

EXPERIENCING LIEDER

A *Lied*, by literal definition, is a song in German. This could include 12th century troubadour songs (*Minnelieder*), folk songs, hymns, and choral works. But the word is most often applied to German and Austrian settings of mid-18th through 19th century poetry for solo voice and piano. There are literally thousands of such *Lieder* composed by some of the world's greatest composers.

The poems selected to be set to music were frequently written by some of the greatest poets in history. These Romantic poets saw society as having become estranged from Nature. They sought the transformation of the individual and society into a higher metaphysical, spiritual realm. These poets viewed themselves as alienated from the world and as Wanderers on a spiritual journey, questing after what they perceived mankind had once had, and lost. Intensely nostalgic, they had a great yearning and longing for this idyllic state. They looked for fulfillment and consolation in love, in music, in re-uniting with Nature, and in spiritual aspiration. The latter was sometimes sought in organized religion, but more frequently from making the adoration of Nature into a substitute for established religion. They venerated the Past, as seen in idealized images of Antiquity and the Middle Ages, the perceived uncomplicated and unspoiled naturalism of common folk and folklore, and the purity and innocence of one's own past in childhood. They were fascinated by remote subjects, whether exotic foreign lands and cultures, myths, or fairy tales. They explored mystery, mysticism, night and dreams, and death was frequently viewed as a release from life's pain. They sought whatever would allow one to communicate with the Infinite.

The early Romantic poets believed that Art was capable of transforming and healing both the individual and society. But after the French Revolution had spun out of control, Napoleonic wars had exhausted Europe, and the harsh political repression of Metternich's post-1815 Europe had taken effect, *Weltschmerz*, pessimism, and resignation set in. This would further intensify after the failed revolutions of 1848. Artists and intellectuals now saw Art more as a refuge, and escape from the depressing reality of industrialized, urban life, rather than as a transformative influence.

It is very understandable that composers were motivated to set highly emotional poems to music. The combination of words and music intensified the emotional experience provided by poetry alone. There were many decisions a composer had to make when setting a poem to music. These include: the relationship of the words and music in terms of dominance; whether to emphasize the general mood and meaning of the poem, or to aim to highlight the details of the rhythms and inflections of the words; whether to provide the same music for each verse (strophic) or make the song through-composed; and what role to assign the accompaniment.

The resulting *Lieder* were usually quite short—very frequently less than three minutes in length—and tended to not display mere passagework or virtuosity for its own sake. With nearly every human experience addressed in these songs, at their best, they can provide as powerful, riveting, and touching an emotional experience as music has to offer.

The *Liederabend* (Evening of Songs), as you'll be hearing tonight, was originally conceived for an intimate venue, which allows the listener to vividly experience the emotions of the poetry and music in a way that a large concert hall does not. It is a tragedy that in today's music world the *Lieder* Recital has become nearly extinct. It is our hope that after tonight's recital, you may be moved to seek out recordings by the great interpreters of the past, such as Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Christa Ludwig, Janet Baker and Kathleen Ferrier. These are easily accessible on YouTube, as well as on CD. We believe one's life can be greatly enhanced and uplifted by this rich literature.

HISTORY OF THE 18TH and 19TH CENTURY LIED

The *Lied* was at the heart of German musical life from the 1740's until early in the 20th century. Several factors came together to create an explosion of *Lieder*, and to contribute to its enormous importance. Most fundamental was the significant role that personal, emotional poetry played in the homes of the growing middle class which prized the arts and cultivated domesticity. The *Lied* became the vehicle by which the individual explored his/her own soul, and the issues of life. It's expressivity was increased by the growing popularity of the piano, which replaced the harpsichord and clavichord. The *Lied* also became a vehicle for the residents of the hundreds of independent German states to feel a sense of cultural unity.

After the excesses of the Baroque era in so many aspects of life, people all over Europe began to yearn for increased simplicity, balance, and above all, naturalness. Good taste, refinement, elegance, clarity, transparency, and gracefulness became goals in all the arts. Reason, Wisdom, and Nature were to be admired, and looked to for guidance. Cheerfulness and agreeability became especially desirable qualities. The arts were now intended to be accessible in all homes, and not just to the aristocracy in their palaces or their glittering boxes at the opera house, where virtuosi tossed off Italian arias with excessively florid embellishment or intense, dramatic pathos. Contrapuntal complexities were ready to be replaced by simple folk-song-like homophony.

The North German *Lied* was a natural vehicle to embody these new qualities in the 1730's and 1740's. It was intended for amateur individuals to sing in their homes, with the words set strophically, in a narrow range, and with the barest self-effacing accompaniment, which usually doubled the melody, and could even be played by the singer. Hamburg was the original center of this kind of *Lied*, although soon after, composers in Berlin played a leading role. Composers in those early stages included Christian Gottfried Krause, Telemann, Johann Gottlieb Goerner, and most importantly, C. P. E. Bach. The latter invested more musical intensity in his more than 200 *Lieder* than other composers, and his songs exercised a great influence on future composers. The poetry utilized was usually pleasant, and often dealt with love and song, and depicted Arcadian, pastoral settings. This type of verse was referred to as Anacreontic, after the Greek poet Anacreon. One author has referred to "middle class urbanites playing at being shepherds and shepherdesses." The poetry was sometimes religious, with a didactic purpose of edifying. Around 1770, significant new developments were occurring. Johann Gottfried Herder became extremely influential in promoting German national pride, through his advocacy of the "Volk," as evidenced in folk legends, myths, poetry and songs. He, along with the young Goethe, was also very influential in crystallizing concepts which became known as *Sturm und Drang*. This was a reaction against the emphasis on Rationalism and Reason which had dominated the thinking of the Enlightenment. A powerful new emphasis on the subjective, the spontaneous, and on heightened human emotions entered the thinking of the times, and became evident in all the arts. Noble simplicity was now amplified by seeking the "Sublime." Nature, which had previously been loved for its naturalness, was now elevated to a source for self-knowledge. *Bildung* was sought after, which was the process of developing oneself spiritually and culturally, through self-reflection.

Lieder followed German literature along these paths. Johann Friedrich Reichardt and Carl Friedrich Zelter were two of the leading composers at this time. **Reichardt** (1752-1814) wrote over 1500 *Lieder* on texts by 125 poets. Based at the court of Berlin for many years, his home was a meeting place for the most important literary figures in the German Romantic movement. He was also a significant musical journalist reporting on his frequent and lengthy travels throughout Europe. His *Lieder*, usually strophic, sought a dignified simplicity, with the music deferring to the poetry, and frequently embodied a folk song style. Employing a wide range of styles, and with their increased drama, many were an advance over the extreme simplicity and plainness of his North German predecessors. Goethe said of him, "Reichardt was the first to make my lyrical work known to the world through music."

Zelter (1758-1832) was an important conductor, organizer, and mentor in the Berlin musical scene. He founded and directed many important organizations which were important to vocal and instrumental music, and he championed the cause of earlier music. His many students included Felix Mendelssohn. His 210 *Lieder* were very influential, and contain a number of forward looking techniques. After Zelter's first collection of *Lieder* was published in 1796, Goethe wrote to him to express his great approval of the settings. This inaugurated a deep mutual friendship which lasted for the rest of their lives, and which encouraged Zelter to continue to compose *Lieder*, 75 of which were settings of Goethe's poems. Goethe wrote Zelter of his *Lieder*, "The purest and highest painting in music is the kind you practice."

The *Lied* through the 1770's was primarily a North German creation. Vienna remained largely immune from its influence, being dominated instead by Italian vocal and instrumental music. The few *Lieder* that were written there were not motivated by the poetry, but instead, the words were simply viewed as something to set to music. The poetry was usually Anacreontic, with little depth, and the music had little relationship to folk song. Josef-Anton Steffan produced the first collection of *Lieder* in Vienna in 1778, and Haydn issued sets in 1781 and 1784. These German songs of Haydn's became overshadowed by his English songs, composed in London in the next decade. **Mozart's** approximately 30 *Lieder* were mostly offerings to friends on private occasions

(*Freundstücke*). Their style reflects whatever stylistic developments were occurring in his more significant compositions at the same time. One hears Mozart the opera composer in these works.

Although **Beethoven** took *Lieder* composition very seriously and wrote 80 songs (including some in Italian and some with orchestra), his efforts have never been fully appreciated. This is due to several factors: his vocal works have been overshadowed by his instrumental works; singers have usually considered his vocal writing to be awkward (Beethoven himself found writing for the voice and the setting of poetry to be difficult, and at age 25 even sought out Salieri for instruction in this area); and the popularity of Schubert's *Lieder* have drawn attention away from Beethoven's *Lieder*. The texts Beethoven set frequently dealt with thwarted or unfulfilled love due to separation, unattainability, or being unrequited which reflected his own life experience. He also composed *Lieder* that embody an unsophisticated, boisterous good humor. With his heightened, dramatic expressiveness, Beethoven brought a profound seriousness to song writing, gave the piano a larger role, and pointed the way for future composers of *Lieder*.

Schubert elevated the importance of the musical elements to equal importance with the poetry and also greatly increased the importance of the piano accompaniment. He utilized the poetry of 91 poets and his 620 *Lieder* cover a wide range of subjects. His friend Grillparzer wrote, "He made poetry sound and music speak." Schubert had a unique gift of combining gaiety and melancholy. An absolutely unsurpassed melodist, his lyricism also permeated his instrumental writing in an unprecedented and highly influential way. His harmonies and modulations astound in their unexpected turns, and yet seem so inevitably right. As the legendary accompanist Gerald Moore has written of Schubert: "I find myself in the evening of my life turning more and more to the master whom Artur Schnabel described as the composer nearest to God. No one ever expressed himself with such lack of artificiality; so spontaneous is his song that the process of transposition from mind to manuscript without loss of freshness or bloom is miraculous. His heart was full of music, which in its unerring directness, unsurprising naturalness and sublime eloquence uplifts our soul."

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) was one of the most naturally gifted musicians in history. His 90 *Lieder* on poems by 30 different poets reflect the esthetics of earlier Berlin *Lieder* composers with their modest simplicity, strophic form and lack of responsiveness to details in the text. They did not break new ground in the history of the *Lied*, nor were they influential. But they are loved for their melodiousness, elegance and grace. It is interesting that a number of his sister Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel's several dozen *Lieder* were published under Felix's name. Her output of nearly 500 compositions is becoming increasingly appreciated.

Schumann, having been almost exclusively focused on the piano in the first dozen years of his composing, gave the piano a much larger role in his *Lieder* than it had ever been previously granted. The piano's harmonies and frequent melodies are largely responsible for the mood. Extensive preludes, interludes and postludes are common. Schumann usually set the poems of the greatest poets, including many by Eichendorff and Heine, and created a magical atmosphere which reflects the emotional heart of the poem. The majority (133) of his 260 *Lieder* were composed in a 12 month period beginning in late-January of 1840, the year of his marriage to Clara.

It is not well-known that **Liszt** wrote over 70 songs utilizing poems of 44 poets in five languages, the majority of which are *Lieder*. The earliest of his often experimental and vastly underperformed songs are sometimes, in his own words, "mostly inflated and sentimental, and usually over padded with accompaniment." Their theatrical drama can make them seem almost operatic. But Liszt revised many of them later, and, especially in his later years, composed songs of great intimacy and simplicity. Liszt was also important in the history of the *Lied* because of his transcribing hundreds of *Lieder* and performing these transcriptions in the concert hall—the first time that *Lieder* in any form were to enter the concert hall.

Brahms aimed for simplicity in his more than 200 *Lieder*. He tended to select poems that dealt with love, nature, home, nostalgia, and death. The words of the poems tended to become a vehicle for a restrained, narrow ranged melodic line, which often resembled a folk song. But that melodic line and its harmonization capture the essence of the general mood, and are reflective of his life experiences.

Hugo Wolf's musical output consists almost entirely of *Lieder*, and there are those who rank him as the greatest song composer of all time. Most agree he at least brought the *Lied* to its fullest state of development. Like Schubert, he lived an itinerant existence without steady income, and was supported and championed by

friends in the intellectual circles of Vienna. Unlike Schubert, who composed consistently throughout his short life, Wolf had several frenzied bursts of astounding productivity where he would produce many dozens of songs over a period of months, and then fall prey to his ongoing depression, and produce nothing. Well over 2/3 of his nearly 300 *Lieder* were written between 1888 and 1891. In each fruitful period, his approach was to focus on one poet at a time and nearly exhaust the possibilities. Being a writer and possessing great literary knowledge, he was a highly regarded music critic, though quite vitriolic in his opposition to Brahms and the more conservative composers of his time. The Viennese referred to him as the “Wild Wolf.” Wolf was only attracted to the greatest poetry, which included large amounts of Mörike, Eichendorff, and Goethe. He usually only set poems which he believed previous composers hadn’t fully realized and, interestingly, he never set poems of any living poets. The variety and uniqueness of each of his *Lieder* is extraordinary. Wolf’s intense correlation of text and music is unsurpassed. Every nuance and inflection of speech is captured in his original, uniquely personal, declamatory language. The piano writing evokes fluctuating moods through the utilization of intense, unexpected, chromatic harmonies, some of which were inspired by Wagner. There is often a very powerful spiritual, introspective quality to Wolf’s writing, combined with intensely concentrated gestures, which is why his *Lieder* have sometimes been called “psychological songs.” Insanity caused by syphilis resulted in Wolf being unable to compose at all in the last years of his brief life, and like Schumann, he died in an asylum.

Richard Strauss, while best known for his symphonic poems and operas, composed nearly 200 songs, many of which were for voice and orchestra. Most were written between the ages of 20 and 40, and are notable for their unique melodic qualities, rich accompaniments and emotional atmosphere. Few composers have known the human voice as did Strauss. Many of his *Lieder* were written with his irascible soprano wife, Pauline, in mind to sing.

The culmination of the *Lied*, as well as Romanticism in music, occurs in the works of **Gustav Mahler** (1860-1911). The same subjects that had motivated past poets and composers of *Lieder*—the lonely Wanderer, the spiritual longing, the love of Nature, the contemplation of Death, the metaphysical purpose of music, and the folk influence, reach their peak of intensity in Mahler’s music. He frequently wrote *Lieder* for voice and piano, and then orchestrated them. The qualities of *Lieder* permeate not only his *Lieder*, but his instrumental writing as well. The venue of the *Lied* had now changed from the home to the concert hall, oftentimes with the orchestra replacing the piano. But the questions the music raises, and the answers it provides concern the issues every human being faces in life, and are similar to those found throughout the history of the *Lied*.

POETS REPRESENTED IN THESE CONCERTS

Gabriele von Baumberg (1768-1839) was a poet and writer who frequented the literary circles of Vienna. Famous in her time, she was called “the German Sappho” and was praised by Goethe. She was an acquaintance of Mozart, and six of her poems were also set by Schubert.

Adalbert von Chamisso (1781-1838) was born in France, but emigrated to Berlin at the time of the French Revolution. He was a botanist as well as a poet and writer, and was a forerunner of the political poets of the 1840’s.

Joseph Karl Eichendorff (1788-1857) was definitely one of the most important German Romantics, with a special sensitivity to nature and religion. The magical, enchanting lyricism of his poetry almost seems to be music itself. A civil servant in Breslau and Berlin, he longed for his beloved countryside.

August Heinrich Hoffman von Fallersleben (1798-1874) was a popular poet, writer, editor, historian, and philologist. He was among the earliest and most influential poets whose liberalism helped prepare the way for the 1848 Revolution.

Ferdinand Freiligrath (1810-1876) was a poet and translator. His expression of political radicalism was influential leading up to the Revolution of 1848 and required him to have to leave Germany for large parts of his life.

Hermann von Gilm (1812-1864) was an Austrian lyric poet from Tyrol, who worked as a civil servant.

Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749-1832) was the giant of German literature. His influence on the late-18th and 19th centuries was absolutely enormous. While he was actually a proponent of Classicism and a critic of many aspects of Romanticism, the Romantics saw much powerful personal subjectivity in his poetry, novels, and plays. His poetry was set by nearly every significant composer of *Lieder* in his time and later. A true genius and complete Renaissance man, Goethe was also a philosopher, scientist, diplomat, and civil servant.

Klaus Groth (1819-1899) was a lyric poet, who wrote of country life in his North German home. He was a school teacher, a professor, and a friend of Brahms.

Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) was an extremely significant poet, essayist, and journalist. His poetry was the most frequently set to music of any writer, and in many languages in addition to German. Controversy surrounded both him and his works—in his own time and still today. He was always an outsider. Alienated by the anti-Semitism and oppressive political climate in Germany, he emigrated to France in 1831. Being a foreigner, he was never fully accepted there, and spent the last eight years of his life extremely alert mentally, but physically paralyzed and confined to his bed, which he termed his “mattress grave.” His early poetry brought him enormous fame, and was the primary source of his poems for composers. Simple and terse, containing melodious beauty and vivid imagery, the poems often dealt with unhappiness in love. However, he and his poetry were extremely complex and full of contradictions and ambivalence. As Susan Youens has written, “Heine at his best has more layers than any onion (and can produce the same bitter tears).” Irony, paradox, and sudden surprises are constant ingredients in his works, and his later poems are particularly full of sarcasm, satiric wit, and disillusionment. Many readers, as well as many composers, have missed what may actually have been intended. In addition to poetry, Heine wrote on history, and harshly critiqued German and French society, with special warnings on excessive political nationalism.

Paul von Heyse (1830-1914) is most famous for his translations of Spanish and Italian poetry in 1852 and 1860, respectively. The Spanish translations were especially widely used by German *Lieder* composers. He was also a writer and poet, and received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1910.

Jacob Nikolaus von Craigher de Jachelutta (1797-1855) was an important figure in Viennese intellectual life. Originally from Italy, he travelled widely, translated significant literature, and wrote poetry.

Emil Kuh (1828-1876) was a journalist and professor of German literature. He was prominent in Viennese literary circles.

Nikolaus Lenau (1802-1850) especially embodied the *Weltschmerz* and *Sehnsucht* of the German Romantic movement, and has been called the most consistently melancholy and pessimistic poet in the German language. A large number of composers set his poetry. Born in Hungary, he wandered in disillusionment much of his life, even living in Ohio and Indiana for a period. The last several years of his life were spent in asylums.

Detlev von Liliencron (1844-1909) was an eminent lyric poet and novelist. He was a career German military officer, who, upon retirement, came to the United States, where he failed to make a living as a painter, piano teacher, and beer hall pianist. He returned to Germany and worked in the civil service.

John Henry Mackay (1864-1933) born in Scotland, but raised in Germany, was a rebellious thinker and writer.

The German poet **Eduard Mörike** (1804-1875) was first a Lutheran pastor, and then a professor of German literature. He wrote in simple, natural language, frequently on humorous subjects. He was neglected until Hugo Wolf set 53 of his poems, and is now held in high regard.

Wilhelm Müller (1794-1827) was a German lyric poet, classics teacher, and librarian whose writings were very popular in his time. His advocacy of the Greek struggle for independence earned him the title of the “German Lord Byron.” His poetry tended to be written in a simple, popular folk style, and his most famous poems deal with unrequited love. Critical opinion of his poetry has varied widely, but he will always be remembered as the poet of Schubert’s cycles, *Die Schöne Müllerin* and *Die Winterreise*.

Robert Reinick (1805-1852), despite very poor eyesight, was a German painter and poet, and personal friend of Schumann. His style was simple and unaffected.

Ludwig Rellstab (1799-1860) was a poet, novelist, influential music critic, and editor of a music journal. It was he who named Beethoven's Sonata, op. 27, no. 2, the "Moonlight."

Friedrich Rückert (1788-1866) was a German poet, professor of oriental languages, and translator of oriental poetry. His poems have been widely set by a large number of composers. Much of his own poetry was influenced by oriental poetry and it is frequently very introspective and meditative.

Franz von Schober (1796-1882) was a gifted, wealthy, literary dilettante, who was Schubert's closest friend.

Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart (1739-1791) was a German poet and writer, who, when he was not being imprisoned or repeatedly expelled from cities for his wild behavior, was the editor of a music journal.

FOR FURTHER READING

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