

German Lieder – An Excursion

The combination of words and music in song lies at the beginning of all music making; each time has entrusted to its songs its most spontaneous emotions, its most fleeting moods, its most secret feelings; the song is a micro-cosmos of human history (Oehlmann, 1976).

Within the German language the term *Lied* simply means song and it has a long history ranging from 12th century troubadour songs (*Minnesang*) via folk songs (*Volkslieder*), church hymns (*Kirchenlieder*) and Art Songs (*Kunstliedern*) to 20th-century workers songs (*Arbeiterlieder*) or protest songs (*Kabarettlieder, Protestlieder*).

There is a strong distinction between folk songs and art songs. The first usually have no known composer, no known text author and are handed down orally. Art-songs on the other hand have a known composer who put poetry of a known poet into music and wrote it all down.

The other here mentioned Lieder or song genres like church, workers or protest songs are distinguished from the art-song in that they are either written for a specific purpose or that they are a means to a non-musical end.

Songs can be distinguish formally:

- Strophic Song which use the exact same melody and accompaniment for all verses of a poem irrespective of mood changes. (e.g. Der Zauberer (Mozart))
- Strophic songs with variation in which melody and accompaniment change in some verses for instance through a

change from major to minor, added ornamentation or an added new part. (e.g. Der Lindenbaum (Schubert))

- Through composed songs which follow the “plot” and mood of a poem with an always new melody and accompaniment (e.g. Der Erlkönig (Schubert)). The influence of the text on the music means that the strophic form gets lost

In Germany and the then Austrian-Hungarian Empire the great age of song came in the 19th century. German and Austrian composers had written music for voice with keyboard before this time, but it was with the flowering of German literature in the Classical and Romantic eras that composers found high inspiration in poetry that sparked the genre known as the *Lied*.

The term *deutsches Kunstlied*, (German Lieder, The German Art Song) first occurred referring to the ‘Romantic’ songs of the early 19th century, the period when the genre evolved.

There is something intrinsically private about the *Lied*: the miniature-form and its simple setting for piano and voice evoke the intimacy of a *Salon*; the term originally just means a ‘larger living room’ but came, particularly in 18th and 19th centuries’ Central Europe to depict the social gathering of a smaller circle of guests in the homes of the educated, culturally interested bourgeois middle class in order to discuss and enjoy literary, artistic and/or musical performances.

In *Lieder*, poetry and music of often quite personal character offer an insight into the human soul’s most vulnerable parts yet stay always perfectly within the boundaries of “good taste”. The subjects of *Lieder* are - within a certain introspection - as varied as the literature of the period and cover every conceivable aspect of unrequited and

unreachable love, marital contentment and friendship, loneliness, death, nature, war and religious faith. The reminiscence of medieval themes typical for the romantic era is reflected in tales of fairies, elves, spirits and suchlike. An often present certain emotional self-indulgence is made bearable and even lovable through either a pinch of irony or a naïve sincerity that defies cheap sentimentality (Oehlmann, 1973). The music, going far beyond the only illustrative, complements the words in an interpreting and deepening way, adding layers to the one-dimensional and simplifying the complicated; music and words fuse and in their union become something new. Melodic or rhythmic phrases, though bound by musical law, never lose their connection to the word; and as the two poles – word and music – combine their force, they double their energy (Fischer-Dieskau, 1985).

The beginnings of the German Lieder tradition are seen in the songs of Mozart and Beethoven, but it is with Schubert that a new balance is found between words and music, a new absorption into the music of the sense of the words. Schubert wrote over 600 songs, some of them in sequences or song cycles that relate a story—adventure of the soul rather than the body. The tradition was continued by Schumann, Brahms, and Hugo Wolf, and on into the 20th century by Strauss, Mahler and Pfitzner. Austrian partisans of atonal music, Arnold Schönberg and Anton Webern, composed lieder in their own style.

The German Lied arguably enters the scene when Franz Schubert “ennobled the folksong and put it on a level equal to the greatest works of music” (Friedell, 1928, p.1002)



Schubert's friends and admirers also coined the term "Schubertiade" meaning informal, unadvertised gatherings, held at private homes (like the above mentioned 'salon') and dedicated to the composer's music. While in those years many Schubertiades included the composer's participation, this was not necessary, and they were sometimes held in places other than Vienna, where Schubert spent most of his life.

Schubertiades in early 19th-century Vienna were typically sponsored by wealthier friends or aficionados of Schubert's music. In addition to Schubert's music, they often also featured poetry readings, dancing, and other sociable pastimes. Attendees numbered from a handful to over one hundred. Schubert's friend Joseph Kupelwieser claimed to hold them on his own, writing, "I treat myself to a Schubertiade now and again".^[1]

There are still Schubertiades, but the modern versions are more likely to be formal affairs, presented as concerts or festivals devoted to Schubert's music.^[2]

Schubert, born 1797 in Vienna into the rather poor family of a school teacher, was educated in a church convent as a “Sängerknabe” (boy soprano) and trained to be a school teacher himself. However from early on he dedicated his life to composition, depended most of his life on a loyal circle of friends and lived mostly in more or less dire circumstances. Having contracted syphilis at a young age, he died with 35 years in 1828. It should be noted that this is only one year after Beethoven’s passing and yet, whilst Beethoven is generally counted into the classical period, Schubert belongs to the Romantic era for which his songs have become almost synonymous. There are many good biographies about Schubert as his life is well documented in the letters and diaries of his friends and I can only recommend that you read up on him a bit.

In Schubert’s songs the era of the piano being just an accompaniment to the singing voice has come to an end and it is now an equal partner to the singer.

The genesis of “Gretchen am Spinnrade” on October 16th, 1814 has, perhaps a bit melodramatically, been pinpointed as the “birth-hour of the German Lied” (Fischer-Dieskau, 1985, p.71, quoting Oscar Bie). Written by the 17 year old Schubert it musically depicts a girl suffering from an overwhelming longing.

The repeated d-minor melody (“Meine Ruh ist hin, mein Herz ist schwer”) symbolizes the manic force of the girl’s irresistible emotions. The rolling figure of the piano paints the monotone spinning wheel, but the harmony goes much deeper; for instance the sudden modulation to C-major in bar 7, forced back to d-minor without a leading note, the frequent empty fifths with the third only reluctantly coming in on a weak beat, give the song dark, bitter and tragic traits from the start. Of great

effect is the part where the image of her lover and his kiss appear so real before her that the piano resolves in formless waves before coming to an abrupt halt with the voice suspended on a dissonant high note. Reluctantly restarting the spinning duty, the song rushes to another climax only to end in a diminuendo and a repetition of the first line as if there was no end to this suffering.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MYoeotSDi8>

I still want to remain with Schubert a bit longer and have you listen to his maybe most famous song, a narrative song or ballad, written only a year after Gretchen: *Erlkönig*. Please have a look at your music example II.

The 12/8 vibrato (a challenge for many a pianist) which starts in the first bar and continues through the whole song until the forth last bar and the recurring descending bass-motive symbolize the stormy night, the galloping horse as well as the suppressed fear of father and child. Changing to alluring harp sound when the Erlking speaks and swelling to a tragic end, the piano always speaks in the monotonous, relentless language of a demonic-overpowering nature. The voices of the 4 characters, narrator, father, son and Erlking are very distinct yet forced into one melodic flow. The tonal space is relatively narrow, remaining in G-and C-minor, the Erlking singing in B-and C major; only the child's terror let him cry out in more remote B and C sharp minor, then we are led back through D-minor to the main key. The piercingly dissonant minor seconds in the child's screams shocked even Schubert's friends. The ending has always been regarded as the strike of a genius: as the father reaches the courtyard, the frenetic ride stops abruptly and the death of the child is stated in recitative by a stricken narrator.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPFurPyMYfk>

The next composer I would like to introduce is Robert Schumann, who by the way will have his 200 year anniversary on June 8th this year.

It has been said that Schumann epitomizes more than any other composer the essence of the “romantic” : radical introversion, a heightened sensitivity for barely perceptible moods, the expression of an insatiable, larger than life longing and visionary fantasy. With a great sense for the notion of the “unity of the arts”, he was highly versed in literature and for a while torn between becoming a poet or a musician; as the initiator and editor of the critical and learned music magazine “Neue Bahnen - Neue Zeitschrift fuer Musik” (new tracks – new magazine of music) he continues his literary output also when, from the age of 20 he completely dedicated himself to music, studying piano with Friedrich Wieck (his future though very reluctant father in law). Having ruined his right fourth (ring) finger with a self-invented contraption to make it stronger meant he had to give up career plans as a concert virtuoso concentrating on composition from the early 1830s. The first 10 years of his compositions are solely dedicated to the piano. In 1840 however, when, after a long legal battle, it becomes clear that his beloved Clara will finally be his wife, a vocal creativity bursts out with unbelievable force. In this so called “Liederjahr” he writes 138 songs, the core of his Lieder opus.

Schumann suffered from bi-polar disorder aggravated by an early syphilis infection. After a suicide attempt in 1854 he spent the last years of his life in the confinement of a psychiatric institution where he died in 1856.

Whilst the time frame of this lecture doesn't allow to speak about all of the poets whose words have been put into music by Lieder composers, I would at this point like to say a few words about one of them – in the hope that this will spark your appetite and induce you to find out more.

So, let me briefly introduce Heinrich Heine: It has been said that Heine was for Schumann what Goethe had been for Schubert – meaning a poet which brought out the very best in the composer. (Fischer-Dieskau,1985).

Born Jewish as Harry Heine he changed his first name to Heinrich after converting – rather half-heartedly - to Protestantism. At that time rather indifferent towards religion, he hoped to thus advance the possibility of a civil service career in law which he then never pursued. Heine later regretted his baptism and there is little doubt that his Jewish background had a great influence on his life and work (Reich-Ranicki, 1997). Rarely has a great poet been so controversial in his own country as his power to annoy equalled his power to charm and move; aggressive satires, radical postures and an impertinent nonchalance made him appear to many as an unpatriotic and subversive scoundrel, and the growth of Anti-Semitism contributed to the case against him. (Oehlman,1973). Heine had moved to Paris in 1831 and emigrated for good when his works were forbidden in Germany in 1833. A hundred years later the Nazis would burn and ban his works yet grudgingly had to include some for their sheer popularity - marking them “author unknown”.

Heine is, after Goethe, the best known German poet in and outside Germany and his poetry has been set to music more than any other texts (except for biblical texts) with the *Buch der Lieder* ('Book of Songs', a collection of short poems, published in 1827) alone accounting for nearly

dann fließen die Tränen zusammen, That our tears join in
their flow,

und an mein Herz drück fest dein Herz, And onto my heart press firmly
your heart,

dann schlagen zusammen die Flammen. So that the flames join
their glow.

Und wenn in die große Flamme fließt And when into the great
flame flows

Der Strom von unsern Tränen, The stream of our tears,

und wenn dich mein Arm gewaltig umschließt, And when my arm
clasps you with might,

sterb' ich vor Liebesehnen. I die of love's desire.

In contrast to many other poems in which connotations are culturally and historically influenced, this song speaks directly and purely of passionate longing and desire; It is hardly possible to interpret the climactic second verse in a non-sexual way: the 'stream' (of tears) that 'flows' into the 'great flame' resulting in a death caused by love's desire. This is pretty explicit imagery, and indeed Heine was often attacked for his frankness; his painfully realistic and deeply ambivalent depiction of love. Although this poem can, in contrast to many others, be clearly understood in a translation, we must be aware that any translation forfeits the expressive power of the vowels and consonants of the German language which are here used masterfully to enhance and underpin the boldness of the words:

There is for instance the progression of the open [a] in the first verse and the rhyme of *zusammen* and *Flammen* followed suddenly by the more

piercing [i] vowel of *fließt*, *umschließt* and *Liebessehnen* of the second verse, not to speak of the strong image of the *Zusammenschlagen* of the *Flammen*

Schumann's music picks up the words boldly and has the song rush impatiently towards its conclusion. Starting already on a *forte* there is a first climax in bar 7, only to immediately pull back in dynamics and to build up again, this time to a great climax on the sustained high *Ab* in bar 15. After the climax enhancing *ritardando*, the tempo immediately picks up again and, starting in an intense almost suppressed *piano*, voice and accompaniment rush without any further hesitation into the deadly bliss of love.

An outbreak of great emotion is compressed into a very short time span, like a window that is suddenly opened onto a rich and multi-layered scene and then shut again as quickly as it was opened.

Such a wide range of dynamics and emotions takes place in such a short time that performers and listeners are left somewhat breathless and spent.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p66to1hokHE>

I want you to listen to another song of Schumann's, this time a very well known one:

Mondnacht, from the song cycle *Liederkreis* op. 39, after words by Joseph von Eichendorff is a stunning synthesis of poetry, musical construction voice and keyboard (Miller, 1999)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8gN_unAT2xQ&feature=related

The next composer I would like to pay tribute to “stands like a block of heavy, solid rock, brimming with a steady, concentrated force in his rapidly changing, forward pushing time. He is one who stands somewhat reserved and sceptical before the use of the new colours and harmonies which his contemporaries indulge in, unwaveringly independent. A musician to whom the conservative and back-ward looking forces gravitated, of deep and powerful productivity who nonetheless influenced the future of his art no less than the progressive Liszt, Wagner and Bruckner” (any guess who it is?):

I’m talking of course of Johannes Brahms.

20 year old Brahms was warmly welcomed in the house of Robert and Clara Schumann and Robert writes enthusiastically about the young composer in his “Neue Zeitschrift fuer Musik”. Friends with both the Schumanns, Brahms had a lifelong and deep love and admiration for Clara.

Brahms loved the Lied-form, thoroughly studied the Folksong and dedicated his best creative powers to the composition of about 200 Lieder which have a key role within his work.

Popular mainly on account of his large orchestral works, Brahms employs in his songs the same musical procedures he developed in his highly important chamber music works. The song as a whole or least over large sections – acquires unity of form and content. Instead of the various details of the song being continuously illustrated, its basic mood is apprehended in purely musical terms – in this aspect Brahms is indebted above all to Schubert.

Please have a look at music example V and the text and translation which has – in this case - been handed out on a separate sheet.

Vergebliches Ständchen is a folksong sourced from the collections of Zuccamaglio. It was originally composed as a dialogue between a male and a female voice, but has been absorbed into the solo repertoire and enjoys great popularity.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MsIHSmpTFQg>

The next song I would like to talk about *Von ewiger Liebe* is transcribed from a folk tale: A poor farmer's aid sets his girlfriend free because she is being harassed because of their relationship. Yet, she stands by him reconfirming their love. The melody emulates just the right mysterious folk song sound which Brahms so often found. The first part depicts the evening mood in which the lovers meet. The middle part is characterized by the somewhat disquieting quaver triplets of the bass as we hear the offer of the boy to set her free; The song finds its climax in the last part; the dark minor shifts to bright major as the girl sings of her enduring love, underlined by a magical-monotonous piano figure which produces a visionary, dreamlike sound.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgIDdZobeHg>

The next composer I would like to introduce was somewhat an opponent to Brahms, an antipathy which was fueled partly by his devotion to Wagner, and partially by a misunderstanding and clash of personality, rather than any ill-will on Brahms' part. His greatest musical influence was Richard Wagner, who, in an encounter had encouraged the young composer to persist in composing and to attempt larger-scale works.

I'm talking, you guessed it, of Hugo Wolf whose 150th birthday is incidentally this week, on March 13th. The Austrian composer carried still further the expressive power of the German Lied.

His later life was clouded by illness, depression and final insanity, after a period of intense activity as a composer.

Collections of songs by Wolf include the 53 Mörike songs of 1888, settings of Eichendorff, 51 Goethe songs completed in 1889, the *Spanisches Liederbuch* of the same year, and the two collections of the *Italienisches Liederbuch*, the first written in 1891 and the second in 1896. These, along with the many other songs written between 1888 and 1897, form a remarkable body of work in which the texts set were given prominence in performance and served as the real inspiration for the music.

Please have a look at music example VII

I'm going to play to you two of the Mörike Lieder, the first *Begegnung* (Encounter) paints a slightly ironical yet benevolent and sensitive picture of a accidental meeting of two lovers on the morning after a satisfying erotic encounter.

The storm of the early morning is reminiscent of the stormy night and depicted in the rushing semiquavers of the piano. The five verses of the poem fly past in one big wind blow. The two little rubati or ritardandi when the boy asks if it was the storm in the girls chamber which has messed up her hair, appear like a smile on the onlooker's face. The song is a lovely example for Wolf's sense of humour that appears to have matched Mörike's own to a T.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLXXRYIDsus&feature=related>

Our next example *Auf ein altes Bild* keeps in wonderfully naive pre-raphael harmonies as it conjures up the image of a renaissance painting of

the Virgin Mary with the Christ child. Rather shocking and very effective are the dissonances of the last phrase “und dort im Walde wonnesam, ach, grünet schon des Kreuzes Stamm”.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ouV9lXRS8M>

The next composer of which I would like to speak – was born in the same year as Wolf (1860) and outlived Wolf by less than 10 years. Whilst during his own lifetime Gustav Mahler was best known as one of the leading orchestral and operatic conductors of the day, he has since come to be acknowledged as among the most important late-Romantic/early-Modernist composers;

Mahler composed primarily symphonies and songs; however, his approach often blurred the lines between orchestral Lied, symphony, and symphonic poem, most notably with his substantial song cycle, *Das Lied von der Erde*.

His Lieder use two poetic sources: one is folk-poetry (Volksdichtung) *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (The Magic Horn of Youth), and the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (songs of a wayfarer); the other is the poet Friedrich Rückert to whom Mahler felt particularly drawn to in his later years.

Our music example *Revelge* is a hair-raising and broadly composed tone picture. It tells the story of a dead soldier who raises his dead comrades who rally against and beat the enemy who succumbs to sheer terror and the army of the dead then marches to the beloved's house. The orchestration includes growling basses, muted trumpets, trilling piccolos and whirring drums.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2dyXV8ZILqA>

Last, not least I want to talk about a composer who has a long blessed life of unbelievably rich musical productivity – Richard Strauss.

His Lieder compositions lead far away from the afore mentioned intimacy of the private home opening the grand concert stage for the Lieder genre. A great composer for grand orchestra, Strauss has himself orchestrated many of his piano songs and written many songs for piano and orchestra from the start.

Our music example *Ständchen* is an all time favourite and, listening to its rendition by the legendary Fritz Wunderlich we also know why.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k4-OJLYapdc>

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