Introduction

Wie Melodien zieht es
Mir leise durch den Sinn,
Wie Frühlingsblumen blüht es
Und schwebt wie Duft dahin.

Doch kommt das Wort und faßt es
Und führt es vor das Aug,
Wie Nebelgrau erblaßt es
Und schwindet wie ein Hauch.

Und dennoch ruht im Reime
Verborgen wohl ein Duft,
Den mild aus stillem Keime
Ein feuchtes Auge ruft.

[Like melodies it is moving softly through my mind. It blossoms like spring flowers and wafts away like fragrance. But when words come and capture it and bring it before my eye, it grows pale like grey mist and vanishes like a breath. And yet there rests in rhyme a well-concealed fragrance, which is gently called forth from the silent bud by a moist eye.][1]

'Wie Melodien' is one of Brahms's most popular songs. The tender lyricism of the principal melody alone could account for this popularity. Indeed, when considering the success of 'Wie Melodien', it can seem convenient to ignore the text (as Brahms himself appears to have done when he reworked the same melody in his A major Violin Sonata op. 100). Elisabet von Herzogenberg, one of Brahms's closest friends and most perceptive critics, commented on the abstract nature of Klaus Groth's poem.[2] The exact meaning of the poem is elusive (an elusiveness that is, paradoxically, hard to capture in English): to what exactly does 'es' [it] refer? Like the perfume and mist the poem describes, the meaning seems to 'waft away' just when the reader is close to grasping it, and Brahms renders this sensation perfectly through the varying erosions of the tonic at the end of each strophe. But in this elusiveness lies an important clue. The poem is self-reflexive – it is a poem about poetry itself: much is lost in the process of transferral from the mind of the poet to the word

on the page, but the sensitive and sympathetic reader (the 'moist eye') will still perceive the essence of the poet's meaning. In the very act of selecting and setting this particular poem to music, Brahms adds another layer to the self-reflexivity of the poem. The melodies that move gently through the narrator's mind are now audible, and the poem and music together seem to evoke the process of Lieder writing: melodies (Brahms's) are captured by words (in this case Groth's), but still it is only the 'moist eye' that will be capable of retracing the process and fully appreciating the composer's intention.

Since Brahms completed 'Wie Melodien' in 1886, there have been a vast number of attempts by sensitive musicologists and performers to interpret the song and discern Brahms's intentions. Few, if any, of these readings take into account the songs Brahms published with 'Wie Melodien' – the other four songs of op. 105. While 'Immer leiser' (op. 105/2) rivals 'Wie Melodien' in popularity, followed closely by 'Auf dem Kirchhofe' (op. 105/4), these songs and their two rarely heard companions ('Klage', op. 105/3 and 'Verrat' op. 105/5) are scarcely ever performed together. Similarly, musicological discussions of op. 105 typically focus on issues raised by individual songs (the modified strophic form of 'Wie Melodien', for example) and seldom, if ever, consider the group as a whole.

Yet consideration of the group as a whole is precisely what Brahms appears to have intended. In a conversation with Alwin von Beckerath in 1883 (just three years before he composed 'Wie Melodien'), Brahms is reported to have talked at some length about his song collections and implied that there is an element of coherence in his groupings:[3]

> Brahms complained to me that most singers, male and female, grouped the songs together completely arbitrarily, according to how they suited their voices, and totally ignored the trouble he would always take to group his songs together like a bouquet [Bouket]. In fact, he was very justified in this complaint. Where does one find a singer who performs complete song books by him, with the possible exception of the Magelone songs? With what fine tactfulness and poetic sensitivity he has bound his song bouquets [Liedersträuße] together. It is thus also regrettable that Ophüls tore these bouquets apart so cruelly in his book of Brahms Texts, in order to publish them ordered according to poet. This was undoubtedly the reason why Ophüls had to wait so long to have his arduous work acknowledged by Brahms.
>
> My father once had to remind Brahms of this. Brahms replied that he would have been happy to read through the texts as he had grouped them, and to be able thus to recall the music. He spoke of floral bouquets [Blumensträußen] that Ophüls had plucked apart, and added that 'he is happy when he finds earthworms'. The individual songs profit immeasurably from their groupings. The famous singer von Zur-Mühlen mostly sang the Lieder this way, in the groups in which they had been placed.[4]

The complaints Brahms voices through Beckerath could have been made today, for most performers and musicologists continue to 'pluck apart' not only op. 105, but also the majority of Brahms's more than thirty other 'song bouquets'. With the exception of the *Magelone Romanzen* op. 33 and *Vier ernste Gesänge* op. 121 (works that are, indeed, 'exceptional'), recordings of complete song sets by Brahms are largely confined to encyclopaedic 'complete Lieder' sets.[5] The song bouquets have fared only slightly better with musicologists. Brief articles by Imogen Fellinger, Ulrich Mahlert and others, as well as passing references in the more extensive studies of Max Harrison, Lucien Stark, Michael Musgrave and Malcolm MacDonald, offer glimpses of the implications of Brahms's comments to Beckerath, but recent literature indicates that the standard frame of reference is still the individual song: Eric Sams's *Brahms's Songs* discusses individual Lieder, democratically numbered from 1 (op. 3/1) through to 204 (op. 121/4), and in examining motivic correspondences Sams is concerned with demonstrating coherence across Brahms's entire oeuvre rather than with revealing connections which may pertain within particular collections.[6] Jonathan Dunsby's article on 'The multi-piece in Brahms' has done much to increase our appreciation of the forms of coherence that might exist in Brahms's sets of piano pieces, yet he offers little direct encouragement to extend such consideration to Brahms's song collections – indeed, he states somewhat dismissively that Brahms 'was disinclined to write song-cycles despite all the precedents'.[7]

A cursory glance at op. 105 as a whole might lead us to question whether we should attempt to apply the concept of the multi-piece to Brahms's song collections, and whether Brahms really was, as Beckerath puts it, 'very justified in this complaint' about the plucking apart of his song bouquets. Brahms did not conceive the songs as a group, and the first references to op. 105 as a set only appear when Brahms began approaching his publisher about them almost two years after 'Wie Melodien' had been composed. Not surprisingly, given that the Lieder appear to have been conceived as independent entities, there are no obvious thematic connections between the songs. There is also no immediately apparent significance in the sequence of keys – something that would have been relatively easy to arrange at a later date – and when Brahms sanctioned a transposed edition he made no effort to preserve the tonal sequence. The poems are from five different sources and produce some strong stylistic juxtapositions: the collection encompasses the folk style of 'Klage', the ballad 'Verrat', and the abstract subtlety already observed in 'Wie Melodien'. Similarly, there are conflicts of narrative voice, which would seem to prevent the whole being read as a single narrative sequence: the dying girl of 'Immer leiser' (no. 2) who waits for a final visit from her lover is almost impossible to reconcile with the unfaithful girl of

'Verrat' (no. 5), whose new lover is murdered by the old. Moreover, the narrators of these two poems are of different genders, which creates perhaps the greatest challenge yet to Brahms's declared desire that his bouquets be performed complete: 'Immer leiser' seemingly demands to be sung by a woman, while the vocal line of 'Verrat' is in the bass clef. Finally, there is no evidence that all five songs were performed together in Brahms's lifetime, and references in the correspondence of Brahms and his circle make few if any connections between the songs of op. 105.

However, a cursory glance is always going to be inadequate when Brahms's music is the subject. Brahms once said to Clara Schumann that if she did not like the text of a poem on first reading she should reread it closely to appreciate its subtlety.[8] And Brahms valued the loose connection that is discernible only with careful study, as quotations he copied into notebooks of citations and maxims (his 'Schatzkästlein') suggest:

> What is holy? That which binds many souls together, even if only gently, as the rush binds the wreath.[9]

> You are not to penetrate the artwork at first glance. Where it appears dim to you, probe with cheerful diligence.[10]

The aim of this book is to probe Brahms's op. 105 grouping and other 'song bouquets', to investigate the nature of the 'rush that binds [these] wreaths', and to ascertain the extent to which Brahms's complaints to Beckerath are justified. Each of the problems posed by op. 105 will be addressed in turn as we, in effect, retrace the process described in 'Wie Melodien': after an examination of the possible generic models and aesthetic frameworks available to Brahms in the creation of 'song bouquets', we follow op. 105 and other collections from conception and publication, to performance and reception, and investigate the implications of each stage for textual and musical coherence. I cannot promise that my investigation will always be characterised by objectivity or 'cheerful diligence', but nor do I apologise for this fact. As Groth suggests in 'Wie Melodien', the 'well concealed' meaning may sometimes best be discerned by the 'moist eye' of the more subjective recipient. It is, I suggest, in the nature of the song bouquet that the meaning must to some extent be constructed by the recipient, and in the final chapter I examine the implications this has for the relationship between meaning and the composer's intentions.

1 Context

What did Brahms and Beckerath mean by the expression 'song bouquet'? The term inevitably invites comparison with the song cycle – the only generic model we have for groups of songs that are in some way related. However, such a comparison is fraught with difficulties, for the song cycle has itself proved almost impossible to define. When Brahms published his first song bouquets (opp. 3 and 6 in 1853, and op. 7 in 1854), musical dictionaries had yet even to acknowledge the term 'song cycle'. Early definitions, which began with the article 'Liederkreis' in Arrey von Dommer's *Elemente der Musik* in 1862, typically (but problematically) take Beethoven's *An die ferne Geliebte* as the ultimate exemplar.[1] *An die ferne Geliebte* has an obvious and indisputable unity: the poems form a highly integrated lyric cycle and are easily read as the expression of a single protagonist in a single narrative context; this continuity is reinforced musically through the connecting piano interludes that draw the individual songs into a seamless progression; moreover, the sequence of keys is symmetrical, and the final song not only returns to the key of the first but also recalls thematic material from the opening song; the six songs are thus bound into a circle – a song *cycle*. However, in its particular combination of features, *An die ferne Geliebte* is actually unique, for no other work commonly termed a song cycle possesses all of them. Thus if we claim that the song cycle is based on texts by a single poet then we must exclude Schumann's *Myrthen*, and if we go further and suggest that the poems should be from a single lyric cycle, we must also exclude Schumann's op. 39 *Liederkreis*, which contains the composer's own ordering of poems selected from several different Eichendorff works. Schubert's *Winterreise* and *Die schöne Müllerin* ostensibly fulfil the textual criteria of a song cycle (although *Winterreise* presents the poems in Schubert's ordering, not that of Müller's lyric cycle in its final form), but neither of Schubert's cycles has the tonal or thematic rounding of *An die ferne Geliebte*. And in none of the cycles by Schubert or Schumann does the composer connect all of the songs as inextricably as Beethoven does with his piano interludes. If we accept the assumption that the particular combination of features presented by *An die ferne Geliebte* makes it the ultimate song cycle then we must also accept that it is the 'ultimate' cycle in a sense that Dommer

doubtless did not intend – it is not only the first, but also the last song cycle.

We might forgive Dommer, writing in 1862, for the inadequacy of his definition – perhaps he thought that someone would still follow Beethoven's model in all its particulars. After another century and a half, however, we ought to perceive *An die ferne Geliebte* for the anomaly that it really is. Yet, while a number of attempts have been made to broaden the definition of the song cycle in order to embrace a wide range of different models, many definitions continue inevitably to circle back to *An die ferne Geliebte*: Donald Lee Earl unwittingly reveals the paradox when he writes that *An die ferne Geliebte* is 'still quite unique in its construction and may be regarded as one of the first song cycles in the most specific sense of the word'.[2] How the form of a work can be both unique and the most characteristic example of a genre Earl does not care to explain – but surely it takes more than a single work to define a genre?

More sophisticated studies of the song cycle, such as that of Ruth Otto Bingham, are typically forced to conclude by defining the song cycle in the vaguest possible terms as 'a group of songs that coheres'. This, as Bingham herself implies, is hardly a definition at all, for it offers little to distinguish song cycles from song collections:

> There are almost no studies of song collections, in spite of their impact, and there is little recognition of the art of compiling a collection, most of which are carefully ordered and geared towards a specific audience or purpose. This imbalance in research reflects the profound influence later nineteenth-century aesthetics has had. The more early cycles are examined, the more this conviction and belief are undermined. The 'cycle-versus-collection' question may ultimately prove to be largely irrelevant, its main function to reveal how ambiguous the boundaries between the two are.[3]

Organicism

The 'later nineteenth-century aesthetics' to which Bingham here refers are those of organicism, a concept that does indeed plague attempts to understand the song cycle as a genre. Although organic theories of art can be traced back to Plato and Aristotle, as Ruth Solie points out, the modern understanding of organicism has its roots (so to speak) in the late eighteenth century.[4] David Montgomery outlines two scientific models of organicism from this period.[5] In the first, represented by Goethe's concept of the *Urpflanze*, all plant species are seen to derive from a single prototypical plant that itself

contains every constituent element of every species. The second model, which is more sympathetic to post-Darwinian thinking, is seen in Jean-Baptiste Robinet's *De la Nature* (1761–8). Like Goethe, Robinet also proposes the existence of a prototypical life form. But rather than containing all the elements of all its derivatives in a fully developed form, Robinet's prototype is a simple 'cell that has a natural tendency towards self-development'.[6] One life form metamorphoses into another in strict sequence: Robinet believed, for example, that frogs could, over time, complete a cycle and 're-evolve' into fish. The theories of both Goethe and Robinet were the object of scientific ridicule by the mid-nineteenth century. By this time, however, an organic conception of unity had already spread to encompass everything from history to literature, the visual arts and music. The two forms of organicism embodied in the theories of Goethe and Robinet can still be seen to underpin influential analytical approaches of the twentieth century. The Schenkerian *Ursatz* has a clear affinity with Goethe's *Urpflanze*, while Schoenberg's concept of 'developing variation' is a descendent of Robinet's more linear model of organic evolution.[7]

As Bingham suggests, it may be no coincidence that the first historical surveys of the song cycle began to appear in 'organicism's heyday', in the 1860s to 1880s.[8] In addition to the early definition of 'song cycle', Dommer's *Elemente der Musik* also contains a lengthy section on organicism:

> Every musical work, just as much as any other art work, is an organism that is packed with content, springing forth from the conditions of the inner life, and whose parts stand in a relationship of inner necessity, both to each other and to the whole . . . Just as in the plant the flowers and fruit are already dormant within the seed, so (obviously allowing for a degree of artistic licence) are the further developments of a musical movement already present in the theme and, even more specifically, in its motives.[9]

Brahms owned a copy of Dommer's *Elemente der Musik* as well as his *Musikalisches Lexikon*, and held both in high regard.[10] Brahms also transcribed into his 'Schatzkästlein' notebooks passages from other works that indicate his interest in a Romantic concept of organic unity:

> Without connectedness, without the deepest connection between each and every part, the music becomes a trivial sandcastle capable of no lasting impression; only connectedness turns it into marble in which the hand of the artist can be immortalised.[11]

> The masterwork is organic on every level, in its beginning, middle and end; the manneristic work is a juxtaposition and superimposition.[12]

Evidence that Brahms subscribed to the principles of organicism has most obviously been found in his music. Elisabet von Herzogenberg, for example, praised the 'organicism of the sonata form' of Brahms's Third Violin Sonata op. 108 whose four movements 'really are members of a family',[13] and both Schenker and Schoenberg found in Brahms's music an ideal representation of their very different organic theories.

But while Schoenberg, Schenker and Brahms's friends demonstrated the organic unity of individual songs, they never attempted to apply an organicist agenda to a group – or bouquet – as a whole. This is hardly surprising given that the majority of Brahms's song bouquets were the result of the conscious arrangement of songs conceived quite independently and thus are unlikely to be connected by what Dommer termed 'inner necessity'. However, the fact that the song collections are not conceived organically does not necessarily mean that they do not possess coherence. Brahms's comments to Beckerath imply that he saw his bouquets as coherent groups, which, by Bingham's loosest definition, would make each the equivalent of a song cycle – 'a group of songs that *coheres*'. Yet despite the increasingly flexible view of the nature of the song cycle, most writers on the subject are willing only to classify Brahms's *Magelone Romanzen* and, perhaps, his *Vier ernste Gesänge* as song cycles. For example, in her article on the song cycle in *New Grove 2*, Susan Youens refers only to these two groups from Brahms's numerous song publications and states that Brahms was 'more given to "collections" or "sets" than cycles'.[14] Dunsby demonstrates convincingly that elements of both different models of organicism can be found in piano sets such as op. 116 yet, as we have seen, he appears reluctant to allow for this possibility in Brahms's song collections.[15]

But is there really such a difference between Brahms's approximately thirty other collections of solo Lieder, so rarely examined in the song cycle literature, and the works commonly deemed song cycles or multi-pieces? To answer this we need first to become more familiar with the models available to Brahms. While Brahms owned and admired Dommer's writings, we need hardly imagine that the composer assembled his bouquets according to textbook definitions of the 'song cycle' or 'organicism'. And while Brahms copied a maxim about the organic nature of the masterwork into the 'Schatzkästlein', how are we to know that he was not equally interested in what the *Kunstblatt* describes as the 'manneristic' work? Indeed, 'juxtaposition and superimposition' could conceivably be desirable features in a collection or cycle. To explore some of the models and aesthetic paradigms available to Brahms let us move, as Brahms no doubt did, from the theoretical works in his library to some of the literary, poetic and musical volumes.

However, first we may turn to Dommer one final time to indicate where this new investigation ought to begin.

Lyric cycles

In his *Musikalisches Lexikon* of 1865, Dommer describes a song cycle as 'a coherent complex of different *poems*'.[16] A tendency to view the song cycle as a genre whose coherence lies predominantly in the texts is also apparent in other early definitions. In 1876 Hermann Mendel describes the song cycle as 'a series of poems which belong together', and he identifies works in the first instance by their poets rather than composers.[17] Examination of the text continues to provide the starting point for most modern analyses of song cycles, and if the coherence of the song bouquet were to lie primarily in the text it would explain why it has been overlooked by those, such as Dunsby, who have so compellingly articulated the coherence of the purely instrumental multi-piece.

It is almost certainly no coincidence that the one collection of Lieder by Brahms that is most commonly referred to as a song cycle (the *Magelone Romanzen* op. 33) is also the only one to have texts from a single lyric cycle. But given that a number of groups of songs with texts assembled by their composers have been admitted to the song-cycle canon, we should consider more carefully the nature of the lyric combinations of Brahms's song bouquets. Schumann's *Myrthen*, for example, contains the composer's own combination of poems by a number of different poets. If this work can be considered a song cycle, why not Brahms's op. 105 bouquet?

Apparently Brahms himself saw textual coherence as a defining feature of the song bouquet. Certainly he felt the texts of his collections could stand alone: Beckerath's claim that Brahms wished to be able to read through the texts of his vocal works (see p. 2) finds support in other sources. In 1883, Brahms described his songs as comprising 'a great collection of poetry'.[18] Two years later he expressed a desire, albeit a half-mocking one, to see the texts of his vocal works published in a separate volume.[19] And it was comments Brahms made to Gustav Ophüls in 1896 that inspired the latter to assemble the texts of Brahms's vocal works for publication: 'I have often wished for a collection of my texts – both for its own sake and also because, although I don't like studying my music too closely, in reading the texts I quite like to let it go through my mind.'[20]

Beckerath's description of Brahms's displeasure over Ophüls's draft of the text collection is also corroborated. Brahms complained to Rudolf von der

Leyen that Ophüls was indulging in 'philological hair-splitting', and added: 'I could easily answer most of the Doctor's questions – but of course it is no fun to get a handful of earthworms straight away – one must find them one by one and with the maximum amount of effort.'[21]

Beckerath's suggestion that the real reason Brahms was displeased was because Ophüls had 'torn these bouquets apart so cruelly . . . in order to publish them ordered according to poet' might imply that the coherence of Brahms's bouquets lies predominantly in the texts. Many critics have come to the same conclusion.[22] The most obvious way to gain an understanding of the textual coherence of the song collections is to examine the texts themselves (for which, ironically, the revised edition of Ophüls's *Brahms-Texte*, with the texts grouped as Brahms published them, provides an invaluable tool).[23] But first we must defy Brahms's wishes and indulge in a little 'philological hair-splitting' of our own, for in order fully to appreciate the 'subtle tact and poetic sensitivity' with which Brahms groups his texts together we need to see his groupings in the light of contemporary trends and developments in the lyric cycle.

For an indication of the kinds of coherence found in contemporary lyric cycles there is no better starting point than Brahms's own library. Brahms was a voracious reader. In 1853 he commented: 'I invest all my money in books. Books are my greatest passion – from childhood on I have read as much as I could, and without guidance I have progressed from the worst to the best.'[24] He added that his favourite authors were Jean Paul Richter, Eichendorff, E. T. A. Hoffmann and Schiller. The selection of these particular authors suggests a strong sympathy with Schumann's interests. While staying in the Schumanns' Düsseldorf home following his mentor's mental collapse and incarceration, Brahms availed himself of Schumann's extensive library, using it not only to broaden his musical knowledge, but also to develop his literary awareness. As his income increased, Brahms was able to invest in his own copies of books. The composer's meticulous catalogues of the growing contents of his library from 1856 to around 1890 provide an invaluable summary of his literary tastes. Although Brahms's interests appear to have been fairly wide-ranging, the bulk of the poetic works are German volumes from the late eighteenth century and first decades of the nineteenth century. To the volumes of Eichendorff, Tieck and Arnim that were among his earliest acquisitions, Brahms added the complete works of Goethe, Heine, Uhland and Rückert, as well as a number of folk or pseudo-folk sources, and volumes of poems by poets now long since forgotten, or remembered only in connection with a setting or two by Brahms.[25]