

Eric Sams

Notes on a Magic Horn

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"Monsieur, are you not lettered?" "Yes, yes, he teaches boys the horn-book"
(Love's Labour Lost)

The "Olifant Horn" carved from an elephant's tusk was a recognised mediaeval instrument of music.
(Forsyth: *Orchestration*)

Everyone knows about that famous early 19th century collection of folksongs, *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, with its magical evocation of German Romanticism in such typical lines as

Allwo dort die schönen Trompeten blasen,
Da ist mein Haus, mein Haus von grünem Rasen!

in which the doomed soldier sings of his green turf grave where the shining trumpets sound. But in fact it is not a collection of folksongs at all; even its title-poem is French in origin, not German; and that couplet looks not merely untypical but unauthentic.

A magic horn certainly sounds as if it could easily lull its hearers into a state of spellbound submission, by tuning the mind to a preposterous key. Then one can believe anything, for example that real soldiers in a real world ever went round warbling about their green turf graves. One can even accept without question that the text of Mahler's Fourth Symphony actually is, as the *Wunderhorn* describes it, a "Bavarian folksong" which it resembles about as closely as Gray's *Elegy* resembles a Buckinghamshire folksong collected by Cecil Sharp in Stoke Poges. Perhaps it is time for a counterblast. After all, one main purpose of a horn is to give the game away. And whoever can discover how this most potent magic still works today, after nearly two centuries, will find a very powerful instrument in his hands.

A few facts may not come amiss. Clemens Brentano (1778-1842) and his friend-later his brother-in-law-Ludwig Achim von Arnim (1781-1831) had already written copiously and travelled widely before they settled in Heidelberg, which then became the matrix of a new Romantic Renaissance. Brentano was a sensitive lyricist and romancer who collected old manuscripts, chap-books, and early editions of 16th- and 17th-century German poets. Arnim was a far less inspired novelist and versifier who collected "folksongs". Their joint three-volume 1250-page compilation *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (so called for reasons which appear below) was, published in Heidelberg between 1805 and 1808, with the significant subtitle (which gave Brentano himself some doubts) "Alte deutsche Lieder". Earlier anthologies had been edifying, literary and eclectic: the poetry of all nations. The *Wunderhorn* was deliberately rousing, popular and national; the art of the folk. It sought to sound out the German soul which though deeply divided by class, creed and dialect as well as by the several centres and systems of government was yet profoundly united by a national heritage of art. Or so Arnim passionately believed.

His essay on folksong appended to vol. i of the *Wunderhorn* proclaimed a new age of gold, attainable by enriching the "reading classes" with the wealth of folk-poetry still buried in native soil. However, his search for literature among the illiterate proved predictably unproductive. Despite his attempts to cross-fertilize culture with agriculture, poets and peasants remained in two different classes. So the frustrated poet of his own folk seems to have become his own folk-poet. Thus we know from correspondence that he "completely altered" the text of *Knabe und Veilchen*. He describes those verses as "mündlich" (oral), but they look very like the original utterance of Christian Overbeck, in a salon poem first published in 1777 and set by Johann Schulz two years later. It seems that Arnim excised half of it and turned the rest into a supposedly traditional boy-meets-blossom dialogue on the lines of Goethe's *Heidenröslein* of 1771. If so, Arnim was attempting to make Overbeck's cultivated violet revert to the wild state by cutting and transplanting it-an aim not merely disingenuous but perverse.

Again, one of the best-known of all German "folksongs" is *Schnitter Tod*. Its *Wunderhorn* text is a revised version of a song in Brentano's novel *Godwi* (1801), where it is said to derive from a Latin hymn. Perhaps there was some written German source for what the *Wunderhorn* itself described as a "Katholisches Kirchenlied"; but Latin verse scarcely suggests the accents of vox populi.

So the national Golden Treasury contains at least two pieces which were specially coined, not to say forged, for the occasion. Many others ring faintly false; not all those marked "oral" will bear examination. We begin to suspect that a folksong can be defined for this purpose as any old poem collected or contributed by Arnim or Brentano. The former's own collected works actually include a number of *Wunderhorn* verses, beginning with the amazingly artificial title-poem-which is flagrantly not

folk but fake. All this helps to explain some further puzzles: for example, how Kapellmeister Reichardt (to whom Arnim's folksong essay is addressed) could possibly have composed a setting of a *Wunderhorn* poem (*Der Falke*) some 30 years *before* it was recovered from "an oral source". Presumably this and other collections were really just recollections. In the same way, a diligent but uninstructed researcher in rural Germany and Austria could even today unearth a lot of folk-poems by Goethe and folk-melodies by Schubert.



Such an oral tradition, even if it spoke in good faith, would soon stand convicted out of its own mouth. And only about a third of the *Wunderhorn* poems are said to be "mündlich". The rest avowedly stem from printed sources; and many bear names that are now well-known, such as Graf Friedrich von Spee (1591-1635), Martin Opitz (1597-1639) and Simon Dach (1605-59). Some of these poets, especially von Spee, owe something of their renown to Brentano. But their art-poetry is the authentic mode of the *Wunderhorn*; its folk-poetry often has the air of a crook-transposition.

This effect was duly noted by such contemporary critics as Johann Voss. But an anthology addressed to, and approved by, "Sr. Excellenz des Herrn Geheimerath von Göthe" was already beyond criticism. Even stronger forces were also at work. There is a profound human need to seek roots in a remote past. The small ships of William the Conqueror, or the Founding Fathers, managed to find room for almost everyone's ancestors. So every simple ditty is deemed to be folksong until it is proved not to be innocent. In general, the *Wunderhorn* not only went unchallenged but is still universally acclaimed, despite its ringing false notes. Thus even the latest edition of the standard history of German literature in English still calls it "a collection of *Volkslieder*", and hopefully guesses that Schubert sought inspiration in its pages. In fact there is no evidence that he either sought or found any. Who did; and why? Reference books are silent or misleading. The hunt has to begin with the *Wunderhorn* itself.

It should have aroused many an echo in Weber, as in *Oberon*; and in fact five of his songs clearly hail from that source, though they have made no very vivid appeal to posterity. The earliest really successful settings are surely those of Mendelssohn (who may well have been told about the poems by Goethe himself). They are the musical equivalents of old woodcuts depicting Death the Reaper, or Love the Huntsman; square in form, sinuous in line. In one of them the composer perceives more readily than the *Wunderhorn* editors that the text as there presented is a garbled conflation of two different sources. There is some evidence that Mendelssohn talked to Schumann about song-writing and song texts in 1840, which was the year of the latter's delectable *Wunderhorn* duet, *Wenn ich ein Vöglein wär*. In 1846 the poems were at last reprinted. Perhaps this second edition was the source of Robert Franz's single setting. His song writing interested Schumann, whom he visited in 1847. He may have mentioned the *Wunderhorn* on that occasion, or even presented a copy. At least something reminded Schumann of it in that year, when he incorporated the duet into his opera *Genoveva*. He also seems to have glanced through the volume again, for his 1849 solo settings are found together only a page or two further on. A less distinguished choral setting from the same volume dates from the same period.

Again the *Horn* fell silent for a few years. But then it was passed on to Brahms-literally, in all likelihood, because he had the run of Schumann's library in Düsseldorf. The rather bitter first fruits were two lyrics about weeping or bereaved women, apparently inspired by Clara Schumann's fiercely grieving widowhood. But later Brahms found among the *Kinderlieder* appended to vol. iii the words of the first verse of the famous *Wiegenlied* (the second is a more modern addition). His other settings, like Mahler's, are spread throughout the 1250 pages, which speaks volumes for the diligence of their reading.

Brahms had finished with the *Wunderhorn* in his 40s, by which time he had become more critical about his folksong sources. He might have found a rather unlikely successor in his arch-critic Hugo Wolf, in whose handwriting there once existed an undated title-page that read, tantalizingly, "Acht Lieder aus des Knaben Wunderhorn"! (it was lost in the last war). It may have been no more than a youthful project. But it is likely to date from the days when Wolf was a close friend of Mahler. Sooner or later, Wolf would have found the sound of the *Horn* uncongenial, whereas Mahler would have noted at once that it could be the ideal instrument for his purposes. His virtuoso variations on it seem to have lasted nearly 20 years. Thus one of its typically confused conflations of two different poems recurs almost verbatim in his *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*; which is hardly compatible with the standard claim that Mahler had never heard of the *Wunderhorn* until four years later. The rational explanation is surely that he read it or heard it quoted (by that compulsive quoter Wolf, perhaps) in earlier years; then forgot, or never knew, its source; and later recollected it from his own memory. This would be wholly in

harmony with the best *Wunderhorn* tradition. So would the fact that Mahler freely adapted or invented his own folk-poetry to suit his own ends. For example in the setting already quoted he not only rephrased the trumpet passages but rearranged most of the text; and from the outset he seems to have treated the anthology as a sort of write-your-own-folksong free instruction booklet. About 30 well-known lines from Mahler's settings are out of the *Wunderhorn* only in the sense that they were never actually in it.

His very personal blend of quotation and pastiche is arguably just as apt as any of Arnim's adaptations. But the essence of Mahler's "folk style", whether musical or verbal, is surely (with all due disrespect to many of his commentators) a deliberate pastiche shading into irony and thence at times into overt parody. Such a style deservedly attained success and popularity for the *Wunderhorn* texts in Strauss's songs or Humperdinck's opera *Hänsel und Gretel*. Schoenberg's settings are more serious in intent; but they have few affinities with popular song in any sense. By the 1920s the German people, like the rest of Europe, had begun to import its folk music from America. The impulse that began with Weber ended with Webern; and it is easy to see that the former is at the nth remove from the latter.

So, the *Wunderhorn* winds its way into history. But there it still stays, miraculously sustained by music. The compilers have in effect been vindicated by the composers. Even some of the most dubious texts have inspired undoubted masterpieces. Whence does that strange power derive? That question was tacitly anticipated, and an answer insinuated, in the narrative above, which was designed to bring out the (no doubt far-fetched) idea of an oral tradition among the composers concerned. Further links might have been added. The young Mendelssohn attended the first night of *Der Freischütz*; the *Wunderhorn* might well have come up in conversation. In fact, Weber's copy is known to have come into Mahler's possession; so the topic of the *Wunderhorn* could easily have been ventilated thence to Schoenberg and by him to his pupil Webern.

Those who relish such speculations are the ideal audience for the *Wunderhorn* recital. No wonder it still flourishes. It appeals directly to a widespread and deep-rooted longing for a closed mystic communion, the charmed circle or in-group, not only in matters of music and poetry, but also (not necessarily in order of ascending interest). religion, politics and sex. *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* was clearly aimed to arouse those very same echoes. Let the title-poem be taken as emblematic. Its tradition is traceable, and turns out to be far from folklike. It began as a medieval French romance, c1300, part of which was transcribed in a history of English poetry, then translated into German, and then turned into a "folk-poem" by Arnim. In that version its most obvious point is its determination to make an impact. The horn glows with pearls and rubies, gleams in gold and silver, and is capped by a 24-carat 100-bell carillon. So lavish a catalogue outcoruscates the French and English *fin de siècle* decadence for sheer preciousness. Thus the poem first of all celebrates a ritual object, a holy of holies, elevated in the presence of a worshipping congregation.

It is manifestly intended to symbolize the anthology's contents: Arnim wished to say that the German people possessed in its folk art a treasury of jewels beyond price. It had long lain lost and neglected in the dark ages past, as the magic horn had been hidden "in the deep sea". But now, as the verses explain, it has been found and handed to a young man (Arnim was in his early 20s) by a mermaid (no doubt his Muse) to give to an empress (of course personifying Germania) famed for her beauty and wisdom. She is told that at the merest touch of her finger she can ring all the golden bells (the coming golden age is the inevitable fulfilment of a historic destiny); and she accordingly does so, while the gifted boy ascends to still further heights. In all this, the original courtly ideas have been deliberately demoted to make them look demotic. Hence the insistent stress on action, in rhythm and language alike. The thumping iambic trimeter hammers home the message. The vigorous verbs ride and dismount in leaps and bounds. The whole contrives, or is contrived, to give the impression of youth and movement; indeed, a youth movement.

Almost as strident (more so, to some readers) are the erotic overtones. Although the horn has only just been uncovered, its existence is well-known to everyone in the world. It is bestowed on a queen as a reward for her purity (though as it was "bigger than an elephant's tusk" it was perhaps hardly a fitting tribute). The boy boldly placed it straight into the royal hand, engagingly observing that one touch of the queen's finger would set its bells swinging. Her Majesty's comments remain unrecorded. But no reader in any epoch would have been surprised to learn that "Des Knaben" is a singular strong partitive genitive, or to find the horn displayed as a frontispiece. This too looks like the result of wilful effrontery on Arnim's part. Long before Freud or D. H. Lawrence there were blatant ways of teaching the bourgeoisie to extract new sap and vigour from the vital roots of the folk.

This massive powder-horn with its explosive mix not only rang down the centuries of Europe but well-nigh rang down its curtain. Of course it was not solely German (or French) in origin. Very similar ferments are at work in, for example, the contemporary *Irish Melodies*. Thomas Moore and his verses were ritualist in religion, egalitarian in politics and erotic in disposition. His themes too are of spiritual, national and emotional uprising; and his style suggests a highly artificial folk-poetry, accompanied by continual harping on a sacred symbolic instrument. Such overtones emanate as clearly from the magic harp as from *The Magic Flute*.

But it seems *prima facie* entirely implausible that Mahler (or Mendelssohn, or Schoenberg, or even Schumann) should feel any special affinity with any folk, let alone the German Volk. Such sentiments were surely quite foreign to them. Indeed, the special poignancy and profusion of Mahler's settings is

surely due, on the contrary, to his innate sense of alienation. The significance of his "schöne Trompeter" was that they sounded, for him, on the other side. The Fourth Symphony finale, so far from being a naive confession of faith in a future life, represents the outsider wondering where on earth such a Heaven can possibly be. And so on. Almost all Mahler's *Wunderhorn* themes, whether tragic or comic, earnest or ironic, embody experiences of total estrangement or frustration. Promises are broken, judgments are false, efforts are vain, delights are brief. Birds exult and expire; lovers sigh and sunder; soldiers mount and depart (with a significantly high desertion and death rate among military bandsmen). The whole scene is vividly evocative of Housman's contemporary Shropshire. It was in a land of lost content that Mahler too found his form. That house of green turf is a jointly owned country property, which has had a surprisingly long lease of life. It was built on the foundations of German Romanticism, which no doubt covered some areas of authentic ballad tradition. But its architects were highly skilled professionals, and its main materials were the perfected classical models of music and poetry. It stands miles apart from any source that could sensibly be called folksong, or folk-anything

So Mahler (like the other composers, in their degree) must have achieved his marvellous mastery of the *Wunderhorn* not so much because he was able to match its naivety as because it was able to match his sophistication - in which commodity it genuinely is a horn of plenty.

MAJOR ORIGINAL SETTINGS OF *DES KNABEN WUNDERHORN*

1- solo voice 2-duet 3-SATB 4-women's chorus
A-with piano B-with orchestral/instrumental accompaniment C-a cappella
i, ii, iii = vol. di *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* K = *Kinderlieder* (appended to iii)

WEBER (1786-1826)

Wenn ich ein Vöglein wär (1818, op.54/6), 1A, i 231
Weine nur nicht (1818, op.54/7), 1A, i 232
Mei Schätzer (1818, op.64/1), 1A, iii 127
Heimlicher Liebe Pein (1818, op.64/3), iii 17
Abendsegen (1819, op.64/5), iii 80

MENDELSSOHN (1809-47)

Erntelied (1827, op.8/4), 1A, i 55
Jagdlied (1834, op.84/3), 1A, I 327
Minnelied (1834, op.34/1), 1A, iii 204

SCHUMANN (1810-56)

Wenn ich ein Vöglein wär (1840, op.43/1), 2A, i 231
id. (1847, op.81), 2B, i 231
Käuzlein (1849, op.79/11), 1A, i 233
Marienwürmchen (1849, op.79/14), 1A, i 235
Jäger Wohlgemuth (1849, op.91/2), 4A, i 305

FRANZ (1815-92)

Zu Strassburg auf der Schanz (?1846, op.54/6), 1A, i 231

BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Der Überläufer (1855c, op.48/2) 1A, ii 21
Liebesklage des Mädchens (?1855c, op.48/3), 1A, iii 5
Wiegenlied (1868, op.47/4), 1A, K 63
Rosmarin (1874, op.62/1), 3C, i 258
Von alten Liebesliedern (1874, op.62/2), 3C, iii 63
Hüt du dich (1875, op.66/5), 2A, i 207
Guter Rat (1877, op.75/2), 2A, ii 29

WOLF (1860-1903)

8 *Lieder aus des Knaben Wunderhorn* (?c1876-8), ?1A

MAHLER (1860-1903)

from *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (1884), 1A/B:
- Wenn mein Schatz Hochzeit macht (iii 124)
from *Lieder und Gesänge aus der Jugendzeit* (1888-91), 1A/B:
- Um schlimme Kinder artig zu machen (i 362)
- Ich ging mit Lust (iii 83)
- Aus! Aus! (ii 31)
- Starke Einbildungskraft (i 373)
- Zu Strassburg auf der Schanz (i 143)
- Ablösung im Sommer (iii 111)
- Scheiden und Meiden (i 253)
- Nicht Wiederseh'n (iii 15)
- Selbstgefühl (i 16, 161)

[MAHLER]

from *Second Symphony* (II mov., 1892), 1B:
- Urlicht (ii, 11)
from *Fourth Symphony* (IV mov., 1892), 1A/B:
- Wir geniessen die himmlischen Freuden (i, 304)
Lieder aus des Knaben Wunderhorn, 1A [B]
- Der Schildwache Nachtlid (1888-92), i 205
- Verlorne Müh (1892), i 372
- Wer hat dies Liedlein erdacht (1892), i 213
- Geh du nur hin (1892), i 371
- Das irdische Leben (1893), ii 10
- Des Antonius von Padua Fischpredigt (1893), i 347
- Rheinlegendchen (1893), ii 15
- Die Gedanken sind frei (?1895), iii 38
- Dort wo die schönen Trompeten blasen (?1895), iii 112, 81
- Lob des hohen Verstandes (1896), ii 33
from *Third Symphony* (V mov., 1893), 1B
- Es sungen drei Engel, iii 79
from *Lieder aus letzter Zeit*, 1B:
- Revelge (1899), i 72
- Tambourgesell (1901), i 78

HUMPERDINCK (1854-1921)

da *Hänsel und Gretel*
- Abends wenn ich schlafen geh (1892c), 1B, K 27
- Eia popeia was rasselt im Stroh (1892c), 1B, K 66

STRAUSS (1864-1949)

Himmelsboten (1896, op.32/5), 1A, iii 78
Für funfzehn Pfennige (1898, op.36/2), 1A, i 309
Hat gesagt – bleibt's nicht dabei (1898, op.36/3), iii 27
Junggesellenschwur (1898, op.49/2), i 232

SCHOENBERG (1874-1951)

Wie Georg von Frundsberg (1900c, op.2/1), 1A, ii 344
Wappenschild (1904, op.8/2), 1B, ii 14
Sehnsucht (1904, op.8/3), ii 112

WEBERN (1883-1945)

Morgenlied (1922-3 op.15/2), 1B, ?
Erlösung (1925, op.18/2), 1B, iii 193

APPENDIX

Footnotes on a Magic Horn (Letter to the Editor, MT 1975)

Last year (July MT, p.55G) I offered some notes about when and how *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* had wound its way into music. A further hunt identified Schumann's quartets *Schnitter Tod* (SATB, op.75 no.1) and *Rosmarin* (SSAA, op.91 no.1), his duet *Die Schwalben* (SA, op.79 no.26) and his unpublished song *Die Ammenuhr*, all of 1849, as probably emanating from the *Wunderhorn*; so apparently did a Cornelius song of 1856 (now lost), *Ein Musikant wollt' fröhlich sein*.

I also asked for comments and additions. Paul Banks of Oxford, who is researching into Mahler's use of folk material both musical and literary, has kindly let me know that the Franz song *Rote Auglein* op.23 no.6 (also arranged for SATB as op.45 no.4) is a setting of the *Wunderhorn* Kinderlieder, p.94; and he has also identified this same section (p.69) as the source of Webern's op.15 no.2. Mr Banks has further persuaded me that there is a case for including, in a list of major settings, Reger's op.75 no.12, *Hat gesagt - bleibt's nicht dabei*. I could make neither case nor space in my original article for Jelmoli, Kamienski, Knab, Hessenberg, Reutter, Trunk or Vriesländer. I now hear from Paul Griffiths about Karel Boleslav Jirák, whose *13 Simple Songs* op. 13 (1917, orch. 1940) are all on *Wunderhorn* texts; and from Professor Longyear of Kentucky about Henry F. Gilbert, whose op.7 no.1 (1894) sets a translation of *Wenn ich ein Vöglein wär*.

I am further indebted to Professor Longyear for drawing my attention to the Silcher settings for solo (notably *Zu Strassburg auf der Schanz*) and quartet TTBB (details in August Lämmle's *Friedrich Silcher*, 1956, pp.37-9); and also for the very interesting suggestion that these or similar settings may have had some influence on Mahler, whether directly or by way of parody. On the question of Mahler, I am further fortified by Mr Banks (as by Professor Mitchell's TLS notice, 29 November 1974, of Henry Louis de la Grange's recent book) in the view that on the plainest textual evidence Mahler must have used the *Wunderhorn* as his source for some lines of the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (by 1884). As to the *Wunderhorn's* own antecedents, I am impressed by a suggestion from Dr Roger Fiske that it was in part inspired by Sir Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Schottish Border*, 1803. This theory finds striking confirmation in a letter from Arnim to Brentano in July of the same year which mentions the publication of that anthology and describes, it significantly, as consisting partly of traditional material and partly of pastiche.

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