Viennese composer Hugo Wolf produced one of the most important song collections of the nineteenth century when he set to music fifty-three poems by the great German poet Eduard Mörike. Susan Youens reappraises this singular collaboration to shed new light on the sophisticated interplay between poetry and music in the songs. Wolf is customarily described as “the Poet’s Composer,” someone who revered poetry and served it faithfully in his music. Yet, as Youens reveals, this cliché overlooks the rich terrain in which his songs are often at cross purposes with his chosen poetry. Wolf and Mörike were very unlike one another and had different aims for their arts. Although Wolf did much to draw the world’s attention to the neglected Swabian poet, his musical interpretation of the poetry was also influenced by his own life, psychology, and experiences. Youens examines selected Mörike songs in detail, demonstrating that the poems and music each tell their own stories which at times intersect but also diverge. This, she argues, is the distinctive strength of lieder.

Susan Youens is Professor of Musicology at the University of Notre Dame. Her books include Hugo Wolf: The Vocal Music (1992), Schubert’s Poets and the Making of Lieder (1996), and Schubert, Müller, and Die schöne Müllerin (1997).
Hugo Wolf
and his Mörike Songs
Hugo Wolf
and his Mörike Songs

Susan Youens
Contents

List of illustrations  page viii
Preface  ix

1 “Göttlicher Mörike!”: an introduction to Eduard Mörike and Hugo Wolf  1
2 Peregrina revisited: songs of love and madness  18
3 Agnes’s songs: the fictional misfortunes and musical fortunes of a nineteenth-century madwoman  60
4 Sung desire: from Biedermeier erotica to fin-de-siècle lied  100
5 Doubters and believers: case-studies in the geistliche Lieder  140

Notes  169
Select bibliography  190
Index  199
Illustrations

1. Pastel portrait of Eduard Mörike by Johann Georg Schreiner  page 101
2. Drawing by Eduard Mörike to accompany his Schilderung eines Traums  page 146
Preface

If music and poetry are the sister arts, so says tradition, they are also the odd couple. They do different things in fundamentally different languages; even where they seem to come together, they have different large tales to tell. It is symptomatic of their dissimilarities that actual collaboration – a poet and composer working together – is a rarity in the history of song. Even those eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poets who desired musical settings of their verse were seldom asked for their assent or consulted about their wishes in the matter; the usual practice was a composer’s appropriation of a poem without even the poet’s knowledge, much less his or her consent. Music’s conventional obeisances to poets and poetry are thus in some measure a guilty façade to conceal a form of theft in which an existing work of art is not only robbed but used and sometimes abused for purposes unimagined by the original creator. No longer poetry per se, it undergoes a sea-change – whether for better or worse is out of the helpless (often dead) wordmonger’s hands.

One of the oddest of odd couples is the pairing of Eduard Mörike (1804–75) and Hugo Wolf, despite the fact that they are often cited as “the perfect marriage” of poetry and music. But even a skeletal outline of their lives makes it apparent that their arts issued from very different experiences and perspectives – two more unlike creatures would be difficult to imagine. Mörike was born in Ludwigsburg, still a small town in the kingdom of Württemberg and even smaller then, into a middle-class but far from wealthy family and was educated for the Lutheran ministry. His youth was punctuated by a series of tragedies – his father’s death, his younger brother August’s suicide, a catastrophic love affair – and life did not become easier in adulthood. Unsuited for religious life, he went from vicarage to vicarage and village to village in the late 1820s and early 1830s before finally receiving a pastorate in Cleversulzbach (another small town within the the Stuttgart–Tübingen–Ludwigsburg axis of his life), not in time, however, to save his protracted engagement to his fiancée Luise Rau. The hypochondriac poet, his psychosomatic illnesses exacerbated by detestation of his breadwinning occupation, was finally forcibly retired from the church’s service at age thirty-nine and became a teacher at a girls’ school in Stuttgart. Although he married Margarethe Speeth in 1851, jealousies between his sister Klara, who lived with them, and his wife eventually put an end to the marriage, while one of their two daughters died young. His oeuvre is slim for someone who lived to the ripe old age of seventy-one: the principal works are the novel Maler Nolten (The Artist Nolten) in 1832; a single anthology of poetry first published in 1838 and revised for editions in 1848, 1856, and 1867;
and several tales and novellas, including what is perhaps his best-known work, *Mozart auf der Reise nach Prag* (Mozart on the Journey to Prague). He was just beginning to garner a small modicum of recognition when he died in poverty in 1875. Anyone familiar with the bare facts of Wolf’s life can recognize numerous points of dissimilarity and difference.

And yet, Wolf would become the agent by which Mörike’s fame surpassed its former regional limits to reach a wider public. Wolf’s spate of fifty-three Mörike songs composed in 1888 constitutes one of the most famous episodes in the history of the lied, and it began the process by which Wolf became known as “the Poet’s Composer,” someone who cared more about poetry, served it more faithfully, delved into it more deeply than other lieder composers. Wolf’s famous act of citing the poet first on his title pages (Gedichte von Eduard Mörike . . . componirt von Hugo Wolf) supposedly sets the seal on poetry’s primacy in these songs, but it is the verb “componirt,” “composed,” which matters more: these songs consist of something done to the Gedichte von Eduard Mörike. The cliché of the Poet’s Composer misunderstands Wolf by overlooking the rich terrain in which the songs are often at cross-purposes with his chosen poetry. This is not to deny his reverence for his favorite poets, the depth of his poetic understanding, or his capacity to find uncannily exact musical analogues for textual nuances, but he came from a different world than the older poets he preferred to his own generation. He could not help reading these late eighteenth- and earlier nineteenth-century poems in ways that were affected by his own political and historical context, psychology, erotic experience, and notions of spirituality, not Goethe’s or Gottfried Keller’s or Justinus Kerner’s or Eduard Mörike’s – and therein lies this book. Previous scholars, including Eric Sams in the sixth edition of *Grove*, have pointed out that Wolf ran roughshod over the printed text on occasion, and the ways in which he did so, the whys and wherefores, bear examining.

For the benefit of those unfamiliar with the backdrop to Wolf’s Mörike songs, the first chapter is a summary of that background, with an emphasis on the huge aesthetic gaps between poet and composer. Wolf, one discovers, would have known little, if anything, about Mörike’s life when he composed these songs, and his ignorance had consequences for his shaping of the music. The poems of the Nachlaß and Mörike’s letters, both of which provide invaluable glimpses into the poet’s character, beliefs, events in his life, and so on, only began to emerge in the 1880s and 1890s, and one doubts Wolf encountered what little scholarship there was by 1888. He would later pursue information about Mörike after making the acquaintance of someone with close ties to the Mörike circle, only to reach the conclusion that he might not have liked the poet, had they met. They certainly had divergent likes and dislikes musically: Mörike worshipped Mozart and detested Wagner and Liszt, whom Wolf loved. Even anecdotes about Mörike’s tendencies to torpor and Wolf as someone who always ran up the stairs rather than walking point to different natures.

The four chapters which follow this brief introduction each tell of Wolf doing something Mörike would not have sanctioned to various poems and of a rich context surrounding the genesis of both the poems and the music, the composer often being unaware of the poetry’s origins. The first case-history in chap. 2 begins with what little is known of a formative event in Mörike’s life. In 1823, the young poet met a Swiss-born wanderer named Maria Meyer, who seems like a character out of a popular novel and who became
the stuff of fiction thereafter. When not imprisoned in Swiss workhouses for the poor, she depended upon different men and different menial jobs – tavern waitress, maidservant – for survival; when Mörike found out about her supposed promiscuity, he was devastated and turned her away from his doorstep in the summer of 1824. This cataclysm in his life is both told and revised in the cycle of five Peregrina poems he wrote over a period of many years, but Wolf set only two of the poems to music, for reasons possibly bound up with Wolf’s own life; it may have been impossible for him to confront the content of the poems he omitted. The differences between the two cycles and speculation about Wolf’s reduction of the poetic work to a dyad are the subjects of the latter half of the chapter.

Maria Meyer is doubled in Mörike’s 1832 novel Maler Nolten, as Peregrina – four of the five poems appear here – and as the psychotic gypsy Elisabeth, the dea ex machina of the work. Elisabeth is not the only madwoman; the title character’s fiancée Agnes goes mad as well, and Mörike carefully traces the course of her mental breakdown from childhood paranoia to insanity and suicide. Here, nineteenth-century notions about hysteria and about women are placed under a literary microscope, and one can glimpse Mörike’s simultaneous critique of and concurrence with those notions. Like Goethe in Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre (the younger writer’s model), Mörike fills Maler Nolten with interpolated poetry, some of which Agnes sings en route to madness and from within it – her songs are the subject of the third chapter. One of those songs, entitled either “Rosenzeit! wie schnell vorbei” (the first line of the poem) or “Agnes,” was set to music many times, notably by Brahms in 1873, while other poems had to await the events of 1888. If it is speculatively possible that Wolf devised his setting of “Agnes” in part to “correct” what he found objectionable in Brahms, it is certain that he had Wagner in mind when he set “Seufzer” (Sigh) and “Wo findest ich Trost?” (Where can I find consolation?), especially the latter, with its quotations from Parsifal. Mörike would not have approved, since he and his friends even contemplated publishing polemics against Wagner, but the reminiscences of Monsalvat are peculiarly appropriate for the poetic content – until the end. Wolf was prone to imaginative extensions of the poem in his postludes, and he provides for one of these songs a “redemptive” ending à la Wagner and not in accord with Mörike, more pessimistic than his best composer.

Dyad-cycles, revised endings, and songs with other songs in mind recur in the fourth and fifth chapters. Eroticism is a red thread throughout the second and third chapters, given Maria Meyer’s embodiment of it and Agnes’s fear of it; Mörike’s erotic poems in Wolf’s hands are the focus of chap. 4. Here, I have arranged four songs along a spectrum from near-pornographic symbolism to fairy-tale eroticism of the lightest, brightest variety and have tried to show what changes Wolf wrought on Mörike’s scenarios and why. Wolf probably found in the invocation of intercourse in “Erstes Liebeslied eines Mädchens” (A Maiden’s First Love-Song) – Mörike’s most startling poem – an antidote to the sexual hypocrisies he decried in his own time and place, but in his delight with the poet’s seeming explicitness, he may have missed the deeper implications of the poem. In his setting of “Der Knabe und das Immlein” (The Boy and the Little Bee) and “Ein Stündlein wohl vor Tag” (An Hour before Daybreak), he avails himself of the Schumannian privilege of putting separate poems together in conjunctions not of the poet’s making and doing so in a manner reminiscent of his Peregrina dyad, while his setting of “Der Gärtner” (The
Preface

Gardener) is speculatively a correction or revision of Schumann’s earlier setting of the same text. And finally, at the opposite end of the spectrum from eroticism, I examine Wolf’s treatment of two Mörike poems on religious subjects – “Gebet” (Prayer) and “Auf ein altes Bild” (On an Old Painting) – in the fifth chapter; ironically, Wolf the Nietzschean ex-Catholic gives Mörike the unhappy Lutheran songs in which the poet’s doubts are converted to redemptive endings, as in “Wo find’ ich Trost.” Wolf could not have realized the full extent of Mörike’s unhappiness with Lutheranism without knowing the Nachlaß and the letters; he might have formed a distorted estimation of the poet’s faith from the religious poems in the anthology, or he could, speculatively, have instilled something of his own non-dogmatic spirituality into these settings.

One cannot discuss discrepancies between Mörike and Wolf without also invoking the points of convergence, more numerous by far. Wolf did, after all, recognize sooner than almost anyone else what is golden in Mörike, and he could and did devise complex, sophisticated intersections between this poet’s words and his own music. It is in the polyphony of ideas, his and Mörike’s, that the richness of these songs resides.

Anyone writing a book incurs more debts than he or she can repay. I am grateful to the National Endowment for the Humanities for the research fellowship that enabled me to complete this project and to the Graduate School at the University of Notre Dame for their funding of a trip to the Mörike archives at the Deutsches Literatur-Archiv in Marbach. I am grateful both to A-R Editions, which produced the music examples for this book, and to the Institute for Scholarship in the Liberal Arts at Notre Dame, which generously paid for the production costs of those examples. I must also thank the Eda Kuhn Loeb Music Library, Houghton Library, Andover Theological Library, the Fogg Art Library, and Widener Memorial Library at Harvard University for their aid on many occasions, as well as the Music Collection of the Library of Congress, both houses of the Stadtbibliothek zu Berlin, the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, the Wiener Stadt- und Landesbibliothek, and Regenstein Memorial Library at the University of Chicago. Jonathan and Maureen Boulton of the University of Notre Dame translated a Latin text in chap. 3 for me, and Albert Wimmer and Siglind Bruhn have helped with the daunting task of translating Mörike’s poetry. Students in two lied seminars have challenged, added to, argued with, and helped refine my thoughts about these songs, and friends (principally James McCaila, James Parakilas, and Mary Hunter) have both put up with a fine whine or two as the project wended its way and given me the benefit of their advice. Most of all, my heartfelt thanks go once again to Roger Parker, whose suggestions regarding this manuscript were invaluable. I am lucky to have such a good colleague and friend.

Everything I write has been, still is, always will be, dedicated to the memory of Paul Amadeus Pisk, teacher and musician extraordinaire. Wolf’s settings of “Schlafendes Jesuskind” and “Anakreons Grab” were sung at a memorial service for him when he died in 1990, and I cannot imagine a more fitting tribute for someone who loved Wolf’s music and shared that love with me.