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Goethe the Musician and his influence on German Song Transcript

Date: Friday, 20 June 2008 - 12:00AM



GOETHE THE MUSICIAN AND HIS INFLUENCE ON GERMAN SONG

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It has become fashionable to label Goethe unmusical. In April 1816 he failed to acknowledge Schubert's gift of 16 settings of his own poems which included such masterpieces as 'Gretchen am Spinnrade', 'Meeresstille', 'Der Fischer' and 'Erlkönig'. He did not warm to Beethoven when they met in 1812. He preferred Zelter and Reichardt to composers that posterity has deemed greater. And he wrote in his autobiography, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*: 'Das Auge war vor allen anderen das Organ, womit ich die Welt erfasste' ('It was through the visual, above all other senses, that I comprehended the world') - a statement which seems to be confirmed by his indefatigable study of natural phenomena and his delight in art and architecture, in seeing. Lynceus's line at the end of *Faust*, 'Zum Sehen geboren, zum Schauen bestellt' ('I was born for seeing, employed to watch') has an unmistakably autobiographical ring. Goethe was, above all a visual being, an Augenmensch.,.

He was also, from his earliest days in Frankfurt, intensely musical. His father brought a Giraffe, an upright Hammerklavier, for 60 Gulden in 1769, played the lute and flute and occasionally made music with friends - there is an amusing passage in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* which describes his father playing the lute, "die er länger stimmte, als er darauf spielte" ("which he spent longer tuning than playing")! His mother, who was more artistic, played the piano and sang German and Italian arias with great enthusiasm. Goethe and his sister Cornelia started piano lessons in 1763, and although the pieces he learnt were probably simple dances, marches and songs, he would have been able to supply his own thorough-bass, since the scores of the period rarely contained written-out harmonies. It was during this early Frankfurt period that his interest in opera was kindled. He attended many performances of French and Italian operas, and in his early teens wrote a libretto, *La sposa rapita*, that he later burned. But the overwhelming musical experience of his youth was the visit to Frankfurt in 1763 of the 6 year-old Mozart. The 14 year-old Goethe was smitten, and his adoration lasted till he died some 60 years later.

While studying in Strasbourg he began to learn the cello ("Ich kann das Violoncello spielen, aber nicht stimmen" ("I can play the cello but not tune it")), he wrote with unaccustomed modesty. In Alsace he gathered folksongs, roaming the countryside like an anterior Kodály or Bartók. A new world of music was thus opened up to him: folksong, with its "alte Melodien, wie sie Gott erschaffen" ("ancient melodies, created by God"), as he wrote to Herder, who had originally aroused his interest in the Volkslied. And it was to Herder that he sent *12 Lieder des Volkes* - the first collection of German Volkslieder to be published and a pioneering effort by Goethe in a field that blossomed during the Romantic period. His concept, incidentally, of what a song ought to be - strophic with a simple melody - was almost certainly influenced by his interest in folksong.

Back in Frankfurt as a lawyer, he became increasingly interested in the relationship between music and poetry. He greatly admired Gluck and now requested him to set his own poetry - Gluck declined. Goethe was also keen to find composers to set the Singspiele that he was now beginning to write. He persuaded Johann André to write the music for *Erwin und Elmire*, and though André's music has long been forgotten, Mozart's setting of a poem from the play, 'Das Veilchen', features in every Lieder singer's repertoire, as does Grieg's 'Ihr verblühet, süße Rosen' from Opus 48. And so it is with his other Singspiele, composed by the likes of André, Kayser, Corona Schröter and Reichardt: their settings have been forgotten, but individual songs from the works have been rescued from oblivion by Schubert ('Erlkönig' from *Die Fischerin*, 'Liebe schwärmt auf allen Wegen' from *Claudine von Villa Bella*), Wolf ('Es war ein fauler Schäfer' from *Jery und Bätely*), Mozart and Grieg ('Das Veilchen' and 'Ihr verblühet, süße Rosen' from *Erwin und Elmire*, Brahms ('Es rauschet das Wasser' from *Jery und Bätely* and 'Serenade' from *Claudine von Villa Bella*, and many other celebrated composers.

His ambitions as a librettist came to nothing, chiefly because he failed to find a composer of genius. These works, however, are delightful pieces. As Hugo von Hofmannsthal wrote in his Introduction to a volume of Goethe's *Singspiele*: "Der Geist der Poesie weht auch hier unmittelbar uns an." ("Here too the spirit of poetry breathes on us"). And one is left with the feeling that had Goethe collaborated with composers of the calibre of Mozart and Richard Strauss, these Singspiele would now be part of the operatic repertoire.

Goethe's contribution to the musical life of Weimar, where he was summoned in 1775 by Duke Karl August, cannot be over-estimated. Though Weimar's musical horizons were narrow by cosmopolitan standards, there was intellectual stimulus in abundance. Anna Amalia, the Dowager Duchess, had chosen Wieland as tutor for her son, and it was Wieland who had proposed making Weimar the intellectual and artistic capital of the German-speaking world. The importation of Goethe was the second step towards that goal, and it was Goethe who recommended that Herder be appointed the following year as Court Chaplain. Goethe's association with drama and music began early on at Weimar and assumed many forms. He himself was impresario, author, director, business manager and actor. In 1783 he founded an Italian Ensemble, called Die Bellomsche Theatergesellschaft. "Ich bin immer für die Opera Buffa der Italiener," ('I've always been in favour of Italian opera buffa.') he wrote to Kayser, having heard examples of the genre in Bellomo's theatre. And one of the reasons for undertaking the Italian Journey was to discover more about Italian music. The journal is peppered with Goethe's comments on Italian folksong, which he experienced in Venice and Rome, on church music which he heard regularly in the Sistine Chapel, on opera buffa, particularly by Cimarosa, and on opera seria, which he described as an "Ungeheuer ohne Lebenskraft und Saft" ("A monster devoid of life and vitality").

He was Director of the Hoftheater from 1791 to 1817, and mounted productions by an astonishing variety of composers, including Mozart, Gluck, Beethoven, Dittersdorf, Paisiello, Cimarosa, Cherubini, Boiledieu, Paër, Spontini and others. In particular he championed the operas of Mozart, when it was not entirely fashionable to do so. During his Directorship, Mozart was performed on no fewer than 310 evenings - *Figaro* 20 times, *Die Entführung* 49, *Don Giovanni* 68 and *Die Zauberflöte* 82. So fascinated was he by *The Magic Flute* that he wrote a continuation of it: all of Schikaneder's characters reappear, Tamino and Pamina are married, but their child has been confined to a coffin by the Queen of the Night's magic. The coffin, however, is continually carried around by bearers in the young pair's apartment, for it has been prophesied: "Solange ihr wandelt, lebt das Kind" ("The child shall live, as long as you wander") The bearers' loyalty is finally rewarded, the child recovers and the libretto ends in celebration. Redemption through striving seems to be the idea.

Music was to Goethe an essential part of life, and above all, perhaps, it brought solace. It is music which saves Faust from suicide, music which soothes Werther in his bleakest moments, music which restores both Tasso and Wilhelm Meister. The vast majority of vocal music in Goethe's time was sacred, and he was convinced that religion could not dispense with music, since it awoke in man higher feelings, what he called a "Vorgeschnack der Seligkeit". Among his favourite sacred works were Bach's chorales, Mozart and Haydn masses and Handel's *Messiah*. His own musical soirées always began with sacred music, and Goethe's only attempt at composition was, significantly, a setting of a religious text. He himself was nothing more than a competent player, but he was convinced that music could only have a beneficial effect on humanity. Or as he put it in a letter to Pleyel, dated August 1822: "Wer Musik nicht liebt, verdient nicht, ein Mensch genannt zu werden; wer sie nur liebt, ist erst ein halber Mensch; wer sie aber treibt, ist ein ganzer Mensch" ("He who does not love music does not deserve to be called a human being; he who merely loves it is only half a human being; but he who makes music is a whole human being.")

Eyewitness accounts of great men and women, though not 100% reliable, are always tantalizing. We would, of course, all love to see Goethe here on stage, and check for ourselves whether Tischbein got it right when he painted the great man in the Campagna. But we can't, and as there are no recordings of his voice either, we have to rely on the accounts of his contemporaries. I've chosen a little known passage in which the singer Eduard Genast tells of the time he was invited to sing before Goethe; and as he quotes Goethe's actual words, I shall read them in German, so that you stand a better chance of capturing his essence. You have the translation in front of you:

[...] wahrscheinlich wollte Goethe sich überzeugen, ob ich Fortschritte im Vortrag, der bei ihm die Hauptsache war, gemacht habe. Ich sang ihm zuerst *Jägers Abendlied*, von Reichardt komponiert. Er sass dabei im Lehnstuhl und bedeckte sich mit der Hand die Augen. Gegen Ende des Liedes sprang er auf und rief: **Das Lied singst du schlecht!** Dann ging er vor sich hinsummend eine Weile im Zimmer auf und ab und fuhr dann fort, indem er vor mich hintrat und mich mit seinen wunderschönen Augen anblitzte: **Der erste Vers sowie der dritte müssen markig, mit einer Art Wildheit vorgetragen werden, der zweite und vierte weicher; denn da tritt eine andere Empfindung ein. Siehst du so!** (indem er scharf markierte: **Da ramm! da ramm! da ramm! da ramm!** Dabei bezeichnete er, zugleich mit beiden Armen auf und ab fahrend, das Tempo und sang dies **Da ramm!** in einem tiefen Tone. Ich wusste nun, was er wollte, und auf sein Verlangen wiederholte ich das Lied. Er war zufrieden und sagte: **So ist es besser! Nach und nach wird es dir schon klar werden, wie man solche Strophenlieder vorzutragen hat!**

Goethe probably wished to convince himself whether I had made progress in the art of declamation, which was for him crucial. First of all I sang him *Jägers Abendlied* in the setting by Reichardt. He sat in his arm-chair and covered his eyes with his hands.

Towards the end of the song he leapt up and cried out: "You are singing the song badly!" He then walked up and down the room for a while, humming to himself, and then, stepping up to me and flashing at me his wonderful eyes, he continued: "The first verse, as well as the third, must be delivered vigorously with a sort of wildness, whereas the second and fourth must be softer, since they represent a different type of feeling. Like this, you see! And he indicated the rhythm: Da ramm! da ramm! da ramm! da ramm! At the same time he illustrated the tempo by moving both his arms up and down, and sang this 'da ramm!' in a deep voice. I now knew what he wanted, and at his request I repeated the song. He was content and said: "That's better! You'll gradually come to realize how strophic songs must be performed!"

Several things are clear from this account, not least that Herr Genast wished to inform posterity of his own talent. More importantly, though, it shows Goethe's approach to Lieder singing. Given that throughout his writings on music, and especially in the voluminous Zelter correspondence, he stresses that in Lieder the accompaniment should be subservient to the poem, that there should be no word-painting in the music and that songs should be strophic and not through-composed, Genast's eyewitness account of his rehearsal shows us the importance Goethe attached to a singer's ability to vary his delivery and explore nuances - in other words to relish the words and interpret the poem.

No other writer, except perhaps Shakespeare, has had such a profound influence on song. Goethe attracted composers from a vast array of different nations, and it is to a great extent because of their settings of his poems and plays that his name is now known throughout the civilised world.

There is a musicality about his verse that has always attracted composers - even philosophical poems, like *Gesang der Geister über den Wassern* tempted them - Schubert, for example, set it twice. Whether his poetry was life-affirming and exultant, anguished and introspective, religious or irreverent; whether he was writing wise epigrams or wicked satire, occasional or nonsense verse, or pornography, he was always writing musical poetry that attracted song-composers, like the candle-flame of his 'Selige Sehnsucht' attracted the moth. He could imitate the great classical writers of Greece and Rome, the Persian lyrics of Hafis and the simplicity of folksong. Like Picasso, he was continually renewing himself and reinventing himself right into old age.

And it's not just the variety of his work set by composers that astonishes, it's also the cosmopolitan enormity of the response: Verdi and Dallapiccola from Italy, Macdowell and Ives from America, Viana da Mota from Portugal, Berlioz and Massenet from France, Tomaschek from Czechoslovakia, Mussorgsky and Tchaikovsky from Russia, Schoeck from Switzerland, Grieg from Norway - the list could be extended to cover countries from all over the globe.

But although Goethe has been prodigiously set, his own views on word-setting were always surprisingly conservative. In opera, he insisted that the libretto should always serve the music - something that is abundantly clear in his letters to those composers, such as Kayser and Reichardt, who set the Singspiele that he wrote for the Court at Weimar. In 1787, for example, he wrote to Kayser that he had learnt in Italy 'to subordinate poetry to music' - 'die Poesie der Musik zu subordinieren'. In matters of song, however, he was adamant that music should merely serve the poetry - which is why, perhaps, he failed to acknowledge Schubert's gift, in April 1816, of 16 settings of his own poems. Many reasons have been adduced for the great man's failure to respond to these wonderful songs. Were they actually performed for him? And if so, was the performance adequate? Josef von Spaun, at the end of his somewhat cloying letter that accompanied the gift, stated that 'the pianist must not lack facility or expression'. Perhaps no such pianist could be found, perhaps he botched (or rolled) those quaver octaves in 'Erkönig'. Or did the songs arrive at a time when Goethe was unusually busy - after all, he enjoyed a huge international reputation and received a daily deluge of letters and visits. Did the sycophantic tone of Spaun's letter displease him? Or was he simply in a bad mood?

The most likely explanation for Goethe's silence must be sought elsewhere. He was not unmusical, but his concept of what constituted a song was profoundly different from Schubert's. Isolated in Weimar, which he mockingly called his 'Fischumgebung' ('fish environment'), he relied very much on Carl Friedrich von Zelter to keep him informed about the musical world of Berlin and beyond, and Zelter was essentially a conservative. In a letter to him, dated 2 May 1820, Goethe expounds his belief that the accompaniment should not seek to illustrate the imagery of a poem:

Die reinste und höchste Malerei in der Musik ist die, welche du auch ausübst, es kommt darauf an, den Hörer in die Stimmung zu versetzen, welche das Gedicht angibt [...]. Töne durch Töne zu malen: zu donnern, zu schmettern, zu plätschern und zu patschen ist detestabel.

'The purest and noblest form of painting in music', he writes, 'is the one which you also practise - it's a question of transporting the listener into the mood of the poem. To depict sounds by sounds: to thunder, warble, ripple and splash is abominable.' ['it

detestabel']!!

And in the *Annals* of 1801 he makes it clear that through-composed songs lose their lyrical character by what he calls a 'falsche Teilnahme am Einzelnen' ('a misplaced concern with detail'). Nor are these isolated examples - throughout his writings on music, and especially in the voluminous Zelter correspondence, he stresses that in Lieder the accompaniment should be subservient to the poem. Schubert's rarely is, and 'the misplaced concern with detail' is everywhere apparent: the chirping crickets of *Der Einsame*, the blind boy's tapping stick of *Der blinde Knabe*, the spinning-wheel of *Gretchen am Spinnrade*, the brook throughout *Die schöne Müllerin*, the midnight tolling of St Mark's bell in *Gondelfahrer*, the call of the nightingale in *Ganymed*, the posthorn from *Die Post*, the wheeling crow of *Die Krähe*, the galloping quavers of *An Schwager Kronos* - all this would have drawn from Goethe a withering 'Detestabel!'

Let us look more closely at the package of 16 songs and the accompanying sycophantic letter that was sent to Goethe in April 1816.

'Ew. Excellenz, Der Unterzeichnete wagt es, Ew. Excellenz

durch gegenwärtige Zeilen einige Augenblicke Ihrer so

kostbaren Zeit zu rauben, und nur die Hoffnung, dass

beiliegende Liedersammlung Ew. Excellenz vielleicht keine

ganz unliebe Gabe sein dürfte, kann ihn vor sich selbst

seiner grossen Freiheit wegen entschuldigen.'

('Your Excellency, The undersigned ventures to steal several

moments of Your Excellency's such valuable time, and only

the hope that the enclosed collection of songs might not be

an entirely unpleasant gift, can excuse him for taking so

great a liberty.')

At any rate, Goethe never replied. Had he studied the songs or heard the songs, would they have found favour? Some, I think, would: the strophic ones such as

Nähe des Geliebten, Der Fischer, Der König in Thule and, above all **Heidenröslein**.

Others, such as **Gretchen am Spinnrade, Erbkönig**, and **Meeresstille** would almost certainly have drawn from him that withering epithet 'detestabel':

It is not surprising that Goethe, who enjoyed an international reputation, did not have the time to concentrate on Schubert's letter and enclosure, when he might well have received a hundred letters from unknown individuals on the very same day. As he explained to Eckermann on 21 January 1827:

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Ich habe große Herren gekannt, denen man viel zusendete. Diese machten sich gewisse Formulare und Redensarten, womit sie jedes erwiderten, und so schrieben sie Brief zu Hunderten, die sich alle gleich und alle Phrase waren. In mir aber lag dieses nie. Wenn ich nicht jemanden etwas besonderes und Gehöriges sagen konnte, wie es in der jedesmaligen Sache lag, so schrieb ich lieber gar nicht. Oberflächliche Redensarten hielt ich für unwürdig, und so ist es denn gekommen, daß ich manchem wackern Manne, dem ich gerne geschrieben hätte, nicht antworten konnte.

I've known great men to whom people sent many letters. They then made up certain formulae and figures of speech with which they answered everyone, and so wrote hundreds of letters which were all the same - empty phrases. I could never do that. If I could not say something special and meaningful to the particular point at issue, I would rather not answer at all, that is why I

could not answer many a good fellow to whom I would gladly have written.

(Johann Peter Eckermann: Gespräche mit Goethe, 21 January 1827.)

Nine years later, in May 1825, Schubert again approached the poet, sending him through his publisher, Anton Diabelli, two copies of three songs printed on satinated paper with gold borders: 'An Schwager Kronos', 'An Mignon' and 'Ganymed'. The parcel arrived and Goethe's secretary, C. F. John, entered in the diary - presumably at Goethe's dictation: 'Sendung von Schubert aus Wien: Von meinen Liedern Compositionen.' ('Consignment from Schubert [*sic*] from Vienna: compositions of my poems.').

Goethe, it seems, finally learned to appreciate Schubert songs. In 1830, two years before his death, the great man of German letters heard Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient give a performance of 'Erlkönig', at the end of which he kissed her on the brow, saying: 'I heard the piece once before and it did not appeal at all, but sung like that, the whole work becomes a visible picture.'

I would like to end this talk by discussing in some detail 4 poems that we shall be hearing during the City of London Festival: 'Gretchen am Spinnrade', 'Prometheus' and 'Kennst du das Land' and 'Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh'.

Goethe's *Sturm und Drang* poems, such as 'An Schwager Kronos' and **Prometheus** must have appealed mightily to anyone living in the repressed atmosphere of Metternich's Vienna. These poems, written in the early 1770s, express a reaction against rationalism, a reliance on individuality and an exaltation of freedom that went straight to Schubert's heart. In 'Prometheus' Goethe changes myth to suit his own purpose: whereas in Greek mythology it was Hercules who rescued Prometheus from his horrible fate, in Goethe it is - typically - Prometheus who relies on his own strength for salvation. Schubert wrote his song for bass voice, and matched the almost contemptuous tone of Goethe's original with a setting of majestic power and Wagnerian scale, that is as much declamation as song - an astonishing achievement so early in the development of the Lied.

Schubert's **Gretchen am Spinnrade** sets a scene from *Faust*. At this stage in the play Gretchen has just met Faust, is smitten, returns to her room, sits down at the spinning-wheel and expresses her rapture in what has become one of the most anthologized love poems in the German language. The very shape of the poem on the page suggests unbridled passion, in particular the short lines, the obsessive repetitions at the passage beginning 'Sein hoher Gang', when she describes the man she is infatuated with. The first 4 lines are end-stopped, as Goethe cranks up her feelings, as it were, only to release the tension in the enjambement of the next lines: 'Und seiner Rede/Zauberfluss'. The absence of a comma allows her pent-up emotions to overflow on the very word ('Zauberfluss') that describes the magical flow of his speech. There are 7 possessive pronouns in 8 lines: sein, sein, seines, seiner, sein, sein, as though the *é*assonance were hammering inside her head. The wonderfully expressive comma at 'Und ach, sein Kuss' compels her to reflect for a moment on the ecstasy of his kiss. The last two verses are even more frenetic, and Goethe's original version even more sensual: 'Mein Schoss, Gott!/Drängt sich nach ihm hin' ('My womb, God!/Yearns for him'). Most erotic of all is the final line: 'An seinen Küssen vergehen sollt!' - where Goethe's use of 'vergehen' implies orgasm, sexual climax. The poem inspired in the seventeen year-old composer music of astonishing passion and psychological probing: the spinning-wheel whirrs, Gretchen's foot works the treadle, and as her agitation increases the wheel accelerates and rises in pitch from D minor to E minor to F. D minor returns as she repeats the opening refrain; but when she recalls Faust's kiss, the pitch rises ecstatically to B flat and a screaming dissonance. Deep in the bass the dominant pedal sounds, as she returns distractedly to her work.

Goethe in 1774 was already a celebrity and confident of his own powers. *Werther* had been rapturously received and there seemed nothing that he could not accomplish. Then came the summons in 1775 from Carl August, the 18 year-old ruler of the small Duchy of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach, to join the cultured circle of the court. Soon after he had received the invitation he wrote an impromptu poem in his diary under the heading '15 Januar 1775, aufm Zürichersee' and later revised it for publication in 1789, giving it the title **Auf dem See**. The poem, on the surface, is about rowing on Lake Zurich, but there is a deeper symbolism at work that reflects Goethe's uncertainty of mind. The initial iambic rhythm conveys the pull of the oars, and the harmony he feels with nature is expressed in the opening two lines. The peaceful mood does not last; the iambs cease, he rests on his oars and, to a new trochaic metre, reflects on his life. The 'golden dreams' refer to his love for Lili Schönemann, to whom he was engaged but now wished to shun. He resolves to forget the dream, and instead embrace the present. To a quicker rhythm he now rows ashore (wonderfully expressed by Schubert in the new 2/4 time), and glimpses the ripening fruit in the morning light. 'Ripening fruit' ('Reifende Frucht'), given the abundance of imagery in the first stanza connected with nurture ('saug/suckle', 'Busen/breast', 'wiegen/cradle' and, in the original version, the umbilical chord: 'Ich saug an meiner Nabelschnur/Nun Nahrung aus der Welt...') implies a new maturity as he faces the future and the new challenge of Weimar.

1795. **Meeres Stille** (Schubert) was first published, with 'Glückliche Fahrt', in Schiller's *Musen Almanach* for 1796. The two poems have always been printed together, since Goethe clearly wished to display the contrasting ideas of stillness and movement. They can also be seen as exercises in the use of trochaic and dactylic metres - the incessant trochees (long/short) of 'Meeres Stille' reflecting the stillness of the ocean, as the sailor is becalmed. Both poems refer to a voyage that Goethe made in 1787 on his Italian Journey, when he crossed the sea from Naples to Sicily, and experienced a flat calm (perfectly caught by no fewer than 32 semibreve chords in Schubert's great song), and frightening storms.

The poems come from the novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*; rarely read today, it contains some of the most memorable lyrics in the German language, sung by the mysterious Harper and Mignon, his daughter through an incestuous relationship with his own sister. The Harper, having fled to Germany, is devoured by guilt and despair. Mignon is abducted to Italy, where she yearns for her homeland and human love.

That is the theme of **Mignon**, which has tempted many of the great Lieder composers, including Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann and Liszt. Some commentators claim that Wolf's setting is impossibly sophisticated for a thirteen year-old girl to sing - which was basically Goethe's criticism of Beethoven's setting. But the poem is sophisticated too: the progression from general to specific longing; the use of Fremdwörter to convey Mignon's longing for her 'foreign' homeland; the subtle assonance of 'stehn und sehn'; the impassioned enjambements of the refrain; the insistent sibilants of the final phrase and, most wonderful of all, the sudden open-vowelled pleading of 'Vater' that contrast with the closed vowels of 'Beschützer' and 'Geliebter'. Wolf matches all this. The beautiful plangent melody gradually grows more exalted until in the final verse G flat shifts to F sharp minor, tremolandi thunder out in both hands, and the music, ineffably overwrought, mirrors Mignon's ecstatic, unattainable vision of her homeland beyond the Alps.