

Considering Music and Poetry in Josephine Lang's Goethe Lieder

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Josephine Lang (1815–1880) was one of countless composers who set Goethe's poetry to music. She set thirteen of his poems in total, most of which were composed from 1830 to 1840, a most prolific period during which she composed some of her finest Lieder. Lang's Goethe settings are unique among her Lieder output in that his poetry, (like the poetry of Heinrich Heine) elicited a sophisticated musical response from her. Lang excelled at the challenge of interpreting the poetry of these two major literary figures and, in her songs, identified with what Henry Hatfield deemed as Goethe's 'pouring forth of emotion'¹ in his art. Her preference for Goethe's poetry in the early stages of her career is highly significant. Analysing her approach to text setting can aid a deepening of our understanding of Lang as a composer of Lieder, while also examining how Goethe's poetry can be interpreted in song.

As Susan Youens rightly points out, there has been a tendency in older musicology to ignore the poetry of German Lieder and, more often than not, we were presented with a discussion of the composer and the music rather than the poet and the poem² This kind of music-only 'appraisal', while it may be useful in its astute musical observations, can only provide us with a limited knowledge of a song and fails to grasp the true essence of Lieder, Dahlhaus, prior to Youens, expressed similar criticism:

The literary element in music culture – without which nineteenth-century vocal music would be inconceivable – has continuously receded in importance. In a work, the nineteenth century tendency to view instrumental work as vocal music by supplying them with an

¹ Henry Hatfield: *Goethe: A Critical Introduction* (Norfolk: New Directions, 1963), 5.

² Susan Youens: 'Schubert and his Poets: Issues and Conundrums', *The Cambridge Companion to Schubert*, ed. Christopher H. Gibbs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 99. Hereafter referred to as Youens: 'Schubert and his Poets: Issues and Conundrums'.

imaginary text has given way to an opposite inclination to vocal music instrumentally and ignore the text.³

The question of the complex relationship between words and music in the German Lied is one which many musicologists have pondered. Does music, in Susanne Langer's opinion, 'swallow words [...] literal sentences and even literary word structures' and 'annihilate' the poem in making a song?⁴ I disagree, as Langer's assertion dismisses the existence of the composer's intention for a faithful realisation of the text. Langer's observations, however, do raise some very interesting questions. For example, what do we actually hear when we listen to a Lied: the music, the poem, a combination of the two? Why analyse the poem if it is, in Langer's opinion, 'annihilated'? Or as Dunsby rightly points out, why should we reduce song to 'some kind of idealised third language that is beyond analysis, beyond interpretation?'⁵ Although an audience may not perceive all the nuances pointed out in this appraisal of Lang's songs or indeed any analysis of song, such subtleties nevertheless contribute to the overall cognitive effect of the Lied and the composer's synthesis of text and music is central to our appreciation of a song. Such questions are, therefore, central for scholars and performer. Although it may not be possible to realise every facet of a composition into one performance of a song, the possibilities for manifold interpretations make this a piquant topic for discussion. Lawrence Kramer attributes the difficulties in analysis of Lieder to the absence of a concrete methodology for this kind of scholarship.⁶ Kofi Agawu similarly recognizes the lack of a recurring set of criteria in this area and points to the highly individual nature of Lieder-analysis in his essay 'Theory and Practice in the Analysis of the Nineteenth-Century

³ Carl Dahlhaus: *Nineteenth Century Music*, California Studies in 19th Century Music, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (California: University of California Press, 1991), 5.

⁴ Susanne K. Langer: *Feeling and Form* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 152–153.

⁵ Jonathan Dunsby: *Making Words Song: Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Song* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 8.

⁶ Lawrence Kramer: *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and after*, California Studies in 19th Century Music (California: University of California Press, 1986), 125–170.

Lied'.⁷ Yet perhaps this deficiency arises through the individual nature of Lieder composition in that each composer responds uniquely to a particular text. In the case of Josephine Lang—as with numerous other composers—multiple factors attracted her to Goethe's poetry: the poet's stature and public persona, his musical sensitivity,⁸ the sheer mastery of his poetry—too many to explore within the confines of this paper but perhaps there is a more concrete explanation for Lieder composers' penchant for Goethe's poetry in particular. Susan Youens' description of Goethe's poetry may provide the answer:

It is his incomparable achievement [...] to have found a way of experiencing and writing in which the thing experienced is always interfused with the emotions of the experiencing subject and is therefore rendered symbolic.⁹

While the artistic realms of Lang and Goethe were worlds apart, essentially both parties had the same artistic objectives in their art: namely the translation of emotion—and the confessional—into art. In view of these questions, perhaps a good starting point for developing techniques in Lieder analysis is to begin with the poem and explore the different relationships that surface when music and poetry collide. This paper examines a selection of settings by Lang from this compositional period, attempting to understand the unique relationship between music and words in her Lieder.

Josephine Lang's setting of Goethe's 'Frühzeitiger Frühling' op. 6, no. 3

Lang's first musical encounter with Goethe's poetry is a setting of his poem, 'Frühzeitiger Frühling', op. 6, no.3 (Spring before springtime) which we know was composed before 1830 (as Lang notes in her diary

⁷ Kofi Agawu: 'Theory and Practice in the analysis of the Nineteenth-century Lied', *Music Analysis* 11/1, 1992, 3–36.

⁸ For further information on Goethe's musicality, read Lorraine Byrne Bodley: *Schubert's Goethe Settings* (London: Ashgate, 2003), hereafter referred to as Byrne Bodley: *Schubert's Goethe Settings* and Kenneth Whitton's article 'Goethe and Schubert: Poetry and Music', *Goethe and Schubert: Across the Divide*, ed. Lorraine Byrne Bodley and Dan Farrelly, (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2003), 51–58.

⁹ Youens: 'Schubert and his poets: Issues and Conundrums', 107.

that she performed the song for Mendelssohn when he visited Munich in that year¹⁰). Goethe's poem, at first glance, appears to be a celebration of spring, suggested by the plethora of imagery associated with nature, 'die Sonne, Hügel und Wald' (the sun, hill and forest) and later 'Buntes Gefieder' (the colourful plumage). The ephemeral phrases of each stanza lend a sense of joviality and giddy breathlessness to the poem but, as is suggested in the title and the opening lines 'Tage der Wonne, kommt ihr so bald?' (Days of enchantment, have you come so soon?'), one recognizes how spring, for the poetic persona, has arrived sooner than expected; implicative of the passing of time where it appears to 'speed up' as one gets older. If, according to Martin Swales, the 'autumnal self' reflects the passing of time,¹¹ then Goethe's treatment of the premature arrival of the season here might also represent the passing of time, or more specifically in this poem, the passing of youth. This mild insinuation of gloom rears its head in the third stanza where the persona pleads with the muses to help him 'endure this happiness' ('Helfet ihr Musen Tragen das Glück'), a recurring motif in Goethe's literary work,¹² inferring that the joy he experiences is emotionally taxing. Such conflation of these positive and negative emotions is characteristic of Goethe's championing of the symbiotic relationship between joy and sorrow. In addition to the presence of such dualities Goethe's doctrine that nature and love are inextricably linked is reinforced by the unanticipated arrival of the beloved in the last stanzas; love, for Goethe is a 'force of nature'¹³ and the transience of youth and love make such experiences infinitely more beautiful and more brutally intense. Connected with the coalition of love and nature is the notion of a sense of kinship between man and nature, so characteristic of Goethe, and is distinguishable in the third stanza where the breeze gradually moves from the shrub to his bosom.

Performers of this Lied should be aware of the hidden tension that underlies this poem. The edgy anticipation and exhilaration of this poem ring out through Lang's effervescent setting of the poem in B

¹⁰ Heinrich Adolf Köstlin: 'Josephine Lang' *Sammlung Musikalischer Vortrag*, ed. P. Waldersee (Leipzig, 1859), 58.

¹¹ Martin Swales and Erika Swales: *Reading Goethe: A Critical Introduction to the Literary Work* (New York and Suffolk: Camden House, 2002), 28.

¹² See Goethe's poem 'Der Musensohn' in J.W. Goethe: *Selected Verse*, trans. David Luke (Middlesex: Penguin, 1964), 14.

¹³ Terence J. Reed: *Goethe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 15.

major, although the Lied actually begins in F# major before a descending scale-like passage establishes the true tonic; this skilful delay of the tonic (a characteristic technique used by Lang) is effective in representing the dual nature of Goethe's poem as it destabilises our aural perception for a moment and corroborates the concept that spring has come early. Lang's idiosyncratic addition of a chromatic E# in the left hand of the piano enhances the energised mood of the song.

Example 1. Lang: 'Frühzeitiger Frühling' op. 6 no. 3, bars 1–10

Allegro agitato

I Ti - ge der Wen - ne. Kommt ihr so bald? Schenkt mir die Son - ne

Hü - gel und Wald? Reich - lich - er flie - ssen Bach - lein zu mal.

A whirring chromatic ascent of quavers in the left hand of the piano at bar 9 accompanying adamantly repeated F#'s in the vocal line also captures the concept of the premature onset of spring and electrifies the song.

The poet's pleading with the muses to help him 'bear this happiness' resonates with 'the desire to rest', present in such poems as 'Der Musensohn' and 'Rastlose Liebe'. In these famous settings Schubert depicts inner turmoil by way of a relentless piano accompaniment and it is interesting to see how Lang uses a similar ceaseless piano figuration in her setting of this poem. The assiduous quaver triplet figuration accentuates the daemonic of Goethe's poem—'that our lives are shaped by forces beyond our control'¹⁴—this is mirrored in performance of the Lied, in that there is no 'breathing space' for the performers of this technically demanding song. The twofold nature of Goethe's poem is eloquently conveyed by the telling chromatic inflection from bars 14 to 15, where the mediant (of the tonic key) is flattened, beginning a charming piano interlude which borrows a melodic fragment from the initial vocal motif.

¹⁴ Erika Swales: 'Johann Wolfgang von Goethe "Urworte", Orphisch', *Landmarks in German Poetry*, ed. P. Hutchinson (Bern: Lang, 2000), 64.

Example 2: Lang: ‘Frühzeitiger Frühling’ op. 6 no. 3, bars 13–

17

The image shows a musical score for a vocal and piano piece. The top system includes a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in G major and 3/4 time, with lyrics 'sind es die Wie - sen? ist es das Thal?' and a 'rit.' marking. The piano accompaniment is marked 'dolce' and features a complex, arpeggiated texture. The bottom system shows the continuation of the piano accompaniment, ending at bar 17.

The inventive manipulation of material in conjunction with interplay between piano and voice, and sophisticated harmonic language betray the work of an accomplished composer, remarkable both for its harmonic brilliance but also for the fact that it was composed by a girl who was at most fifteen years of age.

Josephine Lang's Setting of Goethe's 'Mignons Klage', op. 10, no. 2

Lang composed 'Mignons Klage' op. 10, no. 2, in 1835. This popular poem, from Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, has attracted numerous musical settings since it was written in 1795. In Goethe's poem Mignon conveys her escalating suffering and profound loneliness. Her initial statement concerning an 'other' (i.e. only *those* who know her suffering) symbolises her futile attempt to reach out to another human being but tragically this only consolidates her own seclusion. Goethe links the two stanzas of the poem in the repetition of the verb 'kennen'. The word play on the notion of 'kennen' reveals that Mignon's source of anguish is actually the loss of past intimacy, alluded to in the line 'Ach,

der mich liebt und kennt ist in der Weite' (But he who loves and knows me is far away): her recognition that her lover is the only one who could possibly comfort her deepens her isolation and suffering. The sheer intensity of Mignon's emotional state is symbolised in the physical reactions she describes, namely the reference to the biblical image of her insides burning 'es brennt mein Eingeweide' (literally, it burns my innards). Overcome with grief, the pain Mignon endures is emblematic of the mental torture she is experiencing.

Lang's setting of this poem is possibly one of her finest Lieder as she expertly gauges Mignon psychologically and translates this into musical form. The mood of utter desolation and intense agitation is evocatively woven into this setting and it is a striking illustration of a 'darker' more passionate aspect of Lang's compositional nature as she recreates Mignon's sensual experience of grief. Bereft of a piano introduction, voice and piano begin the Lied simultaneously and this immediately establishes the unsettled atmosphere; we are plunged at once into Mignon's desolation, propelled by the incessant quaver motion in the piano and the employment of the minor tonality (B minor), which is reminiscent of Schubert's settings from the *Lehrjahre*.¹⁵ The melody of the opening statement 'Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt' seems inevitable in the way the melody and harmony unfurl. The harmonic fluidity and immediate chromaticism (observed in the progression I, II7Major, V7b, VIIIdim7 of IV, for example) powerfully portray Mignon's troubled state of mind and gives the music a remarkably dark quality. The sense of panic imparted by Mignon is powerfully interpreted by Lang in bar 5 by the insertion of semiquaver rests between the words 'allein und abgetrennt von aller Freude' (alone and cut off from all joy) and the use of dotted quavers eloquently imbues the song with the feeling of Mignon's increasing anxiety. Lang's emphasis of the key word 'leide', with a suspension at bar 2 emphasises this word (similar to Schubert's third setting of the text). The rhythmic elongation of 'Freude' over diminished seventh chords in bar 4 and the ceaseless rising melody line poignantly betray a sense of Mignon's yearning to experience joy once more.

¹⁵ Schubert set many poems from the *Lehrjahre*, some of them several times. For example, he set 'Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt' six times between 1815 and 1826, with four of these set in a minor key. For more information, see Byrne Bodley: *Schubert's Goethe Settings*, 246–285.

Example 3. Lang: 'Mignons Klage' op. 10 no. 1, bars 1–8

Allegro Moderato

Nur werde Sehnsuchtkennit. weiss was ich leid - e al - lem und ab - ge - trennt von all - ler
agitato

Freu - de. seh ich die Fir - ma ment auch je - ner

Sei - te

fz fz fp

The variation in accompaniment in bar 5 at the words 'Seh ich die Firmament' is significant: pulsated quaver chords replace a flowing arpeggiated accompaniment, difficult to sustain at speed, and mirrors the change in Mignon's psyche, as the music becomes more insistent. The startlingly bright modulation to the relative major underscores a fleeting moment of hope as Mignon gazes into the heavens, perhaps searching for her beloved. A certain tenderness radiates from the music

as Mignon recalls her beloved and the momentary lyricism of the vocal melody somehow intimates Mignon's vulnerability and conveys inwardness.

The piano's imitation of the voice and the introduction of a dotted semiquaver rhythm magnify Mignon's increasing unrest and this dotted figuration assumes an integral role in driving the impetus of the music forward, illustrating Lang's subtle manipulation of melodic motifs. This key relationship between piano and voice exhibits Lang's awareness that there are other ways of conveying *Sehnsucht* apart from adventurous harmony alone. Goethe's wordplay on 'kennen' is echoed musically by Lang, as the new melody is loosely based on the opening vocal motif.

Example 4. Lang: 'Mignons Klage' op. 10 no. 1, bars 9–16

2

Ach der mich liebt und kennt, ist in der Wei- te!

Ach der mich liebt und kennt, ist in der Wei- te!

ped.

The dotted rhythm already mentioned becomes increasingly conspicuous as it is used in sequence as a link to the next vocal phrase and subsequently it forms the bass line to a powerful passage, which further reinforces Mignon's separation from her beloved. Lang's use of diminished seventh chords and hammered quaver chords in the right hand of the piano substantially intensify the momentum of the music as Mignon is immersed in visceral emotion, represented by Goethe in the references to physical maladies. Lang's use of a modulatory corridor successfully captures the sudden welling up of intense emotion. She varies the melody from bar 3 and augments the note values, revealing an incendiary transgressive passion which underlies the poem and portrays the depth of Mignon's anguish. Lang repeats and rhythmically stretches the phrase 'es brennt', descending from F#, to D and then to Bb (over the submediant minor in D major). This austere melodic contour (two consecutive major thirds) emphasises Mignon's catastrophic psychological state.

Example 5. Lang: 'Mignons Klage' op. 10 no 1, bars 17–33

17 *cresc.*
Es schwim - delt mi - es brennt man fin - ge - wei - de es

21
brennt es brennt man er - ge - wei - de

25 *cresc.*
brennt es brennt man er - ge - wei - de

The 'crescendo' in Mignon's iterations of torment becomes almost unbearable and Lang's sensitive musical tactics here perfectly mirror Mignon's shifting psychological state. This is realised in the sparse and expressive interlude which depicts her bleak situation. This poignant moment in the song is truly unexpected and reflects a passing instance of physical incapacity but also psychological resignation on behalf of Mignon and displays Lang's cognitive sensitivity to the text in her musical materialisation of Mignon's exhausting melancholy. As Mignon slowly regains her thoughts, recapitulation of the opening lines of text begin exactly like the opening of the song but this time building through in intensity with a rising melody line, underscoring Mignon's inability to escape this mental torture while also demonstrating Lang's careful

manipulation of ternary form. The prolongation of the Neapolitan 6th from bars 19 to 22 is tantamount to Mignon's prolonged isolation, an excellent manoeuvre by Lang. The static nature of the accompaniment here means that the voice is left on its own, almost in quasi-recitativ, pointing once again to Mignon's isolation. Lang wonderfully conveys the sense of *Sehnsucht* in the lyrical melody before the music descends to an elongation of the words, 'was ich leide' over syncopated air pockets in the piano. A bleak and lingering piano postlude containing a fragment of the previous interlude concludes Lang's compelling setting of Goethe's poem. Lang achieves an amalgamation of transparency and richness in her writing for piano here, what the renowned Schubert scholar, Susan Youens, deems as the key to achieving *Inningkeit* in music,¹⁶ which is one of the most alluring aspects of Lang's Lieder.

Josephine Lang's Setting of Goethe's 'Sie liebt mich', op. 33, no. 4

Goethe's poem 'Sie liebt mich' is taken from his *Singspiel* of 1775, *Erwin und Elmire*. The poem describes the euphoria and uncertainty of falling love. Once again Goethe's poetry is unveiled as a two-edged sword as the heart itself is addressed, 'Bear the joy!' underlining Goethe's fundamental concept of the inseparability of joy and sorrow. Goethe perhaps based this poem on the game of French origin *effeuiller la marguerite* (he/she loves me, he/she loves me not), lending a playful, innocent nature to the lines. The persistent self-questioning that runs throughout the poem, 'Fühl' ich mich selber? Bin ich am Leben?' (Am I myself? Am I alive?) reinforces a notion of insecurity which may affect one so in love, but this insecurity is assuaged by the overwhelming sense of joy that pervades the poem in the repetition of the ecstatic proclamation 'Sie liebt mich! Ja! Sie liebt mich!'

Lang's exuberant and spirited setting of the poem composed in 1840 exquisitely captures the excitement of the experience. The piano introduction with its climbing melodic figures and dotted semiquaver rhythms marvellously set the mood. Non-functional chromaticism in the left hand of the piano once again is typical of Lang: this gently buoyant gesture heightens the mood. The opening vocal phrase with the rising utterances of 'Sie liebt mich!' encapsulates the ecstasy of first love

¹⁶ Susan Youens: *Schubert's Late Lieder: Beyond the Song Cycles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 398.

as it echoes the rising figure of the piano introduction. The ability to get lost in the moment is delineated commendably in Lang's musical treatment of the text culminating in the third exultant declaration 'Sie liebt mich!', arriving at the dominant first inversion at bar 12.

Figure 1. Josephine Lang



Example 6. Lang: ‚Sie liebt mich‘ op. 33 no. 4, bars 1–12

Allegro vivace
feurig

ff

f

f

dim. *rit.*

n tempo *rit.*

Sie liebt mich, sie liebt mich ja sie liebt mich!

pp

ff

The absence of a perfect cadence musically illustrates the protagonist getting ‘carried away’ with his/her thoughts. The piano takes over with a descending scale-like figuration, as if when the voice goes silent the piano becomes more vocal: such interplay amplifies the questioning in the poem, ‘am I myself, am I alive?’ while also exemplifying the interdependent roles of piano and voice prevalent in Lang’s Lieder. A climax culminating in the jubilant high ‘A’ on the repetition of ‘Sie liebt

mich' heightens the triumphant mood of the poem. Lang interprets Goethe's crucial phrase 'trage der Wonne seliges Herz!' with a descending scale, highlighting once again the co-dependant relationship that exists between joy and sorrow. Lang's fluctuating piano figurations enhance the impulsive nature of the poem in this animated setting of Goethe's poem.

So, what is it that sets Lang's Goethe settings apart from her other songs? Like so many other composers of the nineteenth century Mendelssohn, Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Wolf and Richard Strauss to such significant though now neglected composers as Carl Loewe, Siegmund von Seckendorff and Robert Franz to such women composers as Fanny Hensel and Josephine Kinkel; Josephine Lang was inspired by Goethe's poetry to compose some of her best Lieder. Lang's ability to interpret Goethe's poems was a crucial factor in securing her success, a success which was built on the multi-layered relationship between music and poetry in her songs. Music and text combine in her Lieder to illuminate the meaning of each poem in a unique way. Certainly, there are some fine settings by minor poets but the musical intensity is decidedly more powerful in the settings by Goethe and verify her as a worthy song composer, albeit one who could have achieved much more if permitted to obtain a more thorough musical education than the traditional avenues offered to women at that time. Technically and harmonically the Goethe settings are also among the most musically challenging of Lang's songs. Lang's selection of Goethe's poetry at a particularly dynamic time in her compositional career is also significant in that they appear to satisfy her creative desires more so than any other poet at the time. While the extensive emotional range of these three settings can only offer a glimpse of a composer who never got the opportunity to realise her full potential, in her Goethe settings, Lang did, nonetheless, realise some of that latent potential by offering unique interpretations of Goethe's poetry.

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Discography

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