

Notes on the Program

By Arthur R. Smith

This season Vocal Arts DC has provided a mini-series in works from the three great late Romantic German composers, Gustav Mahler, Hugo Wolf, and Richard Strauss. The latter two comprise tonight's program by Anne Schwanewilms and Malcolm Martineau, and Mahler was the focus of the radiant recital presented by Christian Gehaher and Gerold Huber for Vocal Arts DC earlier this season. The lieder of all three are treasures of the recital hall, beautifully realized songs of consummate craftsmanship, and at the same time a poignant monument of farewell to the Romantic lied, a tradition that ebbed after World War I.

Tonight's program is organized in an A-B-A structure (forgive the music nerdiness), with Strauss works enfolding a Wolf set in both halves. For the Strauss we hear representative works from his entire career, encompassing some of his first published songs, through the period of his last songs for piano and voice, just after World War I. This snapshot reveals Strauss' musical development, as well as the consistency of his melodic gift, and his approach to text setting—more often than not, adapting a poem to suit a grateful vocal line, rather than trimming his lyrical sails to the declamation of the text. Both characteristics are present in the first music we hear tonight, "Traum durch die Dammerung," with its gentle strophic accompaniment to a poem that might well be describing an impressionist painting of a lover meeting his beloved at sunset.

Strauss' musical gesture is large—even his most intimate songs often open up to a broad horizon: if they were films the climactic shots would no doubt pull the camera backwards to a contemplative sunset view of the far horizon. (Think of the vast vistas evoked in the "Four Last Songs" a musical panorama complete with birds circling in the far distance.)

Hugo Wolf's artistry embraces the opposite—

the close up, an intimate moment. In his lieder you often meet someone who is leaning in to you, or are dropped into a situation that is engrossing—if mysterious and fraught. An anguished lover, a funny story-teller, some dark myth—familiar song themes all—but in Wolf's hands, you are right there with them—laughing, pleading, wondering. Wolf, whose life was cut tragically short, dying eight years before his sometime friend Mahler, and 46 years before the long-lived Strauss, yearned for success in larger forms—opera most of all. It was not to be. He lost the manuscript of his only symphony in a train station and his one completed opera *Der Corregidor* (on "The Three Cornered Hat" story familiar from the musical setting of Manuel de Falla) was a failure.

Yet in lieder, his only peer is Schubert, and his flowering all the more remarkable for its brevity. His maturity as a song composer began in 1888, a year no less remarkable for song than the inspired outpouring of Schumann's *Liederjahr* of 1840 or the fecund period 1814-15 for Schubert. In the course of a few months he set 53 poems of the Swabian poet and vicar Eduard Mörike (1804-1875), a poet once dismissed as "Biedermeier literature" meaning appealing to the conventional mores of the middle class and avoiding revolutionary fervor and controversial content. Mörike's range of topics, scenes, characters, and moods was great, however, and in these poems Wolf found an imaginative well-spring ranging from love, nature, the supernatural, folk tale, and even the sensual. Notable too is a comic vein in some songs, a vein that is not often successful in lied. Conventional though the poetry may be, Mörike provided a basis for a musical language that was anything but conventional. Wolf was a dedicated Wagnerite (he wept at performances of *Parsifal*, was championed by Liszt, and dubbed Brahms a "nullity" in a review he wrote). These songs

embrace a late romantic harmony, ever shifting keys, and a sense of embodying text in literature as revolutionary in its way as Wagner's aim to invent a new form of music theater.

A case in point comes in the first of the songs in the first set of Wolf's songs on this program, one of his best known, *Das verlassene Mägdlein*. This anguished scene has all the intimacy of a psychological case study, with a harmony that swerves like the tortured thoughts of the abandoned woman, chords moving towards harmonic resolution and then evading it. A simple tonic chord is heard only once, at the close as the singer laments, "O ging er wieder."

The set that closes the first half dates from 1901 and reveals Strauss' more fluid and conversational approach to a vocal line (by now he had considerable experience in opera) and signs of the adventuresome harmony that was to come. The trademark sly modulations he used so often to conclude a passage appear here (think of the wonderful closing moment from the title character's aria "Es gibt ein Reich" in *Ariadne auf Naxos* for a classic example). He often employs this ladder of modulations as a passage floats from one key to the next only to arrive back home with glowing ease.

The second half opens with a wonderful contrast: three of Strauss' most romantic songs paired with his most acerbic, Strauss' setting of Shakespeare, "Drei Lieder der Ophelia." The Ophelia songs were born of a conflict with Strauss' publisher, Bote and Bock. He had committed to provide six songs, a contract that dated to 1903 (two years before his acclaim and notoriety from *Salome*), and some 15 years later Strauss tried to get out of the agreement, but could not. In revenge, he initially delivered songs that ridiculed the publisher, but these were deemed unsuitable, and the publisher sued Strauss. In the resulting decision, the composer was ordered to provide songs with an "appropriate text." He responded by choosing three speeches of Ophelia from *Hamlet*, and crafted difficult music that reveals her as another deranged obsessive Strauss heroine,

complete with snatches of a ditty that echoes through the set and mirrors her disordered thoughts. Although the conflict with the publisher was the main impetus for this forbidding style, the year of composition, war-torn 1918, provides context as well; we are in a world apart from Strauss' arch-romantic style of the previous century.

Next, a different side of Wolf's *Mörrike Lieder* forms the centerpiece of the second half. "Im Frühling" takes a typical romantic trope to the edge of despair. Mörrike created the fairytale world of Orplid, which Wolf supplies with an orphic muse singing to a harp in the second song. In the last Wolf song on the program, "Verbogenheit: Lass, o Welt, o lass mich sein," we get a window into how Wolf approached a theme so dear to Strauss: farewell to the world.

And to close, back to the beginning. Strauss' Opus 10 published in 1885, were his first public efforts in the form. Although simpler in texture and ambition than later work (certainly a world apart from the "Ophelia Lieder"), they still work their ardent magic. The vocal line of "Die Nacht" unfurls over a straightforward accompaniment of repeated notes, and "Geduld" reveals just a bit of swing, the singer giving a knowing answer to her lover's plea for patience.