

# Lehn' deine Wang' an meine Wang': Heinrich Heine and Robert Schumann Revisited

Julia Nafisi

A few years ago and still new in Australia, I was invited as an examiner to a final year singing exam at the Victorian College of the Arts. A student from China sang Schumann's *Dichterliebe*. Listening to the young tenor, who tried hard to do justice to the work, yet clearly struggled with the German language, I was deeply moved. I thought how strange and wonderful it was that these humble, simple, beautiful songs were being sung and brought to life more than 150 years after their genesis on the other side of the globe by a singer who would have grown up in a culture so very different from the one that brought forth these songs.

The question why German Lieder are evidently so well loved all over the world has often puzzled me. It is not that I am lacking faith in the quality of this beautiful music but for a native German speaker words and music are here inseparably intertwined it is truly fascinating to see the Lieder's light also reach people who do not understand a word of what they hear.

Almost as distant from mainstream contemporary Germany/Austria as from Australian culture, the Lieder's familiar language and the 'local flavour' of many still evoke a certain nostalgia in the German native speaker: pre-loved, well-worn and deeply familiar — for the expatriate many Lieder feel like a piece of 'home'. Yet as German Lieder have spoken and continue to speak to people all over the world who have never seen a linden tree or the arrival of spring after a long cold winter, who have never heard a nightingale, strolled along a little creek, seen the river Rhine, or who for that matter have never lost their heart to a blond girl — one wonders how important the 'German ingredient' is after all.

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). The term 'German Lieder', derived from *Das deutsche Kunstlied*, (The German Art Song) first occurred with reference to the romantic songs of the early 19th century, the period when the genre evolved and is nowadays used to depict all Art Songs written in German; one should note that the term 'Romanticism' can mean a variety of things, depending on its reference to either music, literature or art. The musical period of Romanticism stretches well into the 20th century and includes composers like Mahler and Strauss.

The time when the Lied evolved, however, was the so-called Biedermeier period, a name which refers to

works in the fields of literature, music, the visual arts and interior design in the parts of Europe which belonged to the German Confederation (Deutscher Bund) and the Austrian Empire in the period between the years 1815 (Vienna Congress), which marked the end of the Napoleonic Wars, and 1848, the year of the European revolutions. The period was fraught with political tension and rigid censorship, brought about mainly by Prince Metternich's 'Karlsbader Beschlüsse' of 1819, a series of laws which restricted virtually all political activity; there were also growing nationalistic sentiments emerging after years of French rule, and bouts of anti-Semitism as a 'German' reaction to the rights which had been granted to Jews under the Code Napoleon. The lack of outward freedom led to flight into privacy and the idyllic, a certain remoteness and ignorance of the outside world. (Bernhard, 1983). The name *Biedermeier* was constructed with deliberate irony from the titles of two poems by Scheffel — (*Biedermanns Abendgemütlichkeit* (Biedermann's Evening Cosyness) and *Bummelmaiers Klage* (Bummelmaier's Complaint). It epitomises the kind of typical German Romanticism seen, for instance, in Spitzweg's paintings; as romanticism actually started out as a counter movement to classicism, this somewhat domesticated and, in a way, perverted form greatly incensed some poets and in particular, Heinrich Heine of whom we will hear more later in this article.

The German art song arguably entered 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) with the genesis of 'Gretchen am Spinnrade' on October 16th, 1814. This work has been acknowledged, perhaps a bit melodramatically, as the 'birth-hour of the German Lied' (Fischer-Dieskau, 1985, p.71, quoting O. Bie). While there are art songs in French, Russian, Norwegian, Czech, Italian, Spanish and English, the German canon is arguably the most diverse and extensive one. Each composer of Lieder developed his own musical idiom and reflected his time and personality through his choice of poetry.

There is something intrinsically private about the *Lied*: the miniature form and its simple setting for piano and voice evokes the intimacy of a salon which, during the 18th and 19th centuries in Central Europe, meant a large living room where social gatherings of a small circle of guests in the homes of the educated, culturally interested bourgeois middle class discussed and enjoyed 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. Often present is a certain emotional self-indulgence 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 only the 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 forces, they double their energy (Fischer-Dieskau, 1985).

Lieder offer a sheer endless playground for vocal colours and nuances as well as psychological study; their suitability for the singing studio is further enhanced by the fact that key transposition, inconceivable in Opera or Oratorio repertoire, is common practice in art songs; thus the majority of Lieder is easily available in different keys, allowing also singers of limited range and vocal ability to try themselves at a perfect work of art.

It has been said that Heine was for Schumann what Goethe had been for Schubert — that is, a poet who 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, although 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 (Oehlmann, 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 include some for their sheer popularity, but marking them 'author unknown'.

Heine is, after Goethe, the best known German poet 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 accounting for nearly 3000 musical settings alone (Miller, 1999). Heine handled the German language

in a way that made extraordinary use of its melodious content, a feature that has been called *Singen und Klingen* — approximately singing and resounding/resonating — and combined this virtuosity in craftsmanship with extraordinary wit, psychological insight and biting irony. Nietzsche said about him: 'It is H.H. who has fulfilled for me the highest ideal of what it is to be a poet. In vain I have searched all nations through the millennia to find music of equal sweetness and passion. He possessed that divine wickedness ("Bosheit") without which perfection is unthinkable for me' (Reich-Ranicki, 1997, p. 103).

The song cycle *Dichterliebe* (A Poet's Love), a cycle of 16 songs after poems from Heine's Book of Songs, started out as 20 *Lieder und Gesänge aus dem lyrischen Intermezzo in Buch der Lieder* (20 Songs and Tunes from the lyric intermezzo in the Book of Songs). The title *Dichterliebe* was Schumann's own invention, as if to suggest that the trials and tribulations of love were here seen through a poet's melancholic yet slightly ironic eyes; pain is almost omnipresent, but it hides behind the images of flowers and birds, lilies and nightingales, covering its dark face with the mask of poetry. (Oehlmann, 1973). One of the best known and best loved works of the Lieder genre, this cycle skillfully rides the thin line between sentiment and sentimentality (Miller, 1999).

While Heine maintained that *Das Buch der Lieder* had no autobiographical implications (Miller, 1999), it seems quite fair to superimpose a personal note in *Dichterliebe* from Schumann, considering that he was at the time anxiously awaiting the outcome of court procedures regarding his bid to marry Clara Wieck; his future wife was clearly the object of the ardent expressions of love in 20 *Lieder und Gesänge*, which he wrote within a mere week in 1840. Due to his incredible output that year, it has become known as his Liederjahr (song-year). In *Dichterliebe*, however, Schumann's personal flavour matched the strangely shady mood of Heine's poems perfectly (Oehlmann, 1976).

In the complete 20 *Lieder und Gesänge*, there is a Prolog (prologue) and four songs which were omitted in the later published *Dichterliebe*. *Lehn' deine Wang'* (Rest your cheek) and *Dein Angesicht* (Your face) are both inserted between *Dichterliebe's* No. 4: *Wenn ich in Deine Augen seh* (When I look into your eyes) and No. 5: *Ich will meine Seele tauchen* (I want to immerse my soul); *Es leuchtet meine Liebe* (My love is shining brightly) and *Mein Wagen rollet langsam* (Slowly rolls my carriage) come between No. 12 *Am leuchtenden Sommermorgen* (One bright summer morning) and No. 13 *Ich hab im Traum geweinet* (I wept in my dream).

Fischer Dieskau (1985) suggests that *Lehn' deine Wang'* was omitted from the final cycle because it would have introduced a certain 'sentimental quality', which Schumann apparently wanted to avoid. Miller (1999) finds that the omitted Lieder and *Lehn' deine Wang'* in particular would have disturbed the 'compactness that characterises *Dichterliebe*' (p. 138) and would also have disrupted the overall unity of the cycle by introducing a climactic vocal event at the wrong moment. Despite

# Lehn' deine Wang'

(Orig. G moll)

(Heine)

Op. 142 Nr. 2

79. *Leidenschaftlich*

Lehn' dei - ne Wang' an mei - ne

Wang', dann flie - ssen die Trä - nen zu - sam - - -

men, und an mein Herz drück' fest dein

Herz, dann schla - gen zu - sam - men die Flam - - -

FIGURE 1

Page 1 of the score of Schumann's *Lied Lehn' deine Wang an meine Wang'*.



his verdict that ‘any thought of reincorporating it — and the other omitted songs — into Dichterliebe should be abandoned’ (p. 139) the complete *20 Lieder und Gesänge* has sometimes be heard in recital, for instance by Thomas Hampson at Wigmore Hall London in December 2007.

It is the song *Lehn’ Deine Wang’ an meine Wang’* which I would like to take a closer look at.

<i>Lehn’ Deine Wang’ an meine Wang’,</i>	Rest your cheek against my cheek,
<i>dann fließen die Tränen zusammen,</i>	That our tears join in their flow,
<i>und an mein Herz drück fest dein Herz,</i>	And onto my heart press firmly your heart,
<i>dann schlagen zusammen die Flammen.</i>	So that the flames join their glow.
<i>Und wenn in die große Flamme fließt</i>	And when into the great flame flows
<i>Der Strom von unsern Tränen,</i>	The stream of our tears,
<i>und wenn dich mein Arm gewaltig umschließt,</i>	And when my arm clasps you with might,
<i>sterb’ ich vor Liebessöhnen.</i>	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 almost impossible not to interpret the climactic second verse in a 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 that 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 *Liebessöhnen* of the second verse, not to speak of the strong image of the *Zusammenschlagen of the Flammen*.

In a unique recording (Seefried & Werner, 1956) the great Austrian actor, Oskar Werner, speaks those words with a palpably deep, almost desperate longing, as if he was fatally hurt by the depth of his desire. Almost choking with the thought of its fulfillment, he does not rush to the end but interestingly takes about the same 40 seconds to recite the poem as the song takes to be sung in Schumann’s version. Comparing the two versions makes for a wonderful example how passion can be validly expressed in radically different ways.

Schumann’s setting of the text immediately picks up the meaning of the words and has the song rushing impatiently towards its conclusion. Starting with a forte dynamic, 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 A flat in bar 15. After the climax enhancing ritardando, the tempo immediately picks up again and, starting with an intense, almost suppressed piano, the voice and accompaniment rush without any further hesitation into the deadly bliss of love. 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 at its conclusion.

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

For the singing studio there are a few points to consider. To begin with, the question of key arises. Transpositions of Lieder are considered absolutely in order and have the great advantage to bring a song into a comfortable tessitura especially for young voices. Passages that lie awkwardly within the passaggio of a voice can also be moved up or down by transposition of the song, but one must be aware that altering the key will also change the tone colour of a song. A more difficult decision is whether to transpose when tackling a whole cycle because preservation of key relations within a song cycle seems to be sensible or even compulsory (Miller, 1999). However even eminent editions regularly transpose songs within cycles either up or down by different intervals. In these cases, the consideration of keeping all songs in a comfortable tessitura is clearly given preference over the preservation of tonality relation.

Another question that often arises is whether a song should be sung by a male or a female singer. If in doubt, one should consider the composer’s intentions: often songs were composed for a particular singer, thus indicating its suitability for a particular voice type; however, the singer is charged to always look at the poetry to determine if the imaginary character is a man or a woman.

*20 Lieder und Gesänge and Dichterliebe*, for instance, were dedicated to the famous dramatic soprano Wilhemine Schröder-Devrient, whom Schumann admired greatly and who performed the songs to great acclaim. It therefore appears that sopranos and mezzo sopranos should not be excluded from singing the cycle (Miller, 1999). On the other hand, Heine’s poems definitely speak from a man’s point of view and performance tradition seems also to count the cycle as tenor or baritone repertoire. The decision in the end, will depend on the artistic ability and sensitivities of each individual singer who wants to perform the cycle or parts thereof.

Though the language and style of expression of the Schumann Lieder I have discussed come from another era and culture, I believe it is vital to remind ourselves and our students that the composers and poets of those songs were real people, that their emotions were real and evidence that they too were young once. Their thoughts and problems were probably not so very different in many respects from those of young people today; the emotions expressed in the words and music are very real and therefore are still recognisable today. So that singers

can recreate the experience in an artistic manner through the performance of the song, they need to be able to engage with the emotions and state of being portrayed in the song.

The great beauty of the words and the music combined should be celebrated as a means of expression befitting our most tender feelings, and even though such expression is challenging to bring to perfection, I would urge singers not be deterred but rather to be inspired by this task. As a teacher of singing, I feel it is both a privilege and a duty to instil the love of beauty of Lieder in my students.

## References

- Agawu, V. (1984). Structural 'Highpoints' in Schumann's 'Dichterliebe'. *Music Analysis*, 3(2), 159–180.
- Bernhard, M. (1983). *Das Biedermeier: Kultur zwischen Wiener Kongreß und Märzrevolution*. Düsseldorf, Econ Verlag.
- Cooper, M. (1952). The songs. In G. Abraham (Ed.), *Schumann: a Symposium* (pp. 98–137). London: Oxford University Press.
- Dieskau, D.F. (1974). *Auf den Spuren der Schubert Lieder*. Wiesbaden: F.A. Brockhaus.
- Dieskau, D.F. (1985). *Töne sprechen, Worte klingen*. Piper: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt.
- Edler, A. (2002). *Robert Schumann und seine Zeit*. Laaber-Verlag, 2. Aufl.
- Einstein, A. (1947). *Music in the Romantic era*. London: J.M. Dent & Sons.
- Friedell, E. (1928). *Kulturgeschichte der Neuzeit*. München: Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung.
- Hallmark, R. (1977). The sketches for 'Dichterliebe'. *19th-Century Music* 1(2), 110–136.
- Meier, B. (1995). *Robert Schumann*. Monographie Nr.50522, Rowohlt Verlag Reinbek, 4. Aufl.
- Miller, R. (1999). *Singing Schumann*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Oehlmann, W. (1973). *Reclams Liedführer*. Stuttgart: Reclam GmbH.
- Reich-Ranicki, M. (1997). *Der Fall Heine*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt.
- Rosen, C. (1995). *The Romantic generation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

## Recordings

- Fassbaender, B., & Gage, I. (1985). Schumann. Hamburg. Deutsche Grammophon
- Schreier, P., & Shetler, N. (1994). Schumann Lieder Vol. 1. Berlin Classics 0021102BC

**JULIA NAFISI** began her voice training in her hometown Munich/Germany under KS Friedrich Lenz and continued her studies in Vienna/ Austria with Prof. K.S. Hilde Rössel-Majdan and Prof. K.S. Walter Berry, finishing with the Bühnenreifeprüfung (Final Stage Examination) in Opera.

She has appeared in Opera, Oratorio and Recitals across Europe; for example, as Alto-Soloist in Bach's *Passions* in Austria and Italy, at the Salzburg Festival with the Early Music Ensemble Il Diletto Moderno, and with the Vienna State Opera Choir under Sir Georg Solti. She has toured Israel with the Concentus Vocalis and the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra and has appeared in many concerts and recitals in Australia, for example, in the Mozart on the Mountain concert series and with associate artist Jochen Schubert (guitar) in Federation Square's BMW-Edge.

Julia has cooperated for many years with renowned Viennese Prof. Ellen Müller-Preis in her pioneering breathing, posture and movement classes. She has taught voice at one of Vienna's leading Performing Arts Schools and has given many master-classes in Europe and Australia, with a special focus on German Lieder.

Julia is committee member of the Lieder Society of Victoria, was a panel speaker at the 2001 ANATS breathing forum, and presented a paper at the 2006 ANATS conference in Canberra and the 2008 ANZARME conference in Melbourne. She holds a M.MusStud in Vocal Pedagogy from the Sydney Conservatorium of Music and is a PhD candidate at Monash University, investigating certain aspects of the relationship between gesture/movement and the singing voice. Julia teaches voice at the University of Melbourne Conservatorium, Monash University, and MacRobertson Girls' High School.