

The Hugo Wolf Marathon

An essay by Richard Wigmore

from the program book *Hugo Wolf und Seine Zeit*

Salzburg Festival 2003

Program book: <http://hampsongfoundation.org/hugo-wolf-and-his-time/>

Early Songs

Even as a child Hugo Wolf was notoriously willful and uncompromising. And when at the age of 14 he enrolled at the Vienna Conservatory he quickly became something of a student from hell, briding at the institute's pedantic conservatism and eventually thrown out in disgrace. But Wolf did compose voraciously during his ill-fated stint at the conservatory, abandoning more large-scale works than he completed, but composing around 30 songs. His model then was Schumann, though already he had fallen under the spell of the advanced chromatic language of Liszt and his idol, Wagner. After Wolf's enforced return to his parents' home in Styria in March 1877, he composed several more Lieder, among them an innocent, lilting setting of Matthisson's "Andenken," one of the 19th-century's favorite texts and famously set by Schubert.

Wolf's father allowed his errant son to return to Vienna at the end of 1877 in order to earn his living as a music teacher. Here, like Schubert before him, he relied on the patronage of wealthy friends, above all the hedonistic and generous Adalbert von Goldschmidt. Through Goldschmidt Wolf was introduced to Vienna's elite cultural circles. And in spring 1878, aged 18, he fell in love with the raven-haired society beauty Vally Franck, with whom, despite glaring incompatibilities, he had a long and passionate relationship. As a tragic footnote, we might add that at around the same time, probably at Goldschmidt's encouragement, he was sexually initiated by a prostitute, something of a Viennese custom in those days, but for Wolf charged with ultimately fatal consequences. Characteristically, his affair with Vally prompted a euphoric surge of creative energy. And over the next few years he composed over 50 songs. Looking back on this period a decade later, Wolf remarked, perhaps with a touch of hyperbole, that "In those days I composed every day one good song, sometimes two."

Significantly, many of the songs of these early years are settings of bittersweet, often mordant lyrics by Schumann's favorite poet, Heinrich Heine. With its evocation of swirling mists, "Spätherbstnebel" (1878) suggests not only Schumann but also two of Schubert's Heine settings, "Die Stadt" and "Am Meer." Yet Wolf's own distinctive gift for atmosphere and visual imagery is already evident. The Lenau setting "Frage nicht," composed in July 1879, is a song of rapt devotion, both delicate and impassioned; as Wolf's biographer Frank Walker suggested, its intense personal emotion may well have caused Vally to recoil in alarm.

Songs to poems by Eduard Mörike (1888)

After his youthful outpouring of songs—most of them unpublished—between 1878 and early 1883, Wolf experienced a long period of creative torpor. These were the years when he earned his living primarily as Vienna's most barbed music critic, indulging, *inter alia*, in his fanatical hatred of Brahms's music. It was only in 1888 that the floodgates opened again. And between February 16 and May 18, Wolf composed 43 settings of Mörike, working in solitude in a friend's house on the edge of the Vienna Woods. Then, after a walking holiday in central Austria, he set a further ten Mörike poems in October and November. A letter to his friend Edmund Lang of February 22, 1888 gives an idea of Wolf's state of mind at this time. "I have just written down a new song, a divine song, I tell you. .. I feel my cheeks glow like molten iron with excitement, and this state of pure inspiration is to me exquisite torment, not pure happiness."

Eduard Mörike (1804–75) was a Swabian pastor—of necessity rather than choice—a painter and the author of some of the most subtle, passionate and musical verses in the German language. His range was extraordinarily wide, encompassing ideal, unhappy and erotic love, joy in the natural world, religious mysticism, the supernatural, whimsy and broad or ironic humour—all themes richly represented in Wolf's Mörike collection.

With its riot of delicately buzzing trills, its diaphanous piano countermelodies and its mingled shy hesitancy and elation, "Der Knabe und das Immllein," the first song in tonight's Mörike group is a perfect vignette of tremulous young love. The verses of "An eine Aeolsharfe" were inspired by the poet's grief for a dead brother. And Wolf's sweetly sorrowful setting, initiated by delicate harp arpeggios, is intensely characteristic in its flexible vocal declamation over a quasi-independent keyboard accompaniment—a recreation of Wagnerian techniques in concentrated lyric form. "Um Mitternacht" is a sublime nocturne-lullaby in which the serene vocal line soars over a deep-lying accompaniment that suggests the streams murmuring in their sleep.

The ever-popular "Fussreise," dominated by its tramping accompaniment, is an invigorating *al fresco* piece whose folk-like melody expands rapturously in the penultimate verse as the wanderer praises the Creator. The rapt, pantheistic "Im Frühling" and "Auf einer Wanderung" are two more of Wolf's glorious, expansive symphonic songs, each built on the inspired transformations of their opening figures. Listen, for instance, to how Wolf expands the delicious initial "cantering" motif of *Auf einer Wanderung* into a phrase of intense lyric beauty at the song's radiant, visionary climax. Another outdoors piece, "Er ist's," is one of Wolf's most brilliant and extrovert songs, with its excitable, free-soaring melodies, its pulsating accompaniment and its flamboyant postlude where the keyboard strives to recreate the tumultuous power of a Wagnerian orchestra.

Next a group of love songs, beginning with “Begegnung,” an evocation, at once passionate and gently humorous, of the morning after a furtive nocturnal encounter. Wolf evokes the remembered storm—both literal and metaphorical—in the piano’s restless syncopated accompaniment, and underlines the shifts in the story’s perspective with a delightful change of key for each verse. “Nimmersatte Liebe” and “Erstes Liebeslied eines Mädchens” are Wolf’s most erotically explicit songs. The first explores the pleasure and masochistic pain of sexual love with a deliciously light touch; then, at the repeat of the words “Und anders war Herr Salomon, der Weise, nicht verliebt” (“Wise King Solomon loved no differently”) the music breaks into a student’s song, as if in boisterous, laddish acknowledgement of Solomon’s famed carnal appetite. Of “Erstes Liebeslied eines Mädchens,” with its overt phallic imagery, wild snatches of waltz melody and frenzied piano part, Wolf wrote that it was “of an intensity that would lacerate the nervous system of a block of marble ... the poem is mad, the music no less so”.

It is perhaps not over-fanciful to imagine the blissful torment of “Erstes Liebeslied” ending in the sorrow of “Das verlassene Mägdlein,” one of the world’s most piercing songs of betrayed love. Wolf evokes the girl’s bleak inner and outer world with wonderful economy and emotional truth, unifying the whole song with the mournful tolling rhythm of the opening. For an instant the abandoned girl flares up in passionate reproach before the music returns to chill numbness. Finally in this Mörike group a humorous song, albeit one touched with pathos: “Der Tambour,” a sleepy parody of a military march in which Wolf gently mocks the homesick drummer-boy’s fantasies with an abundance of graphic illustrative touches.

Songs to poems by Joseph Eichendorff (1888)

As early as 1880 Wolf had been attracted to the limpid, melodious verses of Joseph, Freiherr von Eichendorff (1788–1857). But it was only in 1888, as the Mörike springs began to run dry, that he began to set Eichendorff’s poetry in earnest. The Eichendorff we know from Schumann’s songs is the romantic nature poet par excellence. But for the most part Wolf rejected his nocturnal nature lyrics. As he wrote in a letter to his fellow-composer Engelbert Humperdinck, “the romantic element in the Eichendorff songs almost completely recedes” in favor of the “relatively unknown roguishly humorous and robustly sensual side of the poet”. The obvious exceptions among the Wolf settings here are the Schumannesque “Die Nacht” (shades of the winding chromatic lines of the older composer’s *Zwielicht*) and the exquisitely tender, secretive nocturne “Verschwiegene Liebe,” composed, according to Wolf’s first biographer, in a single, instant flash of inspiration.

Elsewhere, poet and composer are revealed as masters of the swift, sharp vignette: in “Der Musikant,” where a quasi-folk vein coexists with Wolf’s typical harmonic sophistication (a surprise remote modulation, for instance, to paint the minstrel’s anxiety at “in der Kälte, ohne Schuh”); in the macho, swashbuckling “Der Glücksritter,” another of Wolf’s military march parodies; in “Lieber alles,” with its

witty characterization of the youth's prospective careers; and in the rumbustious "Seemans Abschied," with its outrageous dissonant opening.

Eichendorff, Part II

The second half of this Wolf Marathon opens with three more of his pungent Eichendorff vignettes. The student of "Der Scholar" is—unusually— blissfully contented; and as the voice sings its delicious melody the keyboard's left hand memorably illustrates the poem's picturesque detail. Equally graphic in its piano commentary is "Unfall," a dryly witty treatment of a rather arch poem, culminating in a volley of laughter as Cupid mocks the narrator. We end this Eichendorff group in swaggering, mock-chivalrous vein with "Der Schreckenberger," a counterpart to "Der Glücksritter" (written two days later) which closes with the same pompous, parodistic march music.

Alte Weisen: Six Poems by Gottfried Keller (1890)

After Mörike and Eichendorff came Goethe. Then, following one of Wolf's typical bouts of gloomy exhaustion, the first songs of the *Spanisches Liederbuch* sparked off a new phase of elated creativity at the end of 1889. After completing the Spanish collection in April 1890 Wolf turned almost at once to the Swiss poet and novelist Gottfried Keller (1819–90) for another, much shorter songbook: the six "Old Tunes," each of them a female character portrait, complementing the male character sketches of the Eichendorff songs. The first song, "Tretet ein, hoher Krieger," is an ironic warning against the bonds of marriage, sparkling and playful, yet shot through with flashes of tenderness. In "Singt mein Schatz" the keyboard has a field day with its gleeful evocations first of chirping birdsong, then of the writhing, coiling snake, and finally, in the exultant postlude, of the fiery, flashing sword. "Du milchjunger Knabe," by contrast, is a delicate portrayal of first love, full of mysterious, ambivalent harmonies. "Wandl' ich in dem Morgentau" has an infectious vernal lilt, with the piano repeating the same accompanying figure in ever-fresh melodic and harmonic guises.

The fifth Keller song, "Das Köhlerweib ist trunken," with its cruel piano depiction of the woman's drunken singing, is in Wolf's most abrasive, mocking vein; and you will hear no hint in the music of the poet's compassion for the ruined rustic belle. As if to make amends, the final song, "Wie glänzt der helle Mond," paints a touchingly tender portrait of the old peasant woman, with her childhood memories and naive piety.

Goethe and The Limits of Mankind (1889)

In a reference to "Grenzen der Menschheit," Wolf biographer Frank Walker writes: "It passes far beyond either love or revolt. Man recognizes his own littleness, and has no room in his heart for anything except awe and submission. Across infinite distances in space the harmony of the spheres is perceptible; some force, some creative spirit is there, but it is one that is utterly indifferent to

mankind and its joys and sorrows... Man strives to raise himself to the stars, but finds nowhere a foothold ... The stream of eternity raises him on its waves for a moment and then engulfs him. His life is only one insignificant link in the chain of existence ...”

Wolf was face to face with the poet in whom again and again, “the maximum of human experience is concentrated in a stanza or two in which there is not a superfluous word,” according to Ernest Newman; while Georg Brandes observes, “[Goethe] can be as simple as a folksong or he can present an entire philosophy in a single poem. Newman refers specifically to “Grenzen der Menschheit,” Brandes might as well be.

Goethe wrote “Grenzen der Menschheit” in 1775, at the age of 26, and it was set by Hugo Wolf, only three years older at the time, in 1889. Its unusual (for Wolf) structure was pointed out by Ernest Newman, who observed that “it lacks a continuous web in the piano part, over which the vocal part plays freely. Instead we have a coincidence of rhythms and accents between the two factors throughout the song. Moreover, Wolf follows Goethe in his division of the work into five definite stanzas. Each of these stanzas of Goethe’s poem presents us with an idea and a set of images which, though fundamentally related to the central idea—that of the bounds set by the gods for mankind—are complete in themselves.”

For this listener, there is little even in Wolf that compares to the sweep of the opening phrase: a long musical sentence corresponding to the single verbal sentence of Goethe’s that reaches from “Wenn der uralte Vater” to “Über die Erde sät,” the sense of unrest and uncertainty in stanza 2, the hammering upon a single note 15 times in succession in the words descriptive of a man trying to steady himself upon the solid earth.

Goethe’s Mignon and The Harper (1888)

Even before he had penned the final songs of the Mörike collection, Wolf was pitting himself against the greatest and most universal of all German poets (see above). Between October 1888 and February 1889 he composed all 51 of his Goethe songs, venturing into areas of the poet’s protean output unexplored by previous composers. This was partly due to Wolf’s refusal to treat a poem that he felt had been set once and for all by Schubert—hence no “Gretchen am Spinnrade” or “Geheimes.” But he had no qualms about tackling the songs from Goethe’s semi autobiographical novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. These are sung by the figures of the waif Mignon and the blind old Harper, those enigmatic outsiders who haunted the Romantic imagination. The Harper, who makes his first appearance in the novel when he plays to Wilhelm and his acting troupe in an inn, has escaped to Germany from an Italian monastery, and is tormented by a secret guilt: his incestuous love for his sister, Serata, of which Mignon is the fruit—though neither father nor daughter knows it.

In setting the songs of Mignon and the Harper, Wolf stressed that, unlike Schubert and Schumann, he sought to go beyond the verses to portray the characters as they appear in the novel: i.e., as abnormal and unhinged. And he does this above all through a wandering, liquescent chromaticism. The first three Mignon songs combine this chromaticism with fragile, diaphanous textures, suggesting both the waif's innocence and her deep underlying grief. But in "Kennst du das Land" no trace of her childlike innocence remains: this magnificent song is composed on an operatic scale, moving from quiet reflection through mounting ecstasy to a climax of feverish, hysterical abandon.

The three guilt-laden Harper Songs have no hint of this opulent lyricism. With their drooping lines (each song grows from the same melodic source), spare textures and disorientating chromaticism they capture, as no previous composer had done, the mind of a once noble man tottering under the weight of Lear-like suffering.

Three Poems of Michelangelo (1897)

The three settings of the Italian Renaissance painter, sculptor, and poet Michelangelo were the last songs that Wolf wrote before the syphilis he had contracted nearly 20 years earlier took its final toll. In their intense seriousness, their themes of resignation and human futility, and the final cathartic peroration, these mighty songs, written for bass or low baritone, recall another vocal swansong, written just a year earlier: the *Vier ernste Gesänge* of Brahms. Quoting the text of the first song ("Wohl denk ich oft") in a letter to his close friend, the Mannheim judge Oskar Grohe, Wolf wrote that the verses were addressed by Michelangelo to a friend, adding: "The music, which begins with a mournful introduction and maintains that tone to the penultimate line, takes on an unexpected robust character."

While the opening song moves from brooding, depressive chromaticism to its final diatonic clarion calls, the second, "Alles endet was entstehet," is almost unrelievedly bleak, touched momentarily by the human warmth of E major (after the prevailing C-sharp minor) at "Menschen waren wir ja auch"—"We too were once men". Wolf wrote about this song: "It is really something that might drive one crazy, yet at the same time it has an amazing, truly classical simplicity... I'm literally afraid of this composition, for it makes me apprehensive about my own sanity"—ominously prophetic words.

The opening of the last Michelangelo song, "Fühlt meine Seele," is also saturated with gloomy, drooping chromaticism. But as the music rises from the depths, the mood gradually grows more ardent as E minor gives way to E major. The questioning first theme returns at "Mir zeigt es wohl". But the image of the woman's eyes, and their promise of redemption, inspires a radiant apotheosis of the E major love theme.

From the “Spanish Songbook” (1889–90)

From Goethe onwards, German writers, painters and musicians have been irresistibly lured by the Mediterranean south, a flamboyant, intoxicating world of light, sensual grace and intense, often violent emotions. The north German poet Emanuel Geibel fueled a growing taste for things Spanish with his translations of mainly 16th- and 17th-century verses. And in 1852 he collaborated with a younger poet, Paul Heyse, on a joint compilation, the *Spanisches Liederbuch*, dividing the poems into sacred and secular and drawing on famous writers such as Cervantes alongside anonymous sources and two obscure characters, “Don Manuel Rio” and “Don Luis el Chico,” who turn out to be none other than Geibel and Heyse themselves. Wolf’s own collection of settings of the “Spanish Songbook” is the finest fruit of a long-lasting fascination with Spain that had begun in 1882 with an aborted opera set in Seville and culminated in the two operas of his final creative years, *Der Corregidor* and the unfinished fragment *Manuel Venegas*.

The four songs in tonight’s program are all taken from the larger, secular part of the Spanish collection. Though the sounds and rhythms of Spain echo through a number of the songs, there is no hint of Spanish influence in “Wenn du zu den Blumen gehst,” with its tender, candid melodic line and suggestion of Bach in the contrapuntal accompaniment. “Wer sein holdes Lieb verloren” is its dolefully humorous sequel, using a similar melodic opening and painting the ultra-timid lover’s lost opportunity with delicacy and affection. “Ach, im Maien war’s” is a delicious guitar-accompanied romance whose music seems more inspired by the sunshine and warm breezes of the opening than the dark dungeon in which the singer languishes. Finally in this group, the popular “In dem Schatten meiner Locken,” where, as in so many of the Spanish songs, the female protagonist proves a mistress of coquetry and caprice, with her changing moods reflected in tenderly mischievous key shifts.

Two songs to poems by Lord Byron (1896)

Wolf’s two Byron settings (in German translation) of December 1896 are rarely heard. But they are no less magnificent than the Michelangelo songs composed the following March. “Keine gleicht von allen Schönen” is a drowsy nocturnal seascape in Wolf’s most luxuriant, Tristanesque vein, the lingering vocal line complemented by an accompaniment full of lulling breezes and sensuously lapping waves. In utter contrast, “Sonne der Schlummerlosen” is an icy moonscape, with a bare, incantatory voice part underpinned by the piano’s halting syncopations—an evocation, perhaps, of the insomniac’s heartbeats. In the concluding vocal phrase Wolf paints the antithesis “hell, aber wie kalt” by juxtaposing a bright high note with a numb descent below the stave; and the moon’s cold, impassive glint is graphically evoked by the piercing staccato chords of the postlude.

--Richard Wigmore

The author, formerly a professional singer, is a writer specializing in the Viennese Classical period and in Lieder. He writes reviews for the Daily Telegraph, Gramophone, and BBC Music Magazine; broadcasts on BBC Radio 3 and World Service; and gives classes in Lied interpretation at the Guildhall School of Music in London. He has published Schubert: The Complete Song Texts (Gollancz) and contributed articles to many reference works, including the latest edition of the New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians. English-language program notes are provided by the Edgar Foster Daniels Foundation.