

“I Will Never Get Away from this Period...”

An Interview with Thomas Hampson on Hugo Wolf and His Epoch

from the program book *Hugo Wolf und Seine Zeit*

Salzburg Festival 2003

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

You are dedicating two lieder recitals in Salzburg to Hugo Wolf, the centennial of whose death is one of the most important musical anniversaries we are celebrating in 2003. What motifs and thoughts guided you when planning the program?

Originally I conceived a five-part series, which in addition to the Hugo Wolf Marathon and my own solo recital would have included an orchestral concert, the *Italienisches Liederbuch*, and a symposium, but we were only able to realize the first two of those projects. Although the marathon should be devoted entirely to Hugo Wolf's oeuvre, I wanted to introduce an aspect into my lieder recital that would go beyond Wolf. Initially, I had thought of another theme, which would have perhaps been even more fun: Wolf and the world of opera, the opera composers of his day, especially those from Vienna, whose works he heard and reviewed. It would have posed the question: What did these composers achieve in the genre of the lied—I was thinking of Julius Bittner and Karl Goldmark, for example. But eventually I had to admit that their lieder were simply not of the same quality as Wolf's. The evening would have fallen apart and wouldn't have been satisfactory for the Salzburg Festival, which can't be concerned with a primarily academic notion, a lecture course, but must be about art.

“Hugo Wolf and His Epoch” is the title of the first evening—an era that included very different, even contradictory movements: fin de siècle, Décadence, Gründerzeit [the “founding years” of the German nation], and Modernism. Was Hugo Wolf a typical child of that age or more an outsider?

After studying Hugo Wolf over the years, I was struck by a strange discrepancy. Wolf seemed to be oblivious of his own era, a typical loner, although he had an extremely forceful personality. He was never a truly happy man, nor did he belong to a regular circle of colleagues or like-minded associates. When he worked, whether as a writer or as a composer, he plunged into an obsessive, self-contained world that he occupied all alone. Sometimes it seemed to me as if he had locked himself in with the things he was studying, gnawing at them like a dog on a bone, until he had completely polished them off. He wanted to find out what the truth was, what it was really about—with fiery intensity. The things around him, what the future would bring, didn't concern him. He had nothing to do with the developments that presaged and anticipated the 20th century; he remained completely attached to the nineteenth century. For that reason, he didn't even take notice of Richard Dehmel, as far as I know, though Dehmel was only three years younger than he was.

Richard Dehmel was like the fulcrum between six composers whose works you are juxtaposing with Hugo Wolf's oeuvre, since all the settings you are performing in this group of lieder are based on Dehmel poems. Why did you decide on this poet and make him into Hugo Wolf's opposite pole?

First, because I am a big fan of Richard Dehmel, whose poems speak to me very much and who was also a fascinating personality. Quite unlike Hugo Wolf he maintained close contacts with other artists of his day, including friendships with Otto Julius Bierbaum, Detlev von Liliencron, and August Strindberg; for *Pan*, the art journal he founded, he engaged some of the leading representatives of Modernism as writers, including Hugo von Hofmannsthal. He symbolizes the new departures that began even during Hugo Wolf's lifetime—I'm thinking of *Jugendstil*, Naturalism, and later Expressionism as well—developments that left clear marks in the work of Schoenberg, for example, in *Verklärte Nacht*, say, which can also be traced back to Dehmel. Nearly all of Dehmel's poems, which alternated between dream and reality, were set by important composers of his day, and Dehmel in turn had an ardent interest in these lieder; he had them sung for him and corresponded with their authors: with Strauss, Pfitzner, Reger, and of course Schoenberg.

The world of Wolf and Dehmel really did form opposite poles, as the raging, exciting zeitgeist that Dehmel reflected in such a masterly way passed Wolf by entirely. Dehmel's strength lay precisely in seizing upon all the various facets of this zeitgeist: in his erotic poems, on the one hand, which expose the sensuousness of the *fin de siècle*, and, on the other, with his penchant for socialism and social criticism, which pointed to the world of someone like Egon Schiele—take the poem "Arbeitsmann" ("Worker"), for example. And even the form that Dehmel chose—his free verse—gives something of the feeling of the age: a departure from the nineteenth century. From the start, Dehmel was the most frequently set writer of his day, already by 1911 there were more than five hundred settings of his poems.

You will be presenting Dehmel lieder by Zemlinsky, Webern, Strauss, Alma Mahler, Schoenberg, and Joseph Marx. Why these six?

Let's start at the end: I placed Joseph Marx at the end because his tonal language is most readily traced back to the world of Hugo Wolf. Marx was a composer from Graz who has been largely forgotten, though he wrote more than a hundred lieder, most of which are wonderful, and they must absolutely be rediscovered and returned to the repertoire. "Waldseligkeit" ("Bliss in the woods"), on a poem that Richard Strauss and Alma Mahler had set not long before, was composed in 1911, and it is Marx's only Dehmel lieder. By the way, just like Wolf, Marx wrote an *Italienisches Liederbuch*, but he used precisely the Heyse poems that Hugo Wolf did not—as a supplement, if you will ... Schoenberg's lieder "Erwartung"—not to be confused with the monodrama of the same name, on a text by Marie Pappenheim, that he wrote ten years later—dates from 1899, the same year he composed the sextet *Verklärte Nacht*. I find the beauty and magic of his tonal language, the harmonic

balance, that Schoenberg achieves in this somewhat morbid lied absolutely astonishing, and it refutes all prejudices.

Between Schoenberg, Webern, Zemlinsky, and Alma Mahler there were, famously, close connections, even personal ones. Zemlinsky was the teacher of Schoenberg as well as Alma Schindler, who became Zemlinsky's lover before she met and married Gustav Mahler; Webern, in turn, was Schoenberg's student. But that isn't all: Schoenberg married Zemlinsky's sister Mathilde in 1901. Putting these four composers on the same program is something of an inside joke. But the connections between them are not limited to biographical intersections: for all four, the metropolis of Vienna around 1900 was the starting point, the fertile soil out of which their art and individuality could develop. These surroundings would surely have contributed to their interest in a poet like Richard Dehmel, although all four chose his poetry of ideas and love over the poems with sociopolitical motifs. The ways in which they set his texts to music, however, could not be more different. And that is true even though all of them stood at the start of their careers, were closely connected, and only later would depart into very different sound worlds: Schoenberg and Webern into dodecaphony, and thus a totally new musical language; Zemlinsky moved increasingly from the sphere of aesthetic influence of Johannes Brahms. With Schoenberg and Webern in particular I am constantly astonished to hear these highly expressive early works laden with sensuousness: It is like the moment before a cloudburst that will soon pour down. What distinguishes all six composers of the Dehmel group—that is, Richard Strauss, along with the others already named—is precisely this proximity to the zeitgeist that is lacking entirely in Wolf.

If Wolf had lived longer, how would he have related to his contemporary Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School? Would he have tended to freer tonality as well?

Following the curve of Hugo Wolf's creativity, I see an astonishing development in the use of harmonies and lied form that could be judged a continuation of the achievements of Wagner and Liszt. In that respect, his lieder certainly pointed toward the future and provided starting-off points for the generation that followed him. But I don't think he was really aware of this aspect, and of course he did not influence the style of all of those who were writing important lieder at the same time and later—not Mahler, for example, who composed quite differently. Mind you: if you ask, "What would have become of Wolf if ...?" you will soon find yourself on thin ice. We can only speculate about how Wolf would have developed if he had been able to live and work longer. We don't know what Wolf would have thought or written if he had had to review Schoenberg's works. And though I have no wish to put words in his mouth, I have the feeling that he would have been fascinated by the *Gurrelieder*—or by Mahler's *Das klagende Lied*. The advanced ballads, the narrative form, combined with a harmony that happily takes risks—that might have been something for him. Like everything else that somehow followed on Wagner, continuing or further developing his work. However, that Wolf might have

made a total break with tonality—I dare say I doubt he would have done that. At least in the choice of writers to set, Hugo Wolf was one of the last proponents of Romanticism: Mörike, Eichendorff, and even Goethe are the literary foci of his lieder, whose poems he set to music with inconceivable beauty and profundity. Just take “Der Genesene an die Hoffnung” (“To Hope, On Recovering From Illness”)—a stroke of genius! Or “Im Frühling” (“In Spring”)! That is more than just setting a text! And these works have nothing to do with the everyday reality that surrounded Hugo Wolf in the 1880s and 1890s. I can easily imagine him getting on the train in Perchtoldsdorf, still in his own world, and asking himself: What is all this? What am I hearing? Of course, every composer needs a touch of autism, since first he must hear and sense his own genius, and concentrate on that; but in Wolf this quality is particularly pronounced. He must have composed in a kind of trance state, as if in a fever. How else could it be possible for him to write sometimes two ingenious lieder in one day, for example, two of these unbelievable Goethe songs? That he felt them, heard them, composed them? “Grenzen der Menschheit” (“Limits of Mankind”)—simply wrote it down! Unbelievable... It can only really be compared to Mozart, for not even Schubert, who tended to go back to sketches, worked in this kind of somnambulistic way.

Does your program confirm the thesis of the “synchronicity of the asynchronous”?

Most of the settings from the Dehmel group were composed in 1898–99—even Strauss’s “Befreit” (“Freed”) dates from that year. Hugo Wolf’s greatest creative phase, his feverish, eruptive mania of work was already over in 1891; after that there are only brief and isolated periods of activity, but long interruptions, real dry spells, then in 1897 he fell completely silent and became mentally deranged. Wolf’s work rhythms remind me of a light bulb that is about to go out but, before that happens, gives off an especially bright, hot light for one last time. This was surely related to his disease—syphilis. In the work of Franz Schubert and Robert Schumann, both of whom had syphilis, one finds this same phenomenon of a frenzy of creativity and sudden fading. And isn’t it odd that we are speaking of the three most important German composers of lieder? Did the illness release in them a heightened sensibility for lyric form, emotional surges, and sensitivity that empowered them to achieve such masterly settings? Or to put it another way, Would they not have produced lieder in such quantities if they hadn’t been infected? I would be very interested in a serious answer from a medical or psychiatric perspective.

How do you explain that Hugo Wolf failed to achieve a masterpiece of musical theater? Corregidor was premiered in Mannheim in 1896, but even Manuel Venegas remained a fragment ... Was opera fundamentally lost on Wolf?

Can you name a composer who truly mastered both—the intimate miniature of the lied and the large-scale panorama of the symphony or opera? Richard Strauss, most plausibly (although I don’t consider his lied oeuvre perfect), perhaps Massenet as well—but who else? The others are cases where the craft still functioned in both

genres, but the brilliant idea, the bold idea was limited to one of the two métiers. In that respect, I don't find it surprising at all that Hugo Wolf never managed to celebrate a great success in opera—we still have *Corregidor*, and even the fragments are quite fascinating in their way. Perhaps, too, these works simply came at the wrong time. If Wolf had written *Corregidor* in 1840, it would probably have been celebrated as a masterpiece. I believe that his work in opera again turns out to represent a retrospective attitude, an asynchronicity relative to the zeitgeist. What surprises me far more in the case of Hugo Wolf than his reservations about opera is the fact that he never wrote important works for the piano. If you look at the phenomenal piano writing in his lieder, his virtuoso approach to this instrument, its colors, and possibilities—that is truly a heartbreaking void. Perhaps Wolf needed words to find musical inspiration.

What do you see as the striking qualities in Wolf as a composer of lieder that elevate him above his age?

No lied in Hugo Wolf's oeuvre sounds like any other. But in each of them he managed to establish a psychological coherence, to build a clever dramaturgical arch. He knew how to fan a single moment out into all its divergent facets, as if under a magnifying glass, into different feelings and how to make variety in unity come alive. I find the weaving of voice and piano writing particular impressive: the way the singer gives a melody or feeling, and the piano continues it, extends it, or gives it a subtext. Every lied is a world in and of itself, a self-contained cosmos in which the bees buzz and the water rushes and everything else is excluded. And Wolf had a unique tonal language for each of the writers he set. With Goethe he shows the man as above all a thinking creature in nature; the musical style is more static than in the other lieder; the texture is conceived more in chords, which is why time occasionally seems to be frozen. By contrast, the far more dramatic and colorful Eichendorff settings are closest to the style of Loewe's ballads: they are humorous descriptions of people, exquisite sketches, and playful genre drawings—and this is where I feel he comes closest to opera. In Mörike, in turn, Wolf's narrative style is more linear and lyrical, with more word painting and more playfulness in the melodic figurations. If one were to associate these three writers in Wolf's settings with the form of the sonata, then Goethe would be the introductory movement, Mörike the lyrical adagio, and Eichendorff the scherzo.

Do you feel spiritually at home in the Vienna of the age of Wolf and Mahler? Or (if it really is an "or") do you also have a desire to seek distance from that period?

I feel very much at home in Hugo Wolf's day. There is a rich variety of developments and visions that have their starting point in this era. This epoch gives an astonishing look into a future whose experiences have still not played out, though they have long since become the past for us. The period from 1885 to the end of the First World War is an exciting, jam-packed moment in the history of civilization, and it still shapes and influences our lives. The world suddenly became much smaller, came closer together; the routes of communication changed radically—the seeds of

globalization were sown. The result was that the same processes began to take place independently in different cultural circles, and similar ideas were born. And just think of all that was happening politically then! And in the arts, which were experiencing the departures of Modernism ... The crises and apocalyptic atmosphere; the complaints of a decline in values that circulated then are still familiar today—they too have accompanied us ever since. No, I will never get away from this period!

Fifty years ago there was a legendary Wolf recital at the Salzburg Festival with Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and Wilhelm Furtwängler. And history has been made here again and again in the interpretation of Wolf; one need only think of Christa Ludwig, Irmgard Seefried, Walter Berry, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, or Hermann Prey. Do you use such "figureheads" to guide you, or do you seek your distance?

In recent years it has become fashionable to break free of earlier interpretations to try to find one's own voice. For many, this brought with it pressure to be different at any price— especially for many young people, who truly hate the accomplishments of the generations of their parents and grandparents, and who simply feel it as a burden. But being different doesn't always mean being better. And in Salzburg especially one has to live with the legacy of a great tradition. For example, I have learned an extraordinary amount from Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, and I am happy to admit it. I have a large record collection at home, and I admire all my predecessors here in Salzburg. If we don't know where we come from and what our tradition is, we won't find our path into the future. That doesn't mean that we should imitate them blindly. By the way, those in other disciplines tend to approach the history of interpretation much more matter-of-factly than singers. For example, I don't know a single serious pianist who has not studied Busoni or Rubinstein.

In Salzburg your two Hugo Wolf concerts have aroused extraordinary curiosity in the festival audience. Yet it is often said that the lied is an anachronistic art. Do theatrically conceived lieder recitals have a future?

Definitely, I would like to say euphorically: yes, of course! The question, of course, will be how lieder recitals can be presented in a contemporary way, so that we experience some experiments and answers, and perhaps even suffer and endure them a little. But there are very elemental needs behind the form of the lieder recital: people write poems to one another and sing one another songs. Whether it happens on a meadow somewhere or in a concert hall, this art always has something alive and indestructible. And if all our cultural achievements were to collapse and nothing remained, the lied, the song, what be the first thing to revive, as the most original and essential form of music.

Interview: Susanne Stähr / Translated by Steven Lindberg

English-language program notes are provided by the Edgar Foster Daniels Foundation