

Eric Sams

## Homage to Eduard Mörike

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"Wo ist die Musik? Es bedeutet mich."

It is sad but perhaps inevitable that those two too well-known sisters, Voice and Verse, should so seldom be on speaking terms. Their academic backgrounds are not only exclusive but mutually so: their students attend different schools, their professors occupy separate chairs. In the result, song is bisected and its scholarship suffers, from schizophrenia.

Take for example the settings of Mörike. If music and poetry are indeed the two sisters of song, then all who are wedded to the one must also be lovers of the other (a predicament symbolized in Mörike's own poem *Die Schwestern*). Ignorance of the verses logically entails ignorance of the music; the whole must include the voice part. Conversely, song might sensibly form a branch of literary studies. The major musical settings of any great poet are surely valid (if unusual) modes of critique and commentary, even translation. If the literati omit to make these connections, then some of their essential apparatus is missing; which may account for the rather cloudy atmosphere of gas or vapour that still hangs over this topic.

One may at least hope to dispel some myths. The main Mörike mystique owes much to Harry Maync, who is always quoted with solemn approval to show what a very-musical poet Mörike is and how extremely apt for setting. Why, *Das verlassene Mägdlein* was composed 51 times before 1885, and nearly 80 settings of *Agnes* were in print not long after. But the conclusion, like those hapless heroines, is left dangling. Other relevant facts point the opposite way. Many German lyricists (e.g. Goethe, Rückert, Eichendorff, Heine, Lenau, Geibel) found durable or definitive settings soon after publication, while they were still young men. The plain fact about Mörike is that his poems took half a century to inspire any comparable music; he died an old man without ever having heard a note of it. And most song-writers, from his contemporaries onwards, never set a line of his verse. The melancholy roll-call of notable absentees includes Schubert, Loewe, Mendelssohn, Liszt, Cornelius, Strauss, Mahler, Schoenberg and Webern.

The rational conclusion is surely that Mörike's lyrics, so far from being eminently settable, were not only inaccessible but alien or refractory to the music and musicians of his own day; and they have been generally neglected ever since. One reason might be that the comparable musical medium did not exist until Hugo Wolf (who prophetically called himself "Wölfling" on occasion) forged it by hammering the Schumann piano song in the fires of the Wagner music-drama.

If so, it would follow that Mörike must at first have appeared original, unusual, even eccentric. And this was in fact the first recorded note ever sounded about him by a composer. "Originell" has precisely those connotations; and this was the only epithet that occurred to Robert Schumann when in 1842 he reviewed J. P. E. Hartmann's setting of *Jägerlied*. That lyric also proved "originell" in the sense of seminal. It lay dormant in Schumann's mind for four years before germinating as that rather etiolated albumleaf, op.59 no.3 (his setting for four part mixed chorus *a cappella*).

That work suggests that at this season Schumann's creative ground, despite the long incubation, was not only infertile but unprepared for Mörike. The first of the two quatrains runs:

Zierlich ist des Vogels Tritt im Schnee,  
Wenn er wandelt auf des Berges Höh';  
Zierlicher schreibt Liebchens liebe Hand,  
Schreibt ein Brieflein mir in ferne Land'.

The huntsman sings about the delicacy of the tracks that birds make in snow when they walk on the mountain-tops, and musingly adds that her dear hand writing letters to him from afar is more

delicate still. Wolf's setting is still vibrant with the shock of pleasure and insight he received from the verses; Schumann's creative mind seems insulated from it, partly because of unfamiliarity with the idiom. Instead of fixing the image, he takes a snapshot, jovially asking us to watch the bird. His featherweight themes have a staccato hop, a rhythmic hesitancy. But the material and its treatment tell us that for Schumann this lyric has only the generalized charm and elegance of a social occasion, not at all the precise delineation of a deeply personal emotion. To the Mörike-lover, the mountain scene is an image of virgin inaccessibility; distant and lofty, cold and pure, with an unbroken whiteness of snow. But at the lower levels there is the intimacy and proximity (if only by proxy) of warm love-letters, with the broken whiteness of their laboriously handwritten pages. Unity is achieved by a linking idea, the tracings or tracks of hand or claw. And these two shadowed hieroglyphs of dark on white convey the further message that the bird is out of its element when walking, the girl out of hers when writing; two counterpointed symbols of stilted and vulnerable delicacy. Further, the chiaroscuro effects are not only connoted by the diction but heightened by the contrasting vowel sounds. Similarly, the lovingly observed actions of bird and bride are embodied in the unaccustomed metre of trochaic pentameter. Even the metrical feet are made to halt and hop, pause and poise. Something of this idea at least must have been in Wolf's own conscious mind; he wrote to a friend about the inner poetic necessity of his 5/4 time signature. In general one has only to compare any of Wolf's Mörike settings with any of Schumann's to see that the former are the more comprehensive because their composer was the more comprehending.

To be fair, he had more time in which to discover the new world offered by a Mörike; and he could also use the maps and charts of the pioneers. In *Jägerlied*, as in the other Schumann parallels, Wolf's music embraces not only the poem but its earlier settings. Thus in *Das verlassene Mägdlein* Wolf's variant textual readings come from his copy of Schumann's lieder, not Mörike's *Gedichte*. Musically the same applies to Franz and even Brahms, from whose insights into *Ein Stündlein wohl vor Tag* and *An eine Aeolsharfe* respectively Wolf was audibly the beneficiary. But the controlling will was Mörike's. He was himself a sensitive music-lover; he was a gifted watercolourist and draughtsman; above all he was the first great symbolist poet, drawing his creative powers from the deep sweet springs (a favourite image) that underlie and irrigate music, pictorial art, and language. His essential lyricism is only superficially "musical"; it is more a mode of music itself. This may be discerned just from the first quatrain of *Jägerlied*; it could be exemplified a thousandfold from his complete works. So Mörike settings can be conceived within the musical matrix, as instances of the general class of translation recently described by George Steiner as "imitation, recreation, variation, interpretative parallel". It was surely this affinity that Wolf sought to acknowledge in calling his settings "Gedichte von Eduard Mörike"; an intellectually precise description. On that interpretation, the source is as inexhaustible as the wind's repertory on the Aeolian harp. That was another favourite image of Mörike's, and a continual accompaniment of his inner life. On his 70th birthday, ill, enfeebled and hallucinated, he thought he heard a chord played outside his bedroom window. "Where is the music?" he asked. "It means me. This will be my last birthday." But if song still survives in 2004, on his 200th birthday, he will still be inspiring music and musicians. For his full expression, he may need another Wolf to invent a new musical mode. But he can wait; he is in no hurry; he is for all time.

#### SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

- E. Mörike: *Gedichte* (Stuttgart e Tübingen, 1838, enlarged 2/1848, enlarged 3/1856, enlarged 4/1867, R/1873)  
H. Maync: *Eduard Mörike* (Stuttgart and Berlin, 1902)  
J. Kneisel: *Mörike and Music* (New York, 1949)  
S. Praver: *Mörike und seine Leser* (Stuttgart, 1960)  
G. Steiner: *After Babel* (London, 1975)

**MAJOR MÖRIKE SETTINGS** (*for solo voice with piano unless otherwise indicated*)

**SCHUMANN (1810-56)**

- 1846 Jägerlied, op.59 no.3 (SATB a cappella)  
1847 Die Soldatenbraut, op.64 n.1  
1847 Das verlassene Mägdlein, op.64 n.2  
1849 Schön Rohtraut, op.67 n.2 (SATB a cappella)  
1849 Die Soldatenbraut, op.69 n.4 (SSAA, pf. ad lib)  
1849 Das verlassene Mägdlein, op.91 n.4 (SSAA, pf. Ad lib)  
1851 Der Gärtner, op.107 n.3  
1851 Jung Volkers Lied, op.125 n.4

**FRANZ (1815-92)**

- 1850c Sechs Lieder von Mörike, op.27 [Volker spielt auf, Er ist's, Maschinkas Lied, Das verlassene Mägdlein, Agnes, Denk es, o Seele]  
1850c Ein Stündlein wohl vor Tag, op.28 n.2  
1850c Verborgeneheit, op.28 n.5  
1850c Um Mitternacht, op.28 n.6

**BRAHMS (1833-97)**

- 1858c An eine Aeolsharfe, op.19 n.5  
1858c Agnes, op.59 n.5  
1874 Die Schwestern, op.61 n.1 (duetto SA)

**BRUCH (1838-1929)**

- 1892c Gebet, op. 60 n.4 (SATB)  
1895c Um Mitternacht, op.59 n.1

**WOLF (1860-1903)**

- 1880 Suschens Vogel  
1882 Mausfallensprüchlein  
1884 Die Tochter der Heide  
1886 Der König bei der Kronung  
1888 53 Gedichte von Eduard Mörike

**PFITZNER (1869-1949)**

- 1887c Das verlassene Mägdlein  
1922c Das verlassene Mägdlein, op.30 n.2  
1922 Denk es, o Seele, op.30 n.3

**REGER (1873-1916)**

- 1900c Begegnung, op.62 n.13  
1902-3 Der König bei der Kronung, op.70 n.2  
1909 In der Frühe  
1909 Er ist's, op.111b (SSAA)

**BERG (1885-1935)**

- 1902c Die Soldatenbraut

**SCHOECK (1886-1957)**

- 1907 Septembermorgen, op.7 n.2  
1907 An meine Mutter, op.14 n.1  
1908 Peregrina V, op.15 n.6  
1909 Peregrina III, op.17 n.4  
1937 Er ist's, op.51 n.4  
1937 Septembermorgen, op.51 n.5  
1943 Spruch, op.51 n.6  
1947-9 Das holde Bescheiden, op.62 [40 settings]

**J. MARX (1886-1954)**

- 1904 Septembermorgen  
1906 Peregrina V

**DISTLER (1908-32)**

- 1939 Mörike Chorliederbuch, op.19 [48 settings]

Of less well-known settings, those of Silcher and Hartmann are among the earliest; those of Ernst and Emil Kauffmann, father and son, are among the most interesting (the former was a close friend of Mörike, the latter of Wolf). Other names of some significance are, in chronological order, Hetsch, Viardot, Scherzer, Faisst, Hornstein, Dräseke, Herzogenberg, Smyth, Weingartner, d'Albert, Kahn, van Dieren, Valen, K.Marx, Burkhard, Hessenberg, Erbse, Eyken.