

# Notes on the Program

By Arthur R. Smith

---

Four women, fictional, historical, or from the composers' personal lives, guide the spirit of tonight's *Liederabend* given by soprano Dorothea Röschmann and pianist Malcolm Martineau.

The first of this quartet is Mignon, the mysterious waif created by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in his 1795 novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. The title character rescues the young girl from a traveling circus, but her past remains vague and the arc of her story, tragic. The texts of Mignon's four songs, four brief poems in a novel of some 700 pages, have become its best known passages, serving as touchstones for romantic composers who have offered hundreds of settings. As Schubert scholar John Reed notes, Mignon's lyrics embody the "vague and indefinable search for a nobler and better world," which was at the heart of the romantic movement.

Schubert set all four of the Mignon lyrics, perhaps succeeding best in the first we hear tonight, "Heiß mich nicht reden" from 1826. It has the emotional richness of an operatic scene, yet draws on simple declamatory lines appropriate for the naïve girl. In "So laßt mich scheinen" (which the composer set four times) the singer welcomes death, with the typical Schubertian shifts from major to minor that add a measure of anguished resignation. "Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt" and "Kennst du das Land?" complete the Mignon songs, providing familiar takes on well-trod themes of lonely ardor and longing. Schubert's "Nachtstück," from 1819, closes our Schubert set. This song, almost a tone-poem, is set to poetry of Johann Mayrhofer rather than Goethe, and summons the world of night music, with the sway of easeful death coming to the song's protagonist on steps of descending harmonies.

Next we move to Gustav Mahler and his settings of poems by Friedrich Rückert, composed in the earliest years of the 20th century. Mahler's story is braided together with that of his wife, Alma, also a composer of promise. When they married in 1902, Mahler

demanded that she give up composition as a marriage condition. She consented, seeing quickly that this headstrong genius would be a challenging partner. (In fact, their very first meeting was prophetic: Alma wrote in her journal that they argued about music, and continued, "To be sure, he's very keyed up ... He was like a bull in a china shop. He's pure oxygen: you get burnt if you go too close.")

Mahler completed all but one of the Rückert Lieder in 1901, shortly before his courtship with Alma. These songs, familiar from many Vocal Arts DC performances, often tap a lyric, meditative character that is typical "middle Mahler"—this is the period of his Fifth and Six Symphonies. "Liebst du um Schönheit," a song dedicated to Alma, makes clear both his ardent love—the "burn" that drew them together—as well as the otherworldly quality distinct to his music. Its glow has been likened to the famous "Adagietto" movement of the Fifth Symphony, conjectured to be a love song to Alma.

Mary, Queen of Scots is the most familiar of the women we meet tonight, and she certainly had her troubles too. Catholic rival for the throne of England to her cousin, Elizabeth I, she was caught in a web of romantic and political intrigue and beheaded in 1587. The Stuart Queen was a figure of immense controversy from the beginning: in the words of Antonia Fraser, "A romantic and tragic figure to her supporters, a scheming adulteress if not a murderess to her political enemies," her story has echoed down the centuries inspiring opera, ballet, film, and fiction.

It is the somber end of Mary's life that Robert Schumann turned to in 1852, setting *Gedichte der Königin Maria Stuart* to translations by Gisbert, Freiherr von Vincke of poems attributed to her. Schumann was not far from his own tragic end, which was to be marked by physical and mental breakdown. Whether he saw in Mary's prison reflections a tragic parallel is speculation, but this music

## Notes on the Program

---

is, in any case, a world apart from his love-besotted songs of 1840, here all austere, with vocal and piano lines that set plain language simply. Gone completely are the rhetorical piano introductions, the stage setting, or the big gesture. Instead, only a few shadowy hints of imagery (a musical sigh in the piano here, a remote echo of courtly flourish there) underpin lines that are often the simplest of text setting. Like “the lost to the world” protagonist in Mahler, here everything superfluous has been pared back.

To end, we return to sunlight, in the form of Richard Wagner’s *Wesendonck Lieder* from 1857-8. Mathilde Wesendonck was a poet, and the wife of Otto Wesendonck, a rich Zürich merchant. Like many, both were in thrall to the great composer. Otto had bailed Wagner out financially, offered him a place to live, shielding him from officials who distrusted the composer’s revolutionary tendencies. Not for the first time, Wagner repaid this bounty by having a passionate love affair with Mathilde. One result of this

passion was a focus on *Tristan und Isolde* to which Wagner had turned at this time, putting aside work on *The Ring*; another is tonight’s song cycle, to poetry by Mathilde.

The songs evoke *Tristan* in their mood of inward-looking sensuality and also share musical material with the opera. (Both “Im Treibhaus” and “Träume” were designated “Studies for *Tristan and Isolde*” by the composer.) Familiar Wagner trademarks abound: endless melodies supported by gently pulsing accompaniments (the heart beats of “Träume” being a particularly beautiful example), musical motives that organize and illuminate the music and set the scene (even droplets of water get their little tune). Mathilde’s texts, and perhaps the unaccustomed practice of setting someone else’s poetry, also brought forth a tenderness and even a bit of romantic mystery in Wagner, and in so doing brings us full circle to our first woman of the evening, Schubert’s tender and lost Mignon.