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Nineteenth Century German Art Song: A Research Paper

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NINETEENTH CENTURY GERMAN ART SONG

A Research Paper
for
H 491

by
Kathlyn A. Ramsey

OUACHITA BAPTIST UNIVERSITY
ARKADELPHIA, ARKANSAS
FALL, 1967
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Traces of the Art Song</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics of the Lied.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composers of the Lied.</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

The musical genius of German composers created the art song, or Lied. This song form, designed for the single voice with piano accompaniment, achieved its fixed position among the historical musical forms in the nineteenth century. It has been said that "Germany is the only country in which the art of song in orderly and progressive development can be traced from the simple Mediaeval Volkslied to the elaborate productions of Schubert, Schumann, and Brahms."¹

It is the purpose of this paper to study the development of the German art song in the nineteenth Century. The study will present the history and the typical forms of the art song. It will also trace contributions of the outstanding nineteenth century composers of the Lied.

¹"Song," Encyclopaedia Britannica, XX, p. 987.
EARLY TRACES OF THE ART SONG

Before 1800 the growth of songs and song forms had been closely connected with larger forms in which song played a part—the Mass, oratorio, and opera. As a separate unit, songs had always existed, either as a folk song or in composed forms such as the lute song of the Medieval and Renaissance periods, or the cantata and ballad of the operatic period. Songs were beloved in their simpler guise by the common people, but were hardly noticed by the leading composers. The Italian aria was the form of music for single voice that was cultivated in the higher musical circles. In the eighteenth century, an independent form of vocal solo which flourished was the ode; however, these compositions, with their frequent changes of metre and rhythm have not survived in modern practice. The folk song was universally practiced, but its possibilities of development were hardly imagined in the eighteenth century. The rise of the art Lied through the efforts of Schubert, Schumann and others was one consequence of the new German movement in literature and music as a result of the assertion of the German national consciousness in all forms of intellectual activity. This expression was a return to nature; one of a national feeling which could not be satisfied by older alien forms. Before 1800, songs missed several elements which served to make the song of this Romantic period a new creation. They were written around poems or verses which were largely narrative or ballad in nature. They were written either

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as vocal show pieces or simply as tunes to which almost any words could be sung. They were composed by men *who only exceptionally used music as a means of personal expression.*

The significance of the growth of the Lied into its historic position was expressed by Merian and quoted by Edward Dickinson:

The Lied is distinguished from the earlier forms of solo song (aria, ode) in this respect, that no longer the music but the word-text appears as the chief element. About the middle of the eighteenth century Lied texts were composed to already existing melodies; the modern Lied composer, however, sets music to a poem; he seeks by his art to enhance the effect of the poet's words. From this point of view the Lied must be considered as the direct forerunner of the modern music drama. Through the Lied, musicians first learned to respect the poetic text, which for a long time had been only a make-shift, a vehicle for their tones. What the great reformers of the opera strove for--the most intimate mingling of word and tone--was first accomplished by the Lied singers. (Geschichte der Musik im neunzehnten Jahrhundert, p. 546)

Toward the end of the eighteenth century was a deep and widespread interest in the Lied, which resulted largely from the stimulus provided by the lyric poetry of Goethe. For the most part, the songs were simple and unpretentious--traces can be found in the works of composers: J. A. Hiller, J. A. P. Schulz, J. F. Reichardt, and K. F. Zelter.

The eighteenth century had been rationalistic. It had been versed in logic, mathematical exactness, and scientific learnedness. With the coming of the nineteenth century a new spirit stirred. Long-pent-up emotions seemed to burst into new aspirations expressed by poets, painters, and musicians.

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1Finney, op. cit.
Whatever was beautiful and strange was sought after. Now men listened to wind in tree branches, to chattering brooks and to rushing and whispering surf. Many musicians, inspired by the literature of the day, broke away from the classic forms and impressed a new style of music—romantic—of which the art song was an important form.  

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CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LIED

A song may be defined in strictest sense as a form of vocal music in which a single thought of sentiment is rendered. It is distinguished from an aria or a ballad in that it is not narrative, does not present contrasted ideas or a development of thought or feeling, does not give the processes which resulted in the feeling, but simply gives the feeling itself. A song does not include description or comment unless it is needed to make the single idea distinct. A song acts directly on the emotion; its music is a means of carrying the essential mood or imagery of the poem directly to the hearer's feeling, however elaborate it may be.  

Lied is the German term for song which was applied as early as the thirteenth century. In considering the Lied, it is necessary to distinguish between its several forms. There is the more distinctly popular type of song, known as Volkstümliches Lied, the folk-song form. In this form the same melody serves for all the stanzas of the poem as in the Volkslied itself, upon which the former was modeled. This form is also known as the strophe or stanza form. The second form is the modified strophe form, in which musical changes occur in one stanza, usually the last. The third form is the durchcomponiertes Lied, or song "composed through." In this song there is no division of the melody of stanzas, the music forms a running commentary on a poem, and the sections and phrases change their

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8Dickinson, op. cit. pp. 200-201.

character according to the sentiment of the poem. The folk-song form aims at a wider audience than the latter form. The appreciation of the "through composed" form involves some degree of culture and intelligence since it aims at interpreting more difficult kinds of poetry.

For several centuries the problem of setting words to music had been inherent in the phrase "truth of declamation." By treating the words musically, rhythmically, and melodically, so that the meaning of the words would be clear, a solution to the problem was found. The composers of the new style of romantic song did not do away with truth declamation. The wealth of lyric poetry of the romantic poets and the better understanding of the expressive capacity in musical materials helped the composer create this art song in which neither the text nor the music had a separate existence. The music obeys its own laws to achieve a psychological unity with the poem; it does not make an attempt to carry out a preconceived musical plan. In the art song each individual song develops and prescribes its own musical treatment. Since this is true, it has been stated that "...it is futile to speak of a 'musical form' for the art song as a structural shape that can be subtracted from its materials and viewed as an abstraction."10 The form is a method of treatment; each song makes its own formal laws. Another ingredient in the art song is the willingness and necessity not to dispense with musical form but to create a new form which meets the necessity of each new work to express itself. An example of this is the previously mentioned "through composed" song. "The submission of the composer's mind to the poet's, the control even of his highest musical invention by the purpose to give the fullest possible

10 Finney, op. cit., p. 449.
expression to the mood and sentiment of the text\textsuperscript{11} is to be recognized in the works of all the modern composers of German song.

\textsuperscript{11} Dickinson, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 200.
Heinrich Albert has been given the title of "father of the Volksmäßiges Lied," the art song in folk style.\(^{12}\) Karl Philipp Emanuel Bach has been called "founder and creator of German Lied."\(^{13}\) In "Das Weilchen," in which he used a poem which was worthy of his genius, Mozart produced a masterpiece—regarded by some as the first perfect specimen of the durch-componiertes Lied, and paved the way for Schubert, Schumann, Brahms and other great German song writers of the nineteenth century.\(^{14}\)

One of the first of the romantics in music was Franz Schubert (1797-1828). His music was a kind of bridge that joined the old classical and the new romantic music. Forms and tendencies of the Lied are all illustrated in his songs. He once and for all established the complete model for this phase of art; later composers simply applied his methods and principles. He claims the distinction of "having raised a musical form from comparative obscurity to a rank among the historic art styles."\(^{15}\) He penetrated with unerring insight into the innermost secrets of the best poetry; he possessed a knowledge of the human voice; he was first to divine fully the emotional range of the voice and dissociate it in lyrical work from the traditions of the old school. Schubert never penned a note or a phrase


\(^{13}\) Ibid., p. 27.


\(^{15}\) Dickinson, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 201-202.
merely because it was vocally effective. What he wrote for the voice to sing was there because for him the poetry could not have it another way. In spite of the greatness of Schubert's instrumental music the love that the musical world bears him is mainly due to his *Lieder*. He is unsurpassed as a melodist; his genius was essentially lyric.

Schubert's works show emotional flexibility. He was greatest in his setting of songs that express a mood of yearning and melancholy. In the majority of his songs is a strain of pensiveness and often sadness. Among his finest songs are those devoted to love and nature. In his nature songs he is a type of nineteenth century artist in that the effort as a rule is "to reflect a mood, rather than to describe movement or suggest natural sound." But Schubert was capable of a very different mood—quick stepping and sparkling as in his *Marches Militaires*.

The part that the piano accompaniment was to hold in the highest development of the *Lied* was first revealed by Schubert. Up to his time the harpsichord and then the piano accompaniment had little importance in relation to the vocal line of a song. Schubert gave the piano equal status with the voice. No longer were accompaniments merely background for the singing. It was now an equal partner which set the mood for the singer, and in a way summed up the story of the song in the concluding epilogues.¹⁷

Hardly a single development in subsequent phases of the art, except ones eliminating melodic elements, is not fore-shadowed in one or another of the approximately 625 songs Schubert wrote. He was as good a composer

of durchcomponiertes Lied as of simple strophic type, or the purely decla-
tory. In some of his songs the music is that of a general mood, the accompani-
ment follows one or two general rhythmic figures. Examples are found in the
strophe songs "Das Wandern," "Haidenrööslein," and "Sylvia." In others is a
closer adhesion and greater flexibility of style, as in "Wanderers Nachtlied,"
and "Der Wandrer." Finally a new model is established in which the music
is almost completely pliant to the text. Every line, almost every word, gives
color to the harmony. It is called the "declamatory" song. In this type the
voice declaims the text more in the form of a recitative than in melody. Uni-
ity and continuity are furnished by the accompaniment. The best single example
is "Der Doppelganger."

Another feature of the Schubert Lieder is the setting of groups of poems,
all concerning the same general subject, in song cycles. These cycles were
outgrowths of the romantic song probably suggested by cycles of lyric poems
written by the romantic poets. These poets, realizing that the long narra-
tive was not ideal for romantic expression, conceived the idea of connecting
series of rather short lyric poems with a narrative thread. Each poem had
for its purpose the presenting of a definite lyric mood; the sum total of
which would present a narrative in effect. Schubert made his songs belong
together by a delicate shaping of musically expressed mood, not depending
upon reappearing melodies but upon consistency of psychological substructure.

Die Winterreise consists of twenty-four of his loveliest songs all devoted
to the emotions of a rejected lover as he contemplates the scenes of his

18 Dickinson, op. cit., p. 204.

19 David D. Boyden, An Introduction to Music (New York: Alfred A. Knopf,
"winter journey." This song cycle combines certain typical traits of the early romantic movement. There is the love theme, the longing for nature, and the youthful naivety.20

Franz Schubert has been called the greatest song writer of all ages. Certain features of his works may be emphasized and restated: (1) his use of modulation as a means of emotional expression, (2) his inexhaustible fertility in devising a form of accompaniment which serves to illustrate the pictorial or emotional background of a poem, (3) the sudden entrance of declamatory passages, (4) his realistic touches, by which suggestions in a poem are incorporated into the accompaniment, and (5) rarity of slips in the matter of just accentuation of syllables. This is especially remarkable in a song writer who relies so much on pure melody. The expansion of the Lied into its present scope and stature, and the fulfilment of its high destiny as an art form, is the work of Schubert above all others. Schubert was not a mere song writer; he established the form of the Lied.21

Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (1809-1847) is the oldest and the most conservative of the German song writers born in the nineteenth century. His songs only occasionally show him at his most distinguished, and his reputation is not that of a writer of the Lied. Some of his more lyrical songs suffer from complacently ambling rhythms. He was not in sympathy with Schubert's music. The only song he wrote which might almost be by Schubert is the simple, charming setting of Heine's Gruss. It was probably a lack of vivid

20Ibid.

21Bauer, op. cit., p. 345.
response to words that prevented Mendelssohn from "...becoming a great song-writer; in general he was more stirred by scenery and by a picturesquely dramatic situation than by poetry."  

The vogue of song writing that Schubert inaugurated continued, especially in Germany. Schumann, Brahms, and later Hugo Wolf wrote first class songs during the nineteenth century. Robert Schumann (1810-1856), through his sympathy, habit, style, and influence, proved to be one of the leaders of the romantic movement. By temperament and choice he identified himself with this movement, one in which both poetry and music tended more and more to become a personal revelation rather than a criticism of life. The romantic ideal in music attained self-consciousness in Schumann's hands. Schubert did not call himself a romanticist and was not completely aware of the tendencies of his work; however, Schumann, who was a critical thinker and self-analyst, molded and colored his music in accord with certain definite poetic conceptions received from the romantic writers. He aimed directly at fixing certain progressive principles in the creative and critical thought of his time. He was undoubtedly influenced by Schubert, and his work is a continuation of the art song. The spontaneity of his songs came from only one source, his own genius. His tunes have not quite the variety and flexibility of those of Schubert. They are usually squarer and more short-breathed, but they have a strongly personal character of their own. He had a peculiar power, characteristic of the nineteenth century, of putting a world of emotion into a few bars.  

\[22\text{Stevens, op. cit., p. 245.}\]

\[23\text{Ibid.}\]
Schumann's career as a song writer began in 1840, the year in which he married. By that year he had already written most of his piano music, and his style had broadened from a capricious manner to a more sustained lyricism. This lyricism was made even warmer and more impulsive than before by the impact of the poetry and excitement of writing for the human voice. He wrote musical settings for the lyrics of the German poets, Goethe, Ruckert, and Heine, and also for the English poetry of Byron, Burns, and Moore. He wrote about a hundred and fifty songs in this year which he called his "year of song." 24

The strongly individual character of Schumann's songs is more easily felt than defined. There is an interweaving of the vocal and piano parts, seen at its simplest in Der Nussbaum; it often occurs more subtly—the voice entering in the middle of a phrase or, more frequently, ceasing before the end, and leaving the piano to finish it. 24 Gradually Schumann struck a balance between voice and piano in which both parts are of genuine importance; "...the result might be called a duet for piano and voice." 25 The vocal parts are imbedded in an accompaniment which has the pianistic quality of his best piano music.

On many grounds Schumann can be regarded as having widely extended the conception of the Lied. His example was to encourage later composers to regard no lyric poetry as too subtle for musical treatment. Schumann's music provided a closer attention to the minutiae of declamation than had been attempted before this time. Syncopation and suspension provided possibilities

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24 Ibid., p. 247.
unsuspected before even by Schubert. A polyphonic element new to modern
song was used by Schumann in which the role of interpreter often passes
to the accompaniment while the voice declaims the words. He gave increased
prominence to the opening and closing instrumental symphonies which became
no mere formal introductions or conclusions, but an integral part of the
whole conception of the Lied. Another contribution to this form by Schumann
were short, interrupted phrases in contrast to the developed Schubertian
melodies. Schumann has been described as "the foremost literary champion of
romanticism, he nevertheless considered romanticism not a destroyer but a
fulfiller of the classic law, and labored with all his might to revive an
appreciation of the great masters of the past." 26

After Schubert and Schumann, the art song was destined to attract the
serious attention of almost every nineteenth century composer. However, the
Leider tradition of the nineteenth century culminates in the works of Johannes
Brahms and Hugo Wolf, who adopted opposite solutions of the conflict of lit-
erary and musical values found in all song writing. Brahms's was on the
musical line but derived from Schubert; Wolf's was on more literary values
which emerged in Schumann. The songs of Richard Strauss and Gustav Mahler
show the tradition in a glorious decline.

Next to Richard Wagner, the most conspicuous German composer in the
last half of the nineteenth century was Johannes Brahms (1833-1897). He
may be called equally noted in all the classes—symphony, chamber, choral,
and piano and song composition. Brahms was a master in the use of the
smaller forms, particularly the art song and the piano pieces. His ideal

26 Dickinson, op. cit., p. 228.
was an absolute perfection in the utilization of his materials. This ideal was a real part of his personality and does not necessarily indicate a servile, artificial attempt to imitate classical gesture and intonation. He felt that the one facet which romanticism had left unexplored was that of exploiting its new expressive materials for the purpose of achieving a new perfection in the great forms and, in this way, reach an even greater expressive perfection. 27 Brahms has been called an imitator of Schumann in general mold and structure; he follows the method of Schumann in giving about equal importance to voice and piano part. He approached the composition of songs from a predominantly musical point of view, but did not have Schumann's literary background. His works were deeply affected by Schubert also. However, he could not command so wide a range of emotional expression as Schubert, and the words of his songs were not often taken from the greatest poetry. His chief concerns were beauty of melody, of rhythm, and of musical texture, all of which can be found in his songs. Like that of Schubert, his word-setting was careless at times, but his musical sensitiveness many times enabled him to rise above words that were of no great distinction in themselves. Brahms was very interested in the folk-music of Germany, but he also inherited a love for phrases of unusual length from Schubert. The influence of folk-song is found more in his earlier than in his later works. All through his life he retained his interest in the simple strophic song. He wrote Der Schmied, which has simplicity and directness of a folk-song, though its idiom is purely personal.

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27 Finney, op. cit., pp. 505-506.
The melodic invention of Brahms's songs as a whole impresses one more than anything else. His style does not have quite the supreme spontaneity and variety of Schubert but it is beautifully fashioned, is spacious in line, and is flexible in rhythm. Generally his tunes are more far-flung melodically and more varied rhythmically than the average German folk-song. His solo songs with piano accompaniment number about two hundred, sixty or more of which are in folk-song style. To some critics his songs are of the first order, others disparage them. It may be that with time critics will say, "Brahms, more than any other composer of the nineteenth century, attained neither a perfect classicism nor a perfect Romanticism....but an almost perfect balance between the two."28 Most critics agree that his songs secure for him a position with Schubert and Schumann in the great "triumvirate of art-song composers."29 He did carry forward the form which gave Germany fame for her Lieder.

Among the many Lieder writers at the end of the nineteenth century, Hugo Wolf (1860-1903) is important. His art probably marked the final term of that tendency that began with Schubert, in which the song composer was striving to interpret the text with penetrating directness and expressive nuance. Wolf did not aim at general beauty only, but at characteristic beauty. A melody by Wolf would not be suited for service to any poem except the one to which it is set. Each musical phrase is molded over the poetic phrase so that it seems completely inevitable. Yet the whole song gives an impression of logical design and proportioned artistic structure. His poetic

28 Ibid., p. 506.
29 Ibid., p. 507.
feeling was very acute; he had a high endowment in respect to melody and also had a complete mastery of the technique of composition. Of his German predecessors, Schumann is probably the one to whom he owed the most; it was Schumann who had led towards more sensitive accentuation of words and a more subtle blend between piano and voice. Wolf developed both of these. The result, however, has been something wholly individual, and should not be judged by standards of earlier song writers, but of the greatest value for its own interest and for ways in which it pointed to the future.

Richard Strauss is rated among the foremost song writers of this time also. Among his Lieder there are a few of the highest order in respect to beauty of melody and harmony and deep poetic insight. Most of these belong to the early part of his career.

Other composers contributed to the strain of the art song in the nineteenth century, and their ideas were used by those who followed them into the twentieth century. However, to Schubert, Schumann, and Brahms goes the distinction of being the musical geniuses who created for the world the art song of Germany known as the Lied.

30 Dickinson, op. cit., p. 348.
31 Encyclopaedia Britannica, op. cit., p. 989.
32 Dickinson, op. cit., p. 345.
CONCLUSION

The art song appeared as one of the most loveable innovations of the Romantic period. The Lied conveys the modern conception of ideal song. To Germany goes the distinction of being the only country in which the development of this art song can be orderly and progressively traced, and the nineteenth century was its most prolific period.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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