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Ian Pace

The Complete Songs of Hugo Wolf: Life, Letters, Lieder
by Richard Stokes.
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The Lieder of the Austrian composer Hugo Wolf (1860-1903) will be familiar to seasoned visitors to the Wigmore Hall, but not to many other people. It wouldn't be difficult to construct a history of 19th-century Germanic music which omitted Wolf's name entirely. Part of the reason for this is the mixed reputation of solo song in terms of wider aesthetic hierarchies. While few accounts of Beethoven fail to afford a central place to his symphonies, concertos, string quartets and solo and duo sonatas, the status of his songs, with the possible exception of the cycle *An die ferne Geliebte*, is less unequivocal. Schubert's monumental cycles *Die schöne Müllerin* and *Winterreise* are widely recognised as towering peaks of his output, alongside a handful of other Lieder (though a tiny fraction of the more than six hundred that he completed). The same goes for Schumann's *Dichterliebe* and *Frauenliebe und Leben* (though less often his numerous other collections). But very few of Brahms's 196 songs for solo voice and piano have achieved lasting popularity or a regular place in concert programmes.

Yet Brahms's reputation is secure on account of his symphonies, concertos, much of the chamber music, and at least a fraction of the piano works. It isn't uncommon to see wider commentaries that barely acknowledge Brahms's huge body of vocal music, including many works for multiple solo voices and choir. Of later Lieder composers, Mahler's reputation is secure on the basis of the symphonies and Richard Strauss's for his symphonic poems and operas.

Wolf's output, by contrast, is completely dominated by Lieder, together with a handful of mostly minor orchestral works, the most significant being the *Italienische Serenade* (1892), several worthy choral works, and the opera *Der Corregidor* (1895), which remains obscure and relatively rarely played. His reputation rests on around three hundred Lieder. The musicologist Lawrence Kramer has compared Wolf to Chopin, whose oeuvre is similarly dominated by piano music. But Chopin's piano works are a staple of the repertoire and held in great esteem by critics and musicologists (the shorter genre works as much as the more extended ones). Similar repertoire claims could not realistically be made for Wolf's Lieder, despite critical esteem from a select number of commentators. As Kramer points out, 'his songs are more often praised than sung.'

More musicologists and critics have a background in playing the piano than singing German Lieder in their formative years, which may be one factor informing the relative importance they attach to Chopin and Wolf. Still, Wolf's Lieder present particular challenges for listeners, as distinct from his predecessors. Schubert's two great cycles are based on texts by Wilhelm Müller, a relatively minor poet. The composer could supplement the sometimes modest poetry with vivid and evocative piano parts and subtle vocal writing which add hugely to the emotional depth of the works: in 'Thränenregen', for example, Schubert turns Müller's 'wir schauten so traulich zusammen hinab in den rieselnden Bach' and subsequent lines into a startling premonition of the central character's ultimate suicide by drowning, through descending vocal figures and a rippling piano interlude, as if the river were beckoning him. The piano in Schumann's *Dichterliebe* is an ironic and askew commentator on the vocal part, extending the ironic elements of Heine's poetry, but it nonetheless remains intact, perceptible as a separate melodic entity within a dramatic dialogue. Some of Brahms's songs are less immediate on the surface, not least because of his wider preference for tight development of small motivic fragments over freer and more expansive lines. But at the same time Brahms looked to folksong as an ideal, and insisted on the primacy of textual comprehensibility and word-painting. His vocal lines exhibit a fair degree of autonomy and can be appreciated on their own.

In Wolf's mature songs, however, piano and voice are integrated to an unprecedented degree, without in any sense precluding a dialectical relationship. Rather than piano and voice existing as two 'characters', the relationship is more intricate and complex, with the piano sometimes anticipating, echoing or modifying short fragments of the vocal line, or colouring an otherwise unremarkable melodic passage with extravagant and unusual chromatic harmonisation. The vocal lines sung without piano would still make some sense in many of the songs of Schubert, Schumann and Brahms, but most of Wolf's would seem bare, fragmentary and incomplete. Listening to much of Wolf is a challenge, as depth takes priority over more immediate perceptibility. In the *Mörike-Lieder* of 1888, this is especially true of 'Ein Stündlein wohl vor Tag', 'Im Frühling', 'An den Schlaf' or 'Denk' es, o Seele!', though less so of the more Schubertian 'Fussreise' or 'Der Gärtner'.

All of this should be seen in the context of the 'War of the Romantics' which raged between different compositional factions from the mid nineteenth century. One faction, drawing on a tradition from Schubert, Schumann and Mendelssohn, and in the second half of the century epitomised above all by Brahms, valued musical abstraction and autonomy, instrumental music, established forms such as the symphony, concerto and sonata, and a sense of historicism, sometimes drawing on earlier music for models. The other, represented by Berlioz, Liszt and Wagner, was associated with so-called *Zukunftsmusik* (music of the future). They valued musical depiction and programmatic work, music which oversteps a self-contained logic in order to invite the listener to imagine wider external

connotations, and explored harmonic and orchestral expansion (and, in the case of Wagner, radical new approaches to the relationship between music, text and theatre).

Both factions laid claim to the mantle of Beethoven, but prioritising different aspects of his work. Their representatives among critics, Eduard Hanslick for the first faction, Franz Brendel and Richard Pohl for the second, wrote ferocious polemics, sometimes making the oppositions seem more arch then was necessary. Mendelssohn had been a major figure in the development of the pictorial or programmatic symphonic poem which Liszt later made his own, and Schumann had explored experimental musical forms inspired by iconoclastic literary figures such as Jean Paul and E.T.A. Hoffmann. Liszt, meanwhile, despite being attacked by Brahms as the epitome of *Zukunftsmusik*, showed a historicist side in his major transcriptions of works by Bach and Beethoven. It was only with the appearance of Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht* in 1899, marrying Wagnerian ostentation and opulence to Brahmsian motivic intricacy, that it seemed possible to sublate the opposition.

The factions had different levels of power and influence in different places. In Vienna, Hanslick was long the leading critic, and never failed to write sardonically about each new symphony by Bruckner, who was clearly identified with Wagner, despite working in a symphonic idiom. As a result, Bruckner was for a long time kept on the outskirts of Viennese musical life, his reputation overshadowed by Brahms's.

Wolf was born in Windischgraz (now Slovenjgradec in Slovenia) but educated in various places around Austria before moving to Vienna in 1875, where he attended performances of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*. He quickly became a devotee and identified as a Wagnerian. For the rest of the decade, as Susan Youens has traced in detail, he forged his own style while still under the powerful influence of Schumann (setting a range of Heine poems, as well as work by Goethe, Nikolaus Lenau and Adelbert von Chamisso), ultimately translating many of Wagner's achievements into the Lied, as Bruckner was doing with the symphony. Wolf's songs foreground the most advanced harmony of his time, necessarily a property of the piano rather than the monophonic voice, to an extent that hadn't been possible when Schumann composed most of his songs in the 1840s.

In 1879 Wolf had a consultation with Brahms, whom he had previously admired, but the meeting did not go well. The volatile Wolf took offence when Brahms recommended a somewhat conservative teacher, Gustav Nottebohm, whom Wolf couldn't afford, and who wouldn't have suited his temperamental resistance to authority. From this point Wolf became a staunch opponent of Brahms's work. From 1884 to 1887 he wrote for the *Wiener Salonblatt*, in diametric opposition to Hanslick at the *Neue Freie Presse*. Wolf's passionate advocacy of Wagner came to be matched by attacks on Brahms as vicious as Hanslick's on Bruckner. Wolf asked why 'these glue pots, these obscenely stale symphonies of Brahms, false and perverted to the bottom of their very soul are hailed as wonders of the world', finding 'more intelligence and

sensitivity in a single cymbal crash in a work of Liszt's'. Of the First Piano Concerto, Wolf wrote: 'There blows a draft so cold, so chilly damp, so foggy, that one's heart can freeze, one's breath be taken away. One could catch cold from it.' He also wryly complained of a perceived requirement by critics that performers must play Brahms in order to be reviewed.

Wolf had continued to develop his style through a handful of new Lieder in the early 1880s, in particular his first settings of Joseph von Eichendorff, but composed little during his years as a critic. (This pattern, of bursts of productivity alternating with long hiatuses, may have been linked to depression.) During the winter of 1886-87, however, he found new compositional momentum with settings of Goethe and Eichendorff, and in 1888, inspired by his first publications, composed the 53 settings of Eduard Mörike which make up the *Mörike-Lieder*. The most astute commentator on Wolf's relationship to Wagner, Amanda Glauert, has argued that Wolf self-consciously and systematically constructed them as responses to particular features of Wagner's style.

More Eichendorff and Goethe settings followed in 1888-89, swiftly followed by the *Spanisches Liederbuch*, settings of Spanish poems translated into German by Emanuel Geibel and Paul Heyse. By this time Wolf had encountered Nietzsche's *The Case of Wagner* (1888) and, as Glauert has outlined, he began to distance himself from the Wagnerian influence in favour of an evocation of Mediterranean atmosphere. The texts of the Spanish book, from which Wolf set ten sacred texts and 34 secular ones, show a much sunnier sensibility than the dark introspection and nightmarish visions of Mörike. Wolf's first *Italienisches Liederbuch*, from a further collection of translations by Heyse, was published in 1892.

Wolf's reputation had continued to grow during this period, despite a backlash from allies of Brahms. The limitations of being associated with song, however, as well as the limited financial rewards, came to weigh on Wolf's mind. He wrote to his friend Emil Kauffmann on 12 October 1891:

> Opera & always opera! Truly, I have come to dread my songs. The flattering recognition I've gained as a 'song composer' makes me sick at heart. What else does it mean, other than a reproach that I only ever write songs, that I am only master of a small genre, & do not even have complete mastery of that, since my songs only reveal the *rudiments* of a dramatic talent. So I am not even a decent songwriter!

Also afflicted with inflammation of the throat, which may have been linked to the syphilis that ultimately killed him, Wolf fell into another depressive hiatus, plagued by self-doubt, and wrote almost nothing between 1892 and 1894. When he resurfaced, he set his attention to the composition of *Der Corregidor*, which was completed in 1895 and performed in Mannheim in 1896. Then he returned to the *Italienisches Liederbuch*, which he completed in another furious burst of activity in March and April 1896, by which point he had achieved some comfort and security, in part through help from loyal friends.

Wolf composed three settings of German translations of Michelangelo in 1897,

and began work on another opera, *Manuel Venegas* (which he never completed). But his mental health, together with further symptoms of syphilis, had become acute, and he was taken unwillingly to an asylum. Despite some respite in 1898, he voluntarily returned to another asylum the following year after an attempt to drown himself. He remained there until his death in 1903, visited regularly by his wife Melanie. She took her own life in 1906.

The standard reference point in English for those interested in Wolf's songs has long been Eric Sams's *The Songs of Hugo Wolf*, first printed in 1961, which reproduced the texts of every song, organised chronologically, accompanied by a generalised commentary. Richard Stokes, a professor of Lieder at the Royal Academy of Music whose previous books include *A French Song Companion* (with the pianist Graham Johnson, 2000), *The Book of Lieder* (2011) and *The Penguin Book of English Song* (2016), has in *The Complete Songs of Hugo Wolf* created the first collection in English seriously to rival Sams's.

Where Sams included only the English translations of the texts, Stokes has them in German, English and, where applicable, Spanish and Italian. Rather than chronologically, Stokes structures his book by poet, as Natasha Loges did in *Brahms and his Poets* (2017). The choice seems more logical in Wolf's case than for Brahms, since Wolf made collections of his settings of individual poets or compilers (Stokes categorises the Spanish and Italian songs under their German translators). But the musical detail in Stokes is considerably less extensive and more generalised (because all collected in a single short section on each poet, rather than for each song in turn) than in Sams. Stokes is better than Loges at considering the life and work of the poets, especially in a penetrating passage reconsidering Goethe's relationship to music, and relating this to the composer's settings of them. However, there is almost none of the valuable technical analysis of the metrical and other stylistic features of the poems which is Loges's book's greatest strength, and Stokes's commentaries remain firmly focused on content.

Stokes quotes extensively from Wolf's letters. Many are unremarkable, but there are a few striking exceptions, such as the reflections Wolf sent to Kauffmann on 7 March 1894, after reading Eichendorff's novella *Dürande Castle*:

> Eichendorff's characteristic chiaroscuro atmosphere is simply not compatible with the bright lights of the stage. I would call his stories literary landscapes, in which all the delineated characters play a merely secondary role, resembling what painters call staffage. The reverse is true of the theatre: the décor is staffage & the characters must be placed in the foreground with the greatest possible clarity. Consider now a typical Eichendorff character. There's hardly anything but his costume & a bit of make-up. Not a trace of portrayal or psychological perspective. Only vague shadowy silhouettes, without faces or personality; they suddenly appear like dreamy ghosts – no one knows from where – then vanish, no one knows where to. They drift along like clouds in the sky or, to use an Eichendorff image, like silent dreams, assuming now this form, now that. That's all very well & highly poetic & agreeable for the imagination – but of no use at all in the theatre.

This explains much about Wolf's approach in such Eichendorff settings as 'Der Soldat I' or 'Nachtzauber', in which bland vocal lines, sometimes within a limited tessitura, are transformed by the role of the piano.

Detailed studies of large bodies of musical work are less often attempted by scholars nowadays (Loges's handbook being an exception), perhaps fearful of their books being dismissed by fellow academics as 'survey texts'. The bulk of such work is done by musical practitioners or others working outside universities. Graham Johnson's books, for example, or before him those of the great baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, who published on Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Wolf, Debussy and others, do not feature major scholarly insights or arguments, let alone the application of contemporary academic paradigms, though they demonstrate a level of identification and insight that comes from a performer's intimate familiarity with the music.

Stokes's volume sits somewhere between the approaches of performers and scholars, though without really achieving an integration of the two. The commentaries and comprehensive presentation of the texts are extremely useful for both Wolf enthusiasts and scholars, but otherwise the book will not displace Sams for the general reader, or rival the work of Youens, Glauert and others for scholarly observation and analysis. For deeper yet accessible approaches to Wolf, such as might inspire those with only a passing familiarity with his songs to explore further, the search remains elusive. □