

HUGO WOLF

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There is probably no greater song composer than Hugo Wolf although the American composer Ned Rorem is the finest composer of songs of our time.

Wolf is, by far, a greater song composer than Schubert whose songs have often have vamping piano parts. Schumann, Brahms, Liszt and Richard Strauss composed some fine songs. It has also to be said that Britain has produced some excellent song composers in Ivor Gurney, Stanford, Thomas Dunhill, Roger Quilter, Michael Tippett and the finest of them all, Gerald Finzi. Not to be ignored are the fine songs of Haydn Wood which, apart from *Roses of Picardy*, seem to have been forgotten.

Wolf is a tragic character. He was a manic depressive, poverty-stricken and, sadly, mad. He sought attention and love in the wrong dimension confusing sex with love which is a common malaise even to this day. As with Schubert, he suffered from syphilis which killed both of them. Because Wolf lived about twelve years longer than Schubert, his syphilis progressed to resultant dementia. For example, Wolf insisted that Mahler was not the director of the Vienna State Opera since he was.

This is so sad. Wolf was a song composer par excellence but his self-destruction has deprived us of possible further gems.

He was born in Windischgraz, Slovenia, then part of the Austrian Empire on 13 March 1860 and was taught music by his father who was a merchant in leather goods. Wolf studied piano and theory with Sebastian Weixler and then entered the Vienna Conservatory in 1875 where Mahler was a contemporaneous pupil.

Wolf was a charming man but had a fiery temperament. He had support from financial benefactors, and the daughter of one of his sponsors was Valentine Franck with whom he had a three year relationship. When she left him just before his 21st birthday, Wolf was despondent. He tried to be the second kappellmeister at Salzburg but neither his temperament or conducting skills was up to this.

In 1877 the event which changed his life for ever occurred. He had queried some of the teaching which he felt to be biased and he also challenged the old fashioned attitude of the faculty at the Conservatory. In addition to his complaints, his private life was wayward and during this time he contracted syphilis. The faculty said that they objected to Wolf's observations but it was probably more to do with the student's red-bloodedness. He was expelled in 1877. This destruction of his self-esteem was to haunt him for the rest of his short life. It is reported that Mahler was particularly unpleasant towards him which may explain Wolf's demented outburst later in life.

For ten years Wolf taught piano and he was an excellent teacher. But he made no money.

This introduces the first consideration of his being a fine song composer. His piano accompaniments are truly super and difficult! Sometimes they are sparse and at other times virtuosic. They are not just the repetitive vamping of chords as in many Schubert songs. Sir Michael Tippett once told us that Wolf's splendid piano parts had inspired him in such works as *Boyhood's End* and *the Heart's Assurance* and that is evident.

His first works were instrumental and orchestral. In 1880 his *String Quartet in D minor* appeared. In 1883 his impressive *Symphonic Poem: Penthesilea* was completed. It was ridiculed without mercy in Vienna. He never wrote deliberately for orchestra again. He was so offended and turned to songs. And the death of Wagner in 1883 deeply upset him. The tenor, Ferdinand Jager, whom Wolf had heard in Wagner's *Parisfal*, had impressed and Jager took up Wolf's songs. By 1886 his choral work *Christ Nacht* was available followed by the success of his *Six Eichendorff Lieder* for choir of 1881. In 1887 there appeared a *Serenade in G* for

string quartet and, of course, five years later, the popular Italian Serenade. All these works have class but not all of them are well-known

But then he made a grave error of judgement. Or was it?

He became a music critic in Vienna from 1884 to 1887 and he made many enemies. Eduard Hanslick (1825-1904) was also a music critic and could be scathing. Wolf emulated this and he took sides. He advocated the greatness of Wagner, a valid position, but assassinated the character and music of Brahms thus following in the steps of Robert Schumann who originated the David Club in 1834 to 'fight musical philistines'. The fact is that both Brahms and Wagner are great composers and one does

not have to choose between them.

This was Schumann's error of judgement which may have its seat in his own mental problems. It is a great pity because he wrote some exquisite songs. *Frauenliebe und Leben*, Op 42 of 1840 is the first truly song cycle. Brahms wrote some superb songs as well.

Around 1888 Wolf discovered the poetry of the German poet Morike (1804-1875) who had died some 12 years earlier and he was inspired.

And this leads to the second consideration of his being greatest composer of songs. He captures the character of each song with a remarkable focus. It is as if he has a full understanding of all the text and his music enhances it.

The third consideration is the unfailing concentration in the songs. There is nothing in them that is foreign, that should not be there. There is no padding or time spinning.

In 1888 there appeared his *Morike Lieder*, some fifty three songs to texts by this poet, a tremendous undertaking of commitment and devotion.

And this raises a fourth consideration. Is there any other composer who has been so committed to one poet to spend all his time and continuously to produce such a voluminous set of songs and in one outpouring?

This was not his first sets of songs. Previously he had written

12 *Lieder aus der Jugendzeit* (1877-8)

Six Songs for women's Voices

Six Songs to texts by Scheffel, Morike, Goethe and Kerner

Four Poems of Heine, Shakespeare and Byron

Six Poems by Gottfried Keller

Three Ibsen Songs

Three Poems by Reinick

Three Poems by Michelangelo

This also shows his affection for the art of literature and why his songs are often called art songs.

The fifth consideration is that his songs are intellectual rather than superficial or banal as much German *lieder* is. This may lead some people to believe that his songs are rather arid and I have heard it said, and with some truth, that those who understand German are the most likely to enjoy these gems the most.

In 1888 he composed *Der Feuerreiter* for soloists, chorus and orchestra to a text by Morike. The work seems to be forgotten.

The only work Wolf wrote between 1892 and 1894 was the Italian Serenade. He was recharging his batteries.

His songs were now widely admired and Berlin set up a Hugo Wolf Society. His syphilitic condition was getting worse and madness set in as it did in Smetana who also suffered from syphilis.

His amazing concentration resulted in his composing the Spanish Songbook containing forty four songs during 1889 -90. These were translations into German by Paul von Heyse and Emanuel Geibel. Then followed the Italian Song books, two volumes of 22 and 24 songs respectively. The first volume was completed in 1891 and the second in 1896.

This leads to the sixth consideration of Wolf as the greatest song composer. He started a vocal project and stuck to it without deviation. Other composers would have many projects going at once and not be so focused and, as a consequence, their work could suffer in many ways. Wolf orchestrated some of these songs and later, Max Reger made some superior orchestrations.

The seventh consideration of Wolf's songs is that they are sophisticated. They are never banal or inconsequential. Neither are they shallow nor 'cheap' to be whistled in the street.

In 1895 he wrote his opera Der Corregidor and was preparing a second opera, Manuel Venegas, when he was admitted to an asylum. They could do nothing about his venereal disease but gave him psychiatric help. Thinking he was cured he was released in 1898 but in October of that year he threw himself into the Rhine in a bid to commit suicide as had Robert Schumann forty four years earlier.

In 1897 he began work on his second opera Manuel Venegas which was left unfinished at his death.

He spent his last years in a hospital in Vienna where he died on 22 February 1903.

The greatest song composer of them all?

Certainly the greatest song composer up to and including his own time, I would suggest.

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