transcriptions of dozens of the songs for his own performance. Schumann, who had avidly studied Schubert's songs in the years 1838–9, threw himself with characteristic euphoria into song composition early in 1840. When he met Liszt in Dresden he was in full spate; and his enthusiasm could well have prompted Liszt's first German-language song, "Im Rhein," later that year—months after Schumann had set the same Heine text in his *Dichterliebe*.

In Liszt's earliest songs, composed before he moved to the Weimar court in 1848, the showman can overwhelm the poet; and more than one number threatens to turn into a keyboard etude with vocal obbligato. But Liszt was an acute self-critic and, like the teenaged Schubert before him, an inveterate reworker and reviser of his songs. In a letter written in the early 1850s he described his early songs as "mostly inflatedly sentimental, and often overladen in the accompaniment". And almost invariably, revision meant concentration and simplification. While in Liszt's first, 1840, setting of "Im Rhein" the piano part is indeed "overladen," his revision of 15 years later, sung tonight by Thomas Hampson, is far more restrained. Where Schumann immediately seizes on the image of the reflected cathedral, Liszt's opening paints the rippling waters, à la Wagner. His more pictorial setting contains one of Liszt's ravishing enharmonic modulations to suggest the picture's radiance ("hat's freundlich hineingestrahlt"), and a delicate evocation of fluttering angels' wings at "Es schweben Blumen und Englein".

Unlikely as it might seem, Liszt could on occasion rival Schumann in economy and power of suggestion. And each of the next three numbers—two to poems by Heine, “Anfangs wollt’ ich fast verzagen” (1856), and “Vergiftet sind meine Lieder” (1844, revised 1860) one a setting of Rellstab (“Ihr Auge,” 1843)—is a pungent miniature, more declamatory in style than Schumann, especially in the two Heine songs, and more daringly chromatic. In all three, the acerbic dissonances and typically Lisztian harmonic shocks are a vivid musical embodiment of the poets’ bitterness and melodramatic *Weltschmerz*.

Another Rellstab setting, “Es rauschen die Winde” (previously set by Schubert as Herbst), exists, like so many of Liszt’s songs, in two separate versions, one from the 1840s, the other sung here, from around 1856. The chill blast of autumn is evoked in agitated, low-lying chromatic figuration, the memory of spring in snatches of bel canto lyricism against softly strummed harp chords. Finally in this group, Liszt in piquant Hungarian Gypsy vein: “Die drei Zigeuner” (1860), an episodic ballad in which the singer’s recitative-like declamation is linked by picturesque piano interludes depicting in turn the fiddler, the indolent smoker and the sleeper, with a wonderfully poetic evocation of the wind brushing the cimbalom strings.

Dvořák Discovered

In 1878, at the age of 37, Dvořák finally broke through from local to international fame with his first set of *Slavonic Dances*. The success of these colorful, flamboyant pieces created an eager market for his music in Austria, Germany and England; and the *Slavonic Dances* were followed quickly by, among others, the three *Slavonic Rhapsodies* and the *Czech Suite*. Then, early in 1880, he wrote the seven *Gypsy Melodies* to poems by Adolf Heyduk (1835 –1923) for Gustav Walter, a leading tenor at the Vienna Court Opera who had long admired Dvořák’s songs. In deference to the singer, and to the commercial sense of his Berlin publisher Simrock, he set the poems not in the original Czech but in German, using a translation prepared by the poet himself. The songs were an immediate success; and at Dvořák’s request

Simrock soon brought out an edition with a Czech text, underlaid with the quaint, stilted English translation still sometimes used today.

The Gypsy was a familiar romantic symbol of emancipation from bourgeois constraints. And in these songs Heyduk and Dvořák evoked not only the unfettered gypsy life but also, by implication, the Czech people's bid for independence from Habsburg rule. In several numbers the accompaniments suggest the cimbalom of the Hungarian Gypsy bands Dvořák will often have heard in Prague. But the rhythms and melodies owe more to Bohemian and Moravian folk music than to the Gypsy style.

The first song, with its use of an "exotic" Gypsy scale and its tender, Schubertian shift from minor to major for the middle verse, is typical of the set in its mingled joy and soulful yearning. Next comes an irrepressible Czech folk dance, with the piano gleefully evoking the bright tinkle of the triangle before introducing a new pensive note in the postlude. After the shadowy, rather Brahmsian third song, comes Dvořák's most celebrated song, crooned in Victorian and Edwardian drawing rooms as "Songs My Mother Taught Me." But its haunting, nostalgic tune and subtle pull between the melody (in 2/4 rhythm) and the syncopated 6/8 accompaniment have enabled it to weather any number of sentimental performances and dubious arrangements. Nostalgia is banished in the next two songs, which celebrate the carefree Gypsy life in bold, leaping—and unmistakably Czech—dance rhythms. In the last song exultation in the Gypsy's *al fresco* freedom is tinged with passionate longing. Dvořák artfully varies the accompaniment for each successive verse, and creates a fervent, abandoned climax as the Gypsy proclaims his credo, "to be free forever".

Mahler's "Frühlingsreise"

It was Mahler's anguished relationship with the singer Johanna Richter that inspired his first masterpiece, the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* ("Songs of a Wayfarer"). In June 1883 the composer had landed his first major appointment, as music director

at the opera house in Kassel. His affair with Johanna began shortly afterwards and dragged on until the end of 1884. In its original, voice-and-piano version, the *Gesellen* cycle was probably begun in December 1883, and certainly completed in essentials by 1 January 1885, just after the relationship had ended. Mahler made a preliminary orchestral version of the cycle around 1891–3 and revised the scoring for a Berlin concert in March 1896 that also included the First Symphony, whose first movement and Funeral March use material from the second and fourth *Gesellen* songs.

The texts of the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* were written by Mahler himself under the influence of the *Knaben Wunderhorn* collection, with the opening poem a virtual paraphrase of a *Wunderhorn* text. The cycle has been called Mahler's "Frühlingsreise," a counterpart to *Winterreise*. And as in Schubert's cycle, a jilted lover sets out on his aimless wandering, haunted by memories of the affair and the sweetheart's blue eyes.

Mahler emphasizes the notion of the *Gesellen* songs as a continuous journey by making each song end in a different key from the one in which it began. The first song contrasts the lover's own grief on his sweetheart's wedding day with his delight in the natural world, evoked with a turn to a remote key and a lulling 6/8 motion. In the second song there is an aching tension between the vernal "walking" tune and the merry birdsong on the one hand, and, on the other, the lover's underlying sadness which gradually infuses the walking tune.

If the first two songs are essentially diatonic and folk-inspired, the third foreshadows the expressionist violence and mordant irony of later Mahler. The final song opens as a desolate funeral march, a genre Mahler was to make his own. But the song warms into the major key as the protagonist—unlike Schubert's— finds everlasting rest beneath the linden tree. Then, with a last gentle twist of the knife, major sours to minor in the piano postlude.

Richard Strauss: A Lifetime of Lieder

Strauss's wife Pauline was a notorious shrew, as may be gauged from the composer's graphic portrait of her in *Intermezzo*. But she was also a gifted singer, who created the leading role in Strauss's first opera, *Guntram*, and inspired his lifelong love affair with the soprano voice. From the late 1880s until Pauline's retirement in 1906 the Strausses made regular recital tours in Europe and the United States; and Richard composed many of the songs from his Op. 27 to Op. 56 expressly for his wife. She remained his ideal interpreter, even when her voice grew more fragile and her platform manner—including applause-seeking antics during the piano postludes—increasingly outrageous.

Strauss followed the example of Schumann in *Myrthen* by presenting his four Op. 27 songs as a gift to his bride on their wedding day, September 10, 1894. Thomas Hampson has chosen two numbers from this favorite set to frame his Strauss group. The surging, ecstatic “Heimliche Aufforderung” is an inspired fusion of two normally distinct genres, the drinking song and the love song. “Morgen” unfolds as a rapt duet for piano and voice, with the singer stealing in shyly after the long prelude and magically counterpointing his own independent line with the keyboard's musing cantilena.

“Freundliche Vision” (1900) distills a similar, quintessentially Straussian mood of timeless enchantment. In the song's original version for soprano, the vision is evoked in C-sharp major, with (as in “Morgen”) voice and piano counterpointing and entwining their own distinct melodies; then, as dream blurs into reality, the music melts poetically to the distant key of D major.

“Die Nacht,” from the Op. 10 set (1885) that marked Strauss's coming-of-age as a song composer, is a tender, secretive nocturne evoking the lover's anxiety that the night which steals color and shape will also steal his beloved. Strauss mirrors the

lover's explicit fear in the last verse with shadowy, fluid tonality, culminating in a "shock" plunge to a remote key on the final "auch".

Another nocturne, "Sehnsucht" (1896), is a song of almost symphonic scope, growing from the stark, somber opening, set as quasi-recitative, through the brightening of texture and tonality at the mention of the beloved, to the rapturous final "Ich liebe dich." "Mein Herz ist stumm" (1888) sets verses of clichéd sentimentality by one of the young Strauss's favorite poets, Count Adolf Friedrich von Schack. As so often, though, the music transcends the poem, beginning in frozen desolation, thawing and flowering in the central verses, with their forest murmurs and horn calls, and finally returning to the mood of the opening as the singer-poet contemplates a cheerless old age.

Dvořák: From National to International

Antonín Dvořák was that rare phenomenon among Romantic composers, a happily (and monogamously) married man. But like Mozart nearly a century earlier, he first fell in love with the sister. In his twenties he eked out his modest salary as a viola player in the Czech Provisional Theater Orchestra in Prague by giving piano lessons. Two of his pupils were the sisters Josefina and Anna Čermáková, the daughters of a goldsmith. He was to marry Anna in 1873. But a decade earlier he had fallen passionately in love with the 16-year-old Josefina, then just beginning a career as an actress. She did not return Dvořák's feelings, and like others of her ilk later married into the aristocracy. Under the immediate influence of his unrequited passion he composed his earliest solo songs, a cycle of 18 love songs entitled *Cypřiše* ("Cypresses"), to texts by the Czech poet Gustav Pfleger-Moravský.

Sixteen years later, in 1881, the now internationally famous composer revised four of the "Cypresses," which were published the following year as *Four Songs*, Op. 2. For all their occasional indebtedness to Schumann, all four show Dvořák's melodic gift at its freshest and most candid. Except in the beautiful No. 3, with its poignant vocal line over folkstyle drones, the melodies remained substantially unaltered in

the revision. But Dvořák, by now a master craftsman, refined and clarified the accompaniments, above all in the atmospheric forest murmurs of the fourth song, “Silence on the Mountains”.

In 1876, at a time of rapidly growing professional success, Dvořák composed 12 settings of *Vítězslav Hálek's Večerní písně* (“Evening Songs”), later issued in three groups. Of the four Op. 3 songs, published in 1881, two are clearly indebted to earlier composers: No. 1, “The Tiny Stars Up High,” conjures a mood of nocturnal reverie courtesy of Beethoven’s “Moonlight” Sonata, while No. 4, “Man Was Created,” draws on Mozart’s passionate *Fantasia for Piano*, K. 475.

Of the four songs from Op. 82, originally composed to German texts in the winter of 1887–8, Nos. 2–4 are among Dvořák’s most charming and delicate. The dancing, rippling brook of No. 4 inevitably evokes Dvořák’s beloved Schubert. But the most searching of the four songs is the first, “Leave Me Alone,” which was specially cherished by Josefina, once object of the composer’s unreciprocated love, now his sister-in-law. In November of 1894 Josefina wrote to Dvořák in America telling him she was mortally ill (she was to die in May 1895); and in homage to her he introduced two particularly tender phrases into the Adagio and finale of his B-minor Cello Concerto.

The Americans: MacDowell and Farwell

In the last quarter of the 19th century a European, preferably German, musical training was deemed essential for any aspiring American composer. And in their teens both Edward MacDowell and Arthur Farwell duly made the Atlantic crossing to give their technique the requisite cosmopolitan gloss. MacDowell, born in 1860, the same year as Mahler and Wolf, traveled first to Paris and then to Frankfurt, where he studied with Joachim Raff and was encouraged by Liszt both as a pianist and as a composer. For a time he considered settling permanently in Germany. But he returned to the U.S. in 1888, where he was hailed as “the greatest musical genius America has produced.” After a frustrating period as the first professor of music at

Columbia University he suffered a mental breakdown in 1904. And the last four years of his short life were spent in a state of childlike insanity.

Despite his status as a national composer, MacDowell had little feeling for native American music, remaining true to the European Romantic tradition he had absorbed in his youth. Not surprisingly, Schumann is the dominant influence behind the dozen or so *Lieder* he composed in Germany in his early 20s, to poems by Heine, Goethe, Geibel and others. Here and there chromatic “purple patches” suggest the more feverish idiom of Liszt and Wagner, while the vein of wistful delicacy MacDowell cultivated with such charm shows an obvious debt to Mendelssohn.

Seventeen years younger than MacDowell, Arthur Farwell studied as a young man in Germany with Engelbert Humperdinck and Hans Pfitzner. But on his return to the United States he took a passionate stand against what he viewed as Germanic musical imperialism, collecting and arranging tunes by American Indians and Spanish-American communities, and, in 1907, founding the National Wa-Wan Society of America “for the advancement of the work of American composers, and the interests of the musical life of the American people”. His own songs, which range from settings of Shelley and Blake to 39 songs to poems by Emily Dickinson, are eclectic in idiom, drawing variously on French impressionism, the Russians, especially Mussorgsky (another fierce anti-German), and indigenous American melodies and rhythms.

Grieg: Germanic Overtones, Norwegian Sentiments

“It was amusing to make contact with Dvořák,” wrote Edvard Grieg from Prague in March 1903. “He is a character, to put it mildly; but he was very likeable.” Though they were not to meet again, the two men were warm admirers of each other’s music. And while Dvořák was far more indebted than Grieg to the central European Romantic tradition, both men were fervent nationalists in an age of growing resistance to Austro-German musical hegemony.

In the Op. 48 songs, though, Grieg temporarily abandons his native Norwegian for the German language he had often set as a student in Leipzig. While most of his songs were composed for his wife Nina, the six in the Op. 48 set were written between 1884 and 1889 for the Swedish-born Wagnerian soprano Ellen Gulbranson, who had helped to popularize his Norwegian songs internationally. There are half-echoes of Schumann, the German Romantic with whom Grieg was most in sympathy, in the chromaticism and yearning falling sevenths of the Goethe setting "Zur Rosenzeit." And the delightful "Die verschwiegene Nachtigall," with its warbling "Tandaradei" refrain (prefigured in the brief piano introduction), has a whiff of a Brahmsian folksong. But for all their occasional Germanic overtones, these songs are utterly characteristic of Grieg in their melodic and harmonic pungency. The most famous of them, "Ein Traum," contrasts ecstatic lyricism and a climax of almost Wagnerian opulence (a tribute to Ellen Gulbranson's powerful voice) with piquant little piano flourishes redolent of Norwegian folk music.

Dvořák's Love Songs

In December 1888 Dvořák rewrote another clutch of songs from his lovelorn "Cypresses" cycle, sending them to the Berlin publisher Simrock early the following year with the note: "These are eight Love Songs ["Písně milostné"] their texts are above all lyrical—think of a boy in love." Sometimes the rewriting was merely a question of refining details, especially in the accompaniment. In the last song, for instance, the plain chords of the original became a gossamer shimmer of arpeggios. Elsewhere the alterations were more radical. Dvořák completely rewrote much of the first song, and transformed the rhythm of the fifth—though here, as at times elsewhere, the poem's bleakness is softened by the music. No. 3, "I Wander Oft Past Yonder House," formerly a slow waltz, now becomes a wistful polka. The climax of the most dramatic and impassioned song, No. 6, was intensified and recast to coincide with the climax of the poem (originally it had come too soon). Dvořák also made crucial improvements to No. 7, "When Thy Sweet Glances on Me Fall" (the only

one of the set in which love is blighted or irretrievably lost), changing the key from G major to G minor, and deepening the music's tender yearning.

Brahms: Final Thoughts on Love and Death

Brahms's *Vier ernste Gesänge* ("Four Serious Songs"), Op. 121, his last thoughts on death and the redeeming power of love, date from the spring of 1896, when his beloved Clara Schumann lay mortally ill and he himself was suffering from the first symptoms of the liver cancer that was to kill him a year later. These awesome songs move from the terrible nihilism of Ecclesiastes (Brahms's biographer Max Kalbeck remarked how the agnostic composer "always enjoyed seeking out the godless texts in the Bible") to St. Paul's sermon on love in his first Epistle to the Corinthians. In the process the implacable minor mode of the first song, with its grimly tolling funeral bell and its swirling dusts, yields via the compassionate major-keyed closing sections of the second and third songs to the unalloyed major of the final apostrophe on love—which for Brahms meant eros (in the sketches for this song Kalbeck found allusions to the composer's early love for his student Elisabet(h) von Stockhausen) as well as St. Paul's agape.

Mahler, in the Folk Vein

Ever the autocratic perfectionist, Mahler spent stormy periods as musical director of the Budapest Opera (1888-91) and, from 1891 to 1897, the Hamburg Opera. He found respite in his long summer vacations on the Attersee in the Salzkammergut. And here he composed many of the songs that make up the *Knaben Wunderhorn* ("The Youth's Magic Horn") settings, which drew on a collection of folksongs and folk poems published between 1806 and 1808 by Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano. These examples of popular, "natural" art were nostalgically cherished by the early Romantics as an antidote to a world of encroaching urbanization and industrialization. As Mahler's early biographer Richard Specht put it: "In earlier centuries such songs may have been sung in small market towns among soldiers, shepherds and peasants."

Mahler had known and loved the *Knaben Wunderhorn* anthology since his childhood in the German-speaking Moravian town of Iglau. In his settings he treats folksong, military band music, *Ländler* and Viennese waltzes with mingled affection, irony and tragic realism. “Wo die schönen Trompeten blasen” (1898) is an eerie encounter between a girl and the ghost of her soldier sweetheart, poignantly juxtaposing a funeral march and a slow, swaying *Ländler* of lulling tenderness. In complete contrast, “Urlicht” (1892), which Mahler later incorporated in his *Resurrection Symphony*, No. 2, hymns a serene faith in the eternal life in music of lambent, transfigured stillness.

Dvořák: An Affirmation of Faith

In March 1894, towards the end of his first visit to the United States, Dvořák composed what were virtually his last songs, the set of ten *Biblical Songs*, Op. 99. A devout, unquestioning Catholic, like Haydn a century earlier, Dvořák evidently felt an urgent need to affirm his faith at a time when his 79-yearold father lay mortally ill in distant Bohemia. For the texts he drew on the traditional Czech Protestant translation of the Book of Psalms in the Kraliče Bible of 1613.

Several of the Biblical songs, including Nos. 2, 4 and the jolly No. 5, are in Dvořák’s most direct and naive vein, combining comfortable, “churchy” harmonies, a Czech folk flavor and (especially in No. 2) echoes of the African-American spiritual. The American connection is even stronger in the catchy dance rhythms and pentatonic harmonies of the exultant final song, “O sing unto the Lord”. Elsewhere the musical idiom is more complex and astringent. The first song, “Clouds and Darkness are Round About Him,” matches the psalmist’s apocalyptic vision with dissonant harmonies (the home key is blurred until the cathartic final climax) and a forceful, declamatory vocal line. The *de profundis* cry of “Hear My Prayer,” No. 3, is set with extreme, unsettling freedom of modulation. Most memorable of all, though, is No. 7, “By the Waters of Babylon,” which begins as a grave folk dance (shades here of some of the more melancholy of Dvořák’s *Slavonic Dances*) in the minor key, and then turns radiantly to the major after the poignant climactic cry “O Jerusalem”.

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