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Music Immanent in Words - Hugo Wolf's Mörike Lieder

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The intricacies of German poetic language arguably constitute a challenge in the study, performance and teaching of Lieder – not only, yet particularly for non-German speakers. Especially in the Lieder of Hugo Wolf we see a previously unheard-of dimension of interconnection between word and music as here “every single declamatory device arises from the spirit of the language” (Fischer-Dieskau, 1985, p. 131). Extremely sensitive to the nuances of language, Wolf craved poetry with a “musical foundation” that is the intrinsic possibility having the word-sound inform the composition process. He sought, found and emphasised the “music immanent in words” (Fischer-Dieskau, 1985, p. 130).

This paper starts out with some background information about Wolf and one of the poets who features prominently within his works, Eduard Mörike; it then focuses on one Lied in particular, illuminating its background, text and musical structure, followed by a discussion of a singer's approach and some interpretation guidelines.

Plate 1 (Hugo Wolf, after a photograph from around 1895)



Hugo Wolf was born on the 13th of March 1860 at Windischgrätz in Styria, (now Slovenj Gradec, Slovenia), then a part of the Austrian Empire. His father was a music-loving leather tradesman who taught him the rudiments of piano and violin. Without having finished high school, he went in 1875 to the Conservatoire in Vienna where he appears to have learned very little but was dismissed in 1877 partly because of a practical joke, partly because of financial difficulties. From the age of seventeen Wolf depended mostly upon himself both for his musical training and for his living expenses though his father and a handful of good friends helped him out as well. He survived by giving piano lessons, small scale engagements and in 1884 became musical critic to the *Salonblatt*, a Viennese society paper, where his uncompromisingly trenchant and sarcastic style won him a notoriety which was not helpful to his future prospects. His ardent discipleship of Wagner was linked with a bitter opposition to Brahms, for whose works he always retained an ineradicable dislike (Fischer-Dieskau, 2003).

Wolf composed in periods of feverish creative activity, which alternated with barren periods of deepest depression during which, plagued by the fear that his creative well had dried up forever, he was often unable even to bear the sound of music (Fischer-Dieskau, 2003). By the end of 1891 he had composed the bulk of his works on which his fame chiefly rests: 53

Morike Lieder, 20 Eichendorff Lieder, 51 Goethe Lieder, 44 Lieder from Geibel and Heyse's *Spanisches Liederbuch*, and 22 from Heyse's *Italienisches Liederbuch*, a second part consisting of 24 songs being added in 1896.

In September 1897, the malady (syphilis) which had long lain dormant descended upon him; he was placed in an asylum, released in the following January, only to be remanded again some months later by his own wish, after an attempt to drown himself in the Traunsee-lake. Four painful years elapsed before his death on the 22nd of February 1903.

Wolf's legacy has been called a "radical regeneration of the Lied-genre". (Oehlmann, 2000, p. 494). He intensified the expressive vocabulary of the Lied by extending the harmonic language within the musical tonality of his Lieder while retaining the defining elements of the song tradition he had inherited from Schubert and Schumann. He introduced the "Wagnerian *Sprachmelodie* (melody of the spoken word) into the Lied, "replacing the structured song stanza with a freely reciting word-melody". Although indebted to Wagner, Wolf used his musical means very differently, avoiding "grand dramatic gestures – which would have been inappropriate in the Lied's miniature-form" and "refining melodic and harmonic means to a previously unheard of extend" (Oehlmann, 2000, p.494, 495).

An extreme modernist as a musician, he felt little connection to contemporary poetry finding the quality he looked for primarily in the "poets of the past", (Oehlmann, 2000, p.498). With the exception of Heyse's translations of the Italian and Spanish Songbooks, Wolf only set poetry from writers already dead, showing supreme taste by choosing in particular Goethe, Eichendorff, Heine, Mörike and Keller. His habit was to repeatedly read a poem out loud before beginning to compose the setting. He also liked to include recitations of poems in

recitals so that the audience could appreciate the close relationship between the text and its musical setting.

Plate 2 (Eduard Mörike, drawing by J. G. Schreiner, 1824)



Wolf found wonderful inspiration in the poetry of the Swabianⁱ writer, translator and reluctant Lutheran pastor Eduard Mörike (1804 – 1875). Though sometimes regarded as a typical *Biedermeier* (Early Romantic) poet there is a cryptic and quirky quality in many of Mörike's works that seems to defy categorization (Bergold, 2005) The association between Morike and Wolf has been called that of an 'odd couple' (Youens, 2000) and we know that Wolf himself suspected that the two might have disliked each other had they actually met (Fischer-Dieskau, 2003). It appears that Wolf was attracted to the somewhat restrained, softly spoken and suggestive quality of Mörike's lyric poetry (Oehlmann, 2000) and there was possibly a kind of *Wahlverwandtschaft* (elective affinity) between the two, particularly in the "contemplative, ironic or despairing" quality of their works - carried by a shared feeling of the "presence of the eternal within the transitory" (Fischer-Dieskau, 2003, p.403).

With the Lied *Tambour* written on Feb 16th 1888 Wolf began a phase of frenzied creativity during which, feeling blessed and tortured at the same time, he wrote all 53 Mörike Lieder between February and November 1888. These songs encompass all spheres of Mörike's lyric oeuvre: the folk-like naivety, the meditative and personal confession, religious fervour, fantasy, eerie mythology, merriment and humour. Each a gem in its own right, these songs abound in an originality and boldness unsurpassed in Wolf's later songs (Oehlmann, 2000). The extent to which Wolf saw himself as the translator and interpreter of Mörike's poems is evidenced by his insistence on having the poet's portrait on the front page of these published volumes. This being a well documented fact, it remains "incomprehensible that in later editions Wolf's wish was ignored and his own image was inserted instead" (Fischer Dieskau, 2003, p.196)

In the following we are going to take a closer look at "one of the most celebrated examples of the late Lied" (Bottge, 2009, p. 183) *Das verlassene Mägdlein* (The Forsaken Maiden). The poem is "among the great lyrics of the world" (Sams, 1983) and inspired a host of composers to musical settings (96 according to Fischer Dieskau, (2003) and even 130 according to Bottge, (2009)) with Schumann's and Wolf's the most renowned ones. It was actually Wolf's general rule not to set texts into music that had already, in his judgment, been successfully composed by someone else – and he admired Schumann's setting of the "*Mägdlein*" greatly. His indebtedness to Schumann's setting can also be seen in the fact that he kept the same minor alterations of the original ("schwinden" for "verschwinden" and "darein" for "drein") as Schumann.

Wolf writes in a letter to his friend Eckstein on March 27th 1888

"On Saturday I wrote, without having intended to do so, a setting of *Das verlassene Mägdlein*, already set to heavenly music by Schumann. If, despite that, I too

composed the same poem, it happened almost against my will; but perhaps for the very reason that I let myself be suddenly taken captive by the magic of this poem, something outstandingly good has resulted, and I think that my composition can stand comparison with Schumann's" (quoted in Sams, 1983, p.73)

The short poem is inserted without a title in Mörike's novel *Maler Nolten* (Nolten the Painter), a meticulously crafted *Künstlerroman* (artist-novel) mired in profound sadness, loss, madness, and death (Bottge, 2009). It is heard as a song, sung in the early morning hours by an unnamed girl and inadvertently listened to by the protagonist Theobald Nolten who is at the time imprisoned, sick and thoroughly miserable. The girl singing the song in the novel remains anonymous, thereby allowing both Nolten and the reader to be touched by her plight a personal way, her voice lending expression to every forsaken maiden. In the novel, the song evokes memories of Nolten's own unhappy love affair and culpable behaviour and he is deeply touched by the experience:

"The song's content, though not directed at him, struck him in his innermost soul, and the melody stirred incredibly movingly through the silence of the dark morning.(...) For the first time in immemorial times, Theobald (Nolten) felt the relief of unstoppable tears. The voice fell silent, nothing interrupted the stillness of the breaking dawn. The sick man hid his face in the cushions blissfully succumbing to the sweetness of a – yet so bitter – pain.“ (Mörike, 1967, (1832), p. 182-83).

Here follow the poem's lyrics with a translation by the author, also consulting Bottge, (2009). Some lines have an additional, more literal translation in brackets:

1 Früh, wann die Hähne krähn,	
2 Eh' die Sternlein verschwinden ⁱⁱ ,	Early, when the cocks crow,
3 Muß ich am Herde stehn,	Before the little stars disappear,
	I must stand at the hearth,
4 Muß Feuer zünden.	(Must I stand at the hearth)
5 Schön ist der Flammen Schein,	Must kindle the fire.
6 Es springen die Funken,	Beautiful is the glow of the flames,
	The sparks leap about,
7 Ich schaue so drein ⁱⁱⁱ ,	(There leap the sparks)
8 In Leid versunken.	I gaze therein,
	Lost in sorrow.
9 Plötzlich, da kommt es mir,	(In sorrow drowned)
10 Treuloser Knabe,	Suddenly, it comes to me,
11 Daß ich die Nacht von dir	Unfaithful boy,
	That all (this) night
12 Geträumet habe.	(That I this night of you)
	I dreamt of you.
13 Thräne auf Thräne dann	(dreamed have)
14 Stürzt hernieder,	Tear upon tear then
15 So kommt der Tag heran, -	Streams down,
16 O ging' er wieder!	Thus the day approaches, -
	Oh would it go away again!

Plate 3 provides a representative portraiture of a mid-nineteenth-century servant girl, by Wasmann (1805 – 1886) whose imagery contains remarkable similarities to Mörike's opening stanza. Emblematic of the Biedermeier aesthetic, both Mörike and Wasmann depict their young subject with restrained simplicity; idyllic, but not idealized (Bottge, 2009).



Although presenting outward elements of typical *idyllic poetry*, the poem progresses in a way that is actually “contrary to the idyllic type” (Heydebrand, 1972, p.233). Masterfully crafted to appear as a young girl’s first-person narration it immediately engages the listener with its intimate and subjective tone. It first resembles a simple *Tagelied* (dawn song)^{iv}. The poem opens with the invocation of the familiar surrounds of a common life (the early morning, the rooster’s crow, the fire within the hearth), setting the scene in simple and direct terms. The term *Sternlein*^v suggestive of the language of fairy tales and fables, creates the impression that the girl is only young. Each stanza follows a cross-rhymed *a-b-a-b* pattern giving the recount of her daily routine an air of dispirited regularity. Both rhymes of the first stanza are imperfect rhymes, “*krähn*” – “*stehn*” and “*verschwinden*” – “*zünden*” creating a somewhat spontaneous, folksong like character. The parallelism in the sentence structure of

lines 3 and 4 “*Muß ich am Herde stehn, Muß Feuer zünden*” (Must I stand at the hearth, Must kindle the fire) serves to express the resignation the girl feels towards her inescapable duties and also hints that she has more important thoughts to occupy her. Without it actually being said, we can immediately sense that, as is confirmed in the novel a bit later, this is indeed the voice of a young servant girl (Heydenbrand, 1972, Bottge, 2009)

Already in the next verse however, the poem leaves typical “idyllic” patterns as the girl registers the beautiful flames and leaping sparks (lines 5 and 6) but remains strangely untouched by it – already hinting that she is really preoccupied with some inner drama. Turning her (and our) eyes upon herself she utters, matter-of-factly and again seemingly unmoved by this self-observation, that she is “*in Leid versunken*” (drowned in sorrow), line 8).

As though only brought into focus through this realization the reasons of her distress come flooding back to and she remembers “*plötzlich*” (suddenly) that she has been dreaming of her “*treuloser Knabe*” (unfaithful boy) that night (line 9 and 10). The word “unfaithful” explains not only the bitterness of this memory, but it also elucidates that the girl’s reality is equally sad as her sweetheart has abandoned her. The sudden recollection of this dream brings the lingering sadness to a peak culminating in a stream of tears – tears however that do not bring real relief and the girl’s plea that the dawning day might just go away again is a touching expression of her utter helplessness.

Just as Nolten overhears her voice coming from the kitchen below his room, we too eavesdrop on an intensely personal and solitary moment (Bottge, 2009) it is the kind of situation in which, aware that one’s presence would cause great embarrassment if it was known, one would seek to remain undetected.

In the traditional typical “idyllic lyric”, the girls’ inner drama would have been put in close connection with some outward perception of nature, sounds or everyday things so that these things would have appeared altered by this connection (Heydebrand, 1972). The picture we see in this poem however is a raw and direct psychograph of deepest depression and utter helplessness. There is no adorning or romanticizing connection between the girl and her surrounds. The detached way in which she perceives it – the robot-like fulfillment of her chores, the observation of the beautiful flames so completely devoid of any personal joy, only heightens the sense of the girl’s abandonment.

It is up to the beholder to judge if her grief is ‘only’ a result of an ended love affair in which case the depth of her pain might appear somewhat exaggerated and due to the adolescent character that cannot yet put an experience into perspective. On the other hand we must also consider that life as a servant in the 19th century was, with an average of 16 – 18 hour of labor per day (Bottge, 2009), neither easy nor cheerful to start with, and opportunities to form honorable romantic relationships were very limited. There is also the possibility that the girl is actually pregnant, in which far from uncommon case, her situation would indeed be very dire. A situation in which they were per definition to obey every whim and call of their employers made young female servants particularly vulnerable to sexual predation by the men of the household; it is known that boys of privileged families often began their sexual experiences with the family's maid. However, once pregnant the servant would almost certainly be fired and options for unmarried pregnant working class girls were few and all equally grim: once the child was born a servant had few options: pay another woman to nurse and raise the child, abandon the infant, take it to a foundling home, let it die or kill it (Bottge, 2009). Both Mörike and Wolf would of course have been familiar with these harsh realities.

Plate 4: Hugo Wolf: *Das verlassene Mägdlein* (Edition Peters) and inserted IPA transcription.

Wolf
Das verlassene Mägdelein
(Mörrike)

1 *Langsam*

2 *pp*

Früh, wann die Häh-ne krähu.
[fry: van di: 'he:ne kre:n]

7 eh' die Sternlein schwinden, muss ich am Her-de stehn, muss Feu-er zün-den.
[e: di: 'stern.la:en 'svn.den [mus 'iç 'am 'hɛr.da 'te:n] [mus 'fo:y.eg 'tsvn.den]

3 **4** *pp*

13 Schön ist der Flammen Schein, es springen die Fun-ken; ich schaue
[ʃø:n 'ist de:ɐ 'fla.mən 'ʃa:en] [es 'sprɪŋən di: 'fun.kən] [iç 'ʃa:ø]

20 so da-rein, in Leid ver-sun-ken.
[zo: 'dra:en] [ʼin la:et fɛɐ.'zʊŋ.kən]

pp *ppp*

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5 *etwas lebhafter* *etwas ruhiger*

27 Plötz-lich, da kommt es mir, treu-lo-ser Kna-be, dass ich die
 ['pløts.lɪç da: komt 'es mi:ç] ['trø:v.lo: .zæg 'kna:bə] [das 'ɪç di:]

6

32 Nacht von dir ge-trän-met ha-be.
 naxt fon di:ç [gə.'trɔ:v .met 'ha:bə]

7 *(wie zu Anfang)*

38 Thrä-ne auf Thrä-ne dann stür-zet her-nie-der; so kommt der Tag her-an
 ['trɛ:ne 'a:of 'trɛ:ne dan] ['ʃtʏr.tset hɛç. 'ni:.dæg] [zo: komt de:ç ta:k her.'an]

8

44 o ging'er wie-der!
 ['o: gɪŋ 'e:g 'vi:.dæg]

Although Wolf was unfamiliar with Mörike's traumatic emotional life and its fictionalization in Maler Nolten, his realization of "Das verlassene Mägdlein" connects uncannily with themes surrounding the poem's origins – in that his tone is one of “stark darkness” (Bottge, 2009, p. 183). The original key of the song (see Figure 1.) is A minor, a key often associated in Wolf's music with an especially wistful mood (Sams, 1983). The rhythmical pattern of crotchet-quaver-quaver (quarter-eighth-eighth) is maintained throughout the whole song, except in the six bars postlude. The four bar introduction with its graphically dragging and drooping figure immediately evokes an atmosphere of “boundless emptiness and complete abandonment” (Lehmann, 1945, p.71), an atmosphere which is reinforced by the voice's pianissimo entry on the high E and the subsequent downward leaps of empty fifths.

At the second verse, beginning with “*Schön ist der Flammen Schein*” the music turns perceptibly warmer and brighter with major chords, a rising melody and a more lively vocal rhythm suggesting sparks flying, underlined by a short crescendo. But the comfort is brief and does not really reach the girl who realises that warmth and beauty are not for her. This is made clear by the abrupt harmonic shift progressing to the distant region of A-flat major and the sudden *pp* (even *ppp* in the piano part) in bars 19 and 20. The chord progressions in bars 22 and 23 are parallel to those in bars 30 and 31 suggesting that the girl's dream is already starting to rise to the surface of her conscience from bar 22. The wandering, ambiguous harmonies at this point have been called “vagrant chords” after a term coined by Schoenberg (Cratty, 1987).

The third verse, marked *etwas lebhafter* (a bit more lively) bursts out in the “*Plötzlich, da kommt es mir*” (suddenly it comes to me), with new harmonies and underlined also with somewhat desperate crescendi-decrescendi in bars 27/28 and 29/30, to one of only two *fortes* in the song. As the poetry moves to the reminiscence of the night's bittersweet dream, the

tempo becomes immediately *etwas ruhiger* (a bit calmer), the voice lifts and lightens, lingering ever so slightly on the word “*geträumet*” (dreamed) and a “sudden tenderness invades the song” (Sams, 1983, p.74). The piano motif repeats the questioning and hopefulness but falters after just three bars.

The bleak music of dawn heard in the very beginning is repeated as the flood gates of her tears open “*Thräne auf Thräne dann*” (tear after tear) in bar 38. As she pleads for the day to go away (bar 45) the piano stops its movement for the only time in the piece. The piano postlude reiterates the wistful atmosphere and, ending on a hollow fifth, leaves no doubt that the girl’s sorrow is unresolved.

In order to do justice to the song, the singer needs to find a way to relate to the girl’s persona so that the grief, sorrow and passion expressed in the song may ring true in the singer’s voice. Both a good translation which recreates an English equivalent of the poem in terms of grace, metre and rhyme, as well as a word by word translation which retains the word order should be consulted. Particular attention needs to be given to the words at key passages. The piano is an infallible guide to a good grasp of the song if the singer is willing and capable to listen, hear and react to every harmonic, dynamic and rhythmic nuance. In this masterpiece, Wolf has found as close an interpretation of the “fusion of contrasting moods and scenes in Mörike’s lyric” as are “simultaneously translatable into musical terms (Sams, 1983, p.73).

A credible interpretation would include some of the following considerations. The passages have been marked by numbers in the score.

1. Listen to the opening piano figure and let it set the scene for you, a pale, grief-stricken girl. You are lonely and cold, starting yet another monotonous day.

2. The pianissimo entrance of the voice the on the high E with the fricative “F” of “Früh” portrays great emotional strain and can be tricky (practise the phrase first starting it on the “ü” then place the “F” and rolled “r” on pitch before it. Sing the “Fr” slightly before the beat so that the “ü” starts right on the downbeat in bar 5). The first four phrases should be sung in an empty pianissimo, lightly colored, glassy, almost without expression until “Feuer zünden”
3. Feel how warmth and light come into the music. Sing the word “Schön” (using the lips to form a good “ö”) in the next phrase piano but informed by its meaning (“beautiful”). See the beautiful flames before your inner eye (taking good care to make the double “m” in “Flammen” audible). Know that “springen” means “to leap” as you sing the word. (Practise the transition from the “s”[s] of “Es” to the “sh” [ʃ] of “springen”. Pushing you lips forward when saying the “s” helps and results almost automatically in “sh”). Observe the light crescendo – decrescendo of “Es springen die Funken”. Sing the triplet distinctly, but be aware that the life that seems to awaken in the leaping flames is mainly in the painting of the music – your voice still keeps the quality of great emptiness.
4. Feel the shift in harmony and observe the sudden pianissimo of “Ich schaue so darein” as the realization of your deep sadness descends upon you and you recount this self-observation with the same detachment with which you beheld the flames. Be aware that the word on the high E-flat “Leid” means “pain, sorrow”. Retain that expression through the interlude until
5. suddenly, as if awakening, you become animated. Sing with passion “Plötzlich da kommt es mir, treuloser Knabe”, making good use of the consonants, observing the surging crescendi – decrescendi and singing the syncopation on “treuloser” with poignancy. Become immediately calmer to sing in the softest piano “dass ich die Nacht von dir geträumet habe”. (This phrase should be sung in one breath if possible). Sing this phrase

with an expression of painful happiness, as if you relive the dream which brought back to you, so deceptively, the lost ecstasy of love. (When singing “geträumet” (dreamed), take care that, after a clearly enunciated “t-r” you enter smoothly into the “äu” [ɔ:y]). Hold “geträumet” on the high E a little, sing it with subtlety and the feeling that only a dream can bring you happiness.

6. Listen to the following three bars, as your dream fades into the cold, grey light of the dawn.
7. Sing now “Träne auf Träne dann” with the palest pianissimo (and as with the first phrase of the song, start the “T-r” of Träne a split second before the down beat). Be aware of the contrast of the strong and dramatic word “stürzet” and the quiet musical line at this passage. Yet, just this apparent contradiction gives the greatest possibility for expression. You are so unutterably exhausted that you are no longer capable of violent eruptions of passionate grief; paint the elementary outburst in the word “stürzet” (consonants!, darkly coloured “ü”).
8. Sing the last “O ging er wieder” without sentimentality but in hopeless resignation. Watch motionless as the grey day closes around you like the walls of a prison, from which there is no escape.

(Lehmann, 1945, Sams, 1883, Fischer-Dieskau, 1985, Bottge, 2009)

Apart from considerable vocal ability, musical understanding, diligent pronunciation and thoughtful engagement with the words’ translation, a convincing rendition calls for more: the singer needs to fill each sound with meaning, she has to find a personal experience, an image or a feeling to colour each word as it is sung. As Walter Berry, the great Austrian baritone (and the author’s teacher and mentor) used to say: it is quite simple really - all you have to do is *see* each word as you sing it.

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ⁱ Swabia is a region in South East Germany and was at the time part of the Kingdom of Württemberg (1806 – 1918)

ⁱⁱ Schumann as well as Wolf changed this to “schwinden”

ⁱⁱⁱ Schumann as well as Wolf changed this to “darein”

^{iv} A particular form of medieval German language lyric song named after the first light of day announcing the separation of two lovers

^v In German, the diminutive syllables “-lein” or “-chen” express that something is small in size and/or well loved