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Schumann, Wolf, and Mörike's "Das Verlassene Mägdlein:" A Stylistic Comparison

Emily Cline
ecline@siu.edu

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A Stylistic Comparison

By

Emily Cline

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Schumann, Wolf, and Morike's *Das Verlassene Mägdlein*: A Stylistic Comparison

DR. DOUGLAS WORTHEN

Eduard Mörike's *Das Verlassene Mägdlein* is among the most commonly set texts by lieder composers of the nineteenth century. Among these, the settings of Robert Schumann and Hugo Wolf are two of the finest. This paper briefly explores the circumstances in which these two settings were written by their respective composers; Schumann's travels and the death of his son in 1847 and Wolf's Liederjahr of 1888. Following is a comparative analysis of the musical content of both settings which takes into account melody, rhythm, form, accompaniment, and text setting. The finding is that Schumann's more restricted contrapuntal style is as suitable a setting as Wolf's highly dissonant, post-Wagnerian masterpiece.

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Das verlassene Mägdlein
By Eduard Morike
Translation by Emily Ezust

Früh, wann die Hähne kräh'n,
Early, when the cock crows,
Eh' die Sternlein schwinden,
before the stars disappear,
Muß ich am Herde stehn,
I must stand at the hearth;
Muß Feuer zünden.
I must light the fire.

Schön ist der Flammen Schein,
Beautiful is the blaze of the flames;
Es springen die Funken.
the sparks fly.
Ich schaue so darein,
I gaze into the fire,
In Leid versunken.
sunk in grief.

Plötzlich, da kommt es mir,
Suddenly, it comes to me,
Treuloser Knabe,
unfaithful boy,
Daß ich die Nacht von dir
that last night
Geträumet habe.
I dreamed of you.

Träne auf Träne dann
Tears upon tears then
Stürzet hernieder;
pour down;
So kommt der Tag heran –
So the day comes -
O ging er wieder!
O would it were gone again!

The poetry of Eduard Mörike was not at the forefront of German literature in the nineteenth century. Though far from being unknown, Mörike was not ranked with the great German poets of the time like Goethe, Heine, and Eichendorf. Even so, his poetry was elevated through the songs that great lieder composers wrote, including Pfitzner, Schumann, and the great Mörike champion, Wolf. One particular poem, *Das Verlassene Mägdlein*, is one of the most widely set German texts of all time, and certainly of Mörike's works. With over a hundred settings, the Schumann and Wolf versions are two of the finest; short, intimate settings that represent the true spirit of the lied. The two settings offer an enlightening comparison of Schumann's and Wolf's musical styles.

Eduard Mörike, the "hypochondriac poet" as Susan Youens aptly dubbed him, was a middle class priest who suffered from psychosomatic illnesses.[1] His youth was full of tragedies, such as the death of his father, his younger brother's suicide, and a love affair that ended in disaster. His output was not prolific, but he was recognized for his poetry toward the end of his life. *Das Verlassene Mägdlein* typifies much of his work; a folk text with simple language and sharp imagery. The text describes a young maiden who wakes in the morning to tend the fire. As she stares into the flame she suddenly remembers the faithless boy she dreamed about in the night. She is sunken in grief as the day begins, and wishes it were already over.

Though Schumann is known primarily for his lieder, he never thought of himself as a lieder composer. He wanted to be known for his larger works, and only started writing lieder for the immediate financial gain.[2] With the example of Schubert before him, Schumann's lieder reflected a subtler aesthetic that was as concerned with the accompaniment as with the voice, resulting in an equality of the piano and vocal lines that had not existed before in the genre. Schumann was also known for his great piano preludes and postludes that are included in the greater part of his lieder output.[3]

Schumann set this text in 1847 after a brief concert tour between Vienna, Berlin and his home in Dresden. The Schumann's had been in Vienna for Robert's health, which seemed to improve with the change of location. Unfortunately their son Emil died in the midst of the tour, during a brief stopover in Dresden before heading on to Berlin. With travel and tragedy fresh in his mind, Schumann wrote three Mörike songs. He was

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[1] Susan Youens. Hugo Wolf and his Morike Songs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) ix.
[2] Barbara Turchin. "Schumann's Conversion to Vocal Music: A Reconsideration." *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 3 (July 1981), 401.
[3] Lorraine Gorell. *The Nineteenth-Century German Lied* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1993) 144.

probably inspired to set Mörike poems because of a brief visit with the young composer Robert Franz, who was proud of some of his own Mörike songs[4].

Unlike Schumann, Wolf was primarily concerned with lieder writing. His entire output consists of over 247 lieder, with the exception of one unexceptional opera, *Der Corregidor*. Wolf's reputation for being eccentric, arrogant, and downright nasty was well deserved in the musical world. After a controversial career as a music critic, he emerged as a mature composer at age twenty-eight. Wolf composed in frantic bursts, inspired by the poetry, always setting a single poet's work without interruption until he had exhausted the inspiration and moved on to another poet. Poetry was so important to Wolf that he put the poet's name on his opus before his own. He would also read a poem aloud before one of his songs was sung to better engage the audience with the text. His dedication to the poetry manifests itself in every aspect of his lieder.

Wolf was writing music decades after Schumann, and therefore had the late romantic arsenal that came from his exposure to Wagner and Liszt, whom he greatly admired. According to Frederic Austin, Wolf was the sort of composer that Wagner himself would have admired, who begins composing "with a definite emotional impulse, which in the passion for veracious expression, clothes itself in one particular way, and no other."[5] This accurately describes Wolf's compositional style, which is most marked by his sturdy character pieces that deliver the complete package of inspiration and technical mastery.

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[4] Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. *Robert Schumann Words and Music: The Vocal Compositions* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1988) 137.

[5] Frederic Austin. "The Songs of Hugo Wolf." *Proceedings of the Musical Association*, 38th Sess. (1911-1912), 163.

Wolf set *Das Verlassene Mägdlein* in 1888, the year that he composed all of his 53 Mörike lieder as well as a great deal of his Eichendorf collection. He was aware of the Schumann setting, and even admired it, saying "on Saturday I composed, without having intended to do so, "Das verlassene Mägdlein," already set to music by Schumann in a heavenly way."[6] Although it was his practice to abstain from setting texts he thought had already been set well by other composers, Wolf could not resist the draw of this particular text, and so he set it anyway and was quite pleased with the result.[7] Indeed, the song has become one of the most recognized Wolf lieder and has taken its place among the standard repertoire for singers.

There are several similarities between Schumann's and Wolf's settings of *Das Verlassene Magdlein.* When heard in succession, the similarities between the two are striking, although the shared traits are fewer than one might expect. Both the Schumann and Wolf settings are in 2/4 time. Both are set with ranges slightly over an octave, in a comfortable tessitura for most singers. The Schumann piece is in the key of G minor, while the Wolf is in A minor, a key signature that he related with "a women's distress or sorrow in love."[8]

Both pieces are in ternary form with one slight difference between the two. Instead of beginning the B section at "Plötzlich da kommt es mir," Schumann chooses to start it with the earlier line "ich schaue so darein." This choice is strange because the latter is in the middle of a stanza; in fact it is in the middle of a sentence. "Plötzlich"

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[6] Gorell, 289.
[7] Richard Miller. *Singing Schumann: An Interpretive Guide for Performers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 146.
[8] Jean Haywood. "The Musical Language of Hugo Wolf." (Great Britain: Arthur H. Stockwell, Ltd., 1986) 15.

starts the new stanza, and is indeed where Wolf introduced his own B section. Both settings revert to the A section at the final stanza "Träne auf Träne dann."

Schumann's melody is highly intuitive, sinking slowly in stepwise motion until it circles back on itself before falling even further down. There are no surprises except the occasional chromatic passing tone which marks the piece as one of his later works. Wolf's melody, in contrast, contains a motivic leap at the beginning. Even though it is mostly diatonic, the harmonic underpinnings belie the plainness of the line. As Wolf scholar Eric Sams says, it is not the kind of melody you come away humming.[9] Even so, it serves the text well, as is Wolf's chief concern.

What is clearly the biggest difference in Schumann's and Wolf's settings is the piano accompaniment. In Schumann's version there is no prelude or postlude. As in other songs, the piano is intimately linked with the voice, often doubling it. The accompaniment is driven by contrapuntal figuration which Fischer-Dieskau suggests is due Schumann's recurring interest in the music of Bach.[10] Miller disagrees, and claims that the baroque sound invokes feelings of sorrow and introspection appropriate to the text.[11] Either way, Schumann accomplishes an atmosphere of sinking grief while maintaining strict technical precision, quite an accomplishment.

Wolf writes the austere setting of the poem with the single-mindedness and technical superiority that drives much of his work. The opening texture is thin, with regular rhythms that set the tone for the entire piece. The two-note motive alternates registers until it settles into a medium range where more recognizable chords are formed. The plodding, almost regulated feel of the accompaniment is adhered to through the rest

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[9] Eric Sams. *The Songs of Hugo Wolf* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962) 2.
[10] Fischer-Diskau, 137.
[11] Miller, 147.

of the piece. The postlude features chords played in changing registers, and finally resolves to open fifths in each hand. A combination of Wolf's post-Wagnerian dissonance and non-traditional chord progressions are the main accompanimental features. In typical Wolf fashion, intervals of a diminished fourth and diminished fifth are prevalent, and highlight the despairing mood of the piece.[12]

In most art song the text is the most important consideration of the composer. Schumann, who was very well-read, took great care in choosing his texts, but did not allow the poetry to drive his musical sensibilities. Because Wolf only set one poet at a time, his music reflects the poetry in a more idiomatic way. Besides the afore mentioned misstep on Schumann's part when dividing up the poetry, the text setting is unremarkable, the vocal line simply resting lightly above a more involved accompaniment. Wolf's text setting follows the poetry carefully. At "springen di Funken" the triplet adds a little life into the barren landscape as the sparks of the fire spring from the hearth. A slight delay before the words "O ging er wieder!" leaves a space which might represent a sobbing, choked-up maiden.

When programming these two settings together in a recital or concert, it is important that the singer pay close attention to the stylistic nuances of each composer. Wolf's song which comes so much later than Schumann's has more exact indications for tempo and mood with markings such as "etwas lebhafter" and " wie zu Anfang." Schumann's sole tempo marking is "Nicht Schnell." The poetic emphasis of the poems are also different, especially since the Schumann versions ends in a Picardy third, while Wolf's postlude leaves out the third altogether, creating an empty space for the sorrow to linger.

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[12] Gorrell, 294.

Richard Miller encourages all Schumann singers to be fluent in the German language, or get a vocal coach who has some proficiency. He goes on to warn against practices that are not appropriate to the Schumann style. Among these he includes scooping into words, starting with straight tone and then adding vibrato, gratuitous rubato, too much variation in dynamic intensity, and using "exaggerated vocal coloration."[13] That is not to say that the singer should not endeavor to represent the mood and poetry accurately, but that one should avoid stylistic practices of the late romantic or twentieth-century.

Miller has only a few thoughts on the performance of this particular text. First he says "the singer should use a somewhat detimbred vocal color without forsaking her legato." The atmosphere is of complete hopelessness, and no emotion other than despair should come through in the singing. Interestingly, he urges the singer to let the piano carry the responsibility of nuancing the song, so that the vocal line might be simple, understated grief.[14]

The singing of Wolf's setting should be approached with post-Wagnerian ideals of performance in hand. Here the singer should pay special attention to the idiomatic declamation of the text above all. Wolf's instructions are specific enough that too much creativity in interpretation is not necessary. The singer should feel free to be expressive and present a dramatically viable performance.

Sams' one suggestion for performance of this song is that the singer "lifts, lightens, and hushes" at the word "getraumet" (dreamed), which imbues the setting with a small moment of tenderness, thus adding an undercurrent of emotional complexity that

[13] Miller, 16.
[14] Miller, 147

could not be portrayed if grief were the only emotion represented. He suggests that the song is best received when the audience is attentive to the poetry and opens up their imaginations.[15]

From a poem that inspired so many songs, these two stand out as pillars of German lieder. Though the Wolf setting is indeed great, Schumann's setting is not diminished. It is amazing that two entirely different settings can share so much in common. The rigid counterpoint of Schumann's setting is oddly just as appropriate as Wolf's dramatic, text-driven interpretation. The fact that Wolf admired Schumann's setting and was inspired to right his own is a perfect example of the nature of progress; each one builds upon the work of those that came before, and in return creates something greater.

[15] Sams, 44-45.

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