

# Notes on the Program

By Arthur R. Smith

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The harmonically daring and richly dramatic musical world of Franz Liszt opens tonight's recital by Tara Erraught and John O'Connor. Although Liszt was not an operatic composer (few have heard "Don Sanche, ou le château d'amour," his only opera, and written when he was 13), his music is inherently theatrical. Narrative programs are the basis for his greatest orchestral music (for instance, *Les Préludes* or the *Faust Symphony*); many piano works have extra-musical subjects (travel for the wonderful *Années de pèlerinage* sets); and religious struggles and redemption mark not only his numerous sacred works, but pervade much of his solo piano music.

Given all this drama, and prodigious productivity (his piano music alone runs to 99 CDs!), it's interesting to note that song was a relatively minor occupation. He wrote merely some eighty songs, and mostly in the 1830s and early 1840s before he had become an international superstar. The three we hear tonight date from 1842-44, and are settings of Victor Hugo, ten years Liszt's senior, and a cultural and political hero to a generation of romantic artists.

Unsurprisingly, the songs boast elaborate piano parts (so much so that Liszt revised and simplified them later in life) matched with soaring vocal lines—listen for the beautiful arcs of "Oh! Quand je dors." One charming emblem of Liszt's attentiveness to every expressive detail is the opening piano figure in "Comment? disaient-ils" that is marked "like a guitar" when it underscores the men's pleading questions but gives way to a different and knowing texture for the women's wry answers.

Liszt wrote very few songs, but for Hugo Wolf it was the dominant genre, constituting his primary legacy, as well as the endpoint to the story of the 19th century lied tradition of Schubert, Schumann, and Brahms. Wolf was also the inheritor of a century's worth of harmonic and formal innovations—Wagner was a hero to him—and stands as one of most innovative of song composers. His explicit

aim was creating lieder as fully expressive and musically daring as the larger forms: forging something new from a text, rather than just illustrating it: in his own words he was seeking an "art written with blood"—this from a man who also feared being dismissed as a "mere song composer."

The Swabian poet and Lutheran preacher Eduard Mörike presented a miraculous source for Wolf's art. Mörike wrote on a broad range of romantic topics (we hear of love, nature, abandonment, and mermaids tonight) in styles that varied from folksy humor to tragedy. Wolf engaged with this poet in the 1880s—all of tonight's works come from 1888. The selections, including some of his finest songs, show his wildness and his craft: text setting that is both natural and yet dramatically heightened, harmonies that search fruitlessly for resolution, yet clarify the drama. "Das verlassene Mägdlein" is a particularly fine example, wherein the harmony turns this way and that, with nary a moment of repose except during momentary recollections of happiness during a dream.

Roger Quilter is a figure from the "second English Renaissance," that golden moment from the 1880s through the first World War, during which Elgar, Vaughan Williams, and a host of other composers flourished, bequeathing to us great treasures, particularly in vocal music.

Like many of his peers, Quilter was German-trained, yet it would be hard to find a more quintessential English gentleman composer. His works, mostly songs, and a small amount of incidental, choral and chamber music, reflect Edwardian sensibilities: fine craftsmanship and a sweetly old-fashioned musical style even for its own era perhaps. Like Vaughan Williams, he excelled at crystalline text setting, and adapted beloved poets (tonight Shakespeare, Tennyson, and Shelley) adjusting poems as needed to suit his sensibility. "Now sleeps the crimson petal," his best-known song, perfectly catches the dusky mood, and restraint of the text from Tennyson's epic *The Princess*.

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Our tour of romantic song reaches its capstone tonight with a set of the best-loved songs of Richard Strauss, frequent highlights of Vocal Arts DC programs. Strauss' love of the female voice (both musically and literally in the form of soprano Pauline De Ahna, his muse and later his wife) brought forth not only a set of extraordinary operatic characters, but a large repertoire of romantic lieder written in two batches: the early years of Strauss' career, and in his last stage, as he returned to the form (the *Four Last Songs*). Tonight's works come from the late 1880s and early 1890s and boast the familiar Straussian pleasures of meltingly ardent vocal lines, backed by active piano parts—his music is well balanced between big moments and intimate conversation, with both modes true to the musical temperament and character of the piece. An ever-green example comes in "Morgen," beloved of many VADC artists and audiences, in which the quiet arpeggios of the piano are interrupted by a the gentle aside as the singer floats "and tomorrow the sun will shine again" in momentary stillness.

To close, we have Rossini's solo cantata *Giovanna D'Arco*, a work from 1832, three years after the bel canto lion retired from opera. From 1829 on, Rossini, a semi-invalid, held forth in his Paris salon, entertaining and composing occasional music including his *Péchés de vieillesse*, (*Sins of Old Age*), piano and vocal works of considerable charm, written for domestic use, to entertain his friends, and in the case of tonight's work as a present for a mistress. Volume 11 of the "*Sins*" includes *Giovanna D'Arco* on the Joan of Arc story so beloved of opera composers and writers.

For the solo cantata, Rossini tapped conventions of a bel canto opera scene—slow extended piano introduction, next a recitative for the singer to set the scene, closing with a graceful and reflective aria. But things are never so simple: and after a short *tempo di mezzo* (in opera scenes where the chorus comes in and tells the heroine something to the effect of "You are in very, very big trouble"), Rossini offers a spectacular cabaletta with florid vocal writing, and emphatic rhythms, closing the cantata (and the recital) in fine heroic style.