



### Option 3

**‘When I compose songs, my principal goal is not to write music but first of all to do justice to the poet’s most secret intentions’ Is it possible for a composer ‘to do justice to the poet’s most secret intentions’? Illustrate your answer with reference to at least two songs.**

**‘To the Angel who has lifted me so high’: the relationship between the music of Richard Wagner and the poems of Mathilde Wesendonck in *Fünf Gedichte für eine Frauenstimme*, with particular reference to ‘Der Engel’ and ‘Traäume’.**

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Poetry and music have always been intimately linked, but never more so than in the nineteenth century, a time when 'many musicians were literary [and] many poets were musical' (Philip and Gibson, 2007, p.113). The German poet Wilhem Müller wrote, 'My songs lead but a half life, a paper life of black and white ... until music breathes life into them' (Johnson, 1997, p.4). Initially designed for performance in intimate, domestic settings with pianoforte, German Lieder from Liszt onwards evolved to orchestrated songs intended for the concert hall (Mueller, 2004, p.168). By the end of the century, songs had become bound up with the rediscovery of native folk traditions in other European countries, and poets writing in many different languages had their verses set to music, usually, although not exclusively, by their compatriots. In writing to his friend and biographer, the American music critic Henry Theophilus Finck at the turn of the century, the Norwegian composer Edward Grieg was actually lamenting the problems of the translation of his into the more common performance languages of German, English or French. 'The translator', Grieg wrote 'must have insight into poetry, language and music', or else 'both the poet and the composer suffer' (Benestad, 2000, p.233).

This issue is less of a problem with songs written in the more widely known European languages, German Lieder, for example, being almost always sung in the original language. However, the issues raised by the quotation go beyond the issue of translation from one language to another in the strictly linguistic sense, alluding to the relationship between verbal and musical language, and the broader question as to whether it is ever possible for one person's meanings to be completely understood and expressed by another. In this assignment, I intend to examine the development of the unusual relationship between Richard Wagner and the object of his infatuation at the time, Mathilde Wesendonck, that led him to set aside more pressing and lucrative assignments for almost six months in order set five of her poems to music. I will argue that in the case of *Fünf Gedichte für eine Frauenstimme*, seeking to do justice to the poet's most secret intentions is almost impossible to separate from the composer's secret intentions, and that both the poems and the songs are also inextricably linked to *Tristan und Isolde*, on which Wagner was working at the same time, and which he discussed privately with Mathilde. I will look in some depth at 'Der Engel', the first song in the cycle which has no obvious link to any other work, and 'Traüme', the final song which is more closely tied to the music of *Tristan und Isolde*. They are not the only songs Wagner wrote, but the set is one of his few non-operatic works that is still part of the mainstream repertoire, and their length (around 20 minutes) belies their significance for his other works. They are also one of the few occasions on which he set texts that he had not written himself, although part of the argument in this essay will be that the sentiments expressed in the poems were largely reflections of his own ideas. Indeed,

until the death of Mathilde Wesendonck in 1902 and the publication of extracts from her correspondence with Wagner (Ellis, 1905), it had been widely assumed that he had written the words as well (Deathridge, 2008, p.125).

My interest in these songs arose partly from the discovery that I share a birthday with Mathilde (23 December), a fact which might be of no importance were it not in the context of Wagner's 'near-obsession with the significance of dates', with performances frequently scheduled to coincide with birthdays or other anniversaries (Walton, 2002, p.42). They also appear to have been important to her husband Otto, which possibly helps to explain his otherwise incongruous support for the composer. Yet despite the great volume of literature on Wagner and his works (Magee, 1988, p.33) there are, to date, scarcely more than a couple of short articles in English about either the songs or the author of the poems (Deathridge, 2008, p.261).

Wagner and the Wesendoncks appear to have first met at a concert in Zürich early in 1852. He had settled in Switzerland with help from Franz Liszt, after escaping arrest in Germany following his still uncertain role in uprisings in Dresden; Otto Wesendonck, a wealthy silk merchant and his young wife, Mathilde, 'a woman determined to shape the social and intellectual life around her' (Deathridge, 2008, p.129) had recently returned from a period in the United States. Both Wagner and the Wesendoncks were attracted to Zürich, as were many other German exiles, by its liberal reputation, and small-scale, but thriving cultural life. Although it was probably to be expected that their paths would have crossed, Walton (2002, p.41) suggests that Wagner, ever eager to find wealthy patrons, was already acquainted with the fact that one of Otto's brothers was in exile, and another had recently died, and was therefore able to 'slip into the position of an ersatz brother' (ibid., p.42). Whatever the reason, Wesendonck provided funds for a Wagner festival in Zürich in 1853 and from 1854 onwards, began settling Wagner's extensive debts in return for receipts for future performances of his works. (Millington, 1992, p.15). His motives may not have been wholly altruistic - Millington (ibid, p.118) suggests that 'Wagner was as valuable to the Wesendoncks as they were to him', members of the *nouveaux riches* craving the social respectability that money alone cannot bring.

However, the relationship between Wagner and Mathilde was a different matter. It developed slowly - between 1851 and 1857, Mathilde bore three children and the family spent several periods abroad (Ellis, 1905, xxxix), while Wagner suffered recurring ill-health and depression - but he dedicated a piano sonata (in Ab major, the key of both 'Traüme' and the *Tristan und Isolde* love

duet) to her in 1853, and shared with her his developing interest in the philosophy of Schopenhauer from 1854 onwards. She was an aspiring poet and author, and almost certainly found with Wagner common passions that she could not share with her husband. Their relationship appears to have intensified following the Wesendonck's move to the 'Green Hill' in Enge, an affluent suburb of Zürich in 1857, and their offer of the Asyl, a smaller house in the grounds to the Wagners for a nominal rent. During the summer of that year, Wagner ceased work on *Siegfried* and devoted himself to the libretto of *Tristan und Isolde*, 'an artistic mission as passionate as his sexual desires' (Samuel, 2008, p.103), which, in the case of his relationship with Mathilde however were almost certainly unconsummated. After a scandal involving intercepted letters, after which he had to leave Zürich in the summer of 1858, Wagner wrote to both his wife Minna and his sister Clara protesting the 'purity of these relations' that 'never offended against morality', and to Mathilde the same year of 'a crime which could not be so much as thought of' (Ellis, 1905, p.25). Their relationship was undoubtedly intense, but never overstepped 'the limits of upper middle class decorum' (Deathridge, 2008, p.117). Wagner wrote to Liszt at the time of 'love as terrible torment' (ibid, p.118) and as Millington observes, it is 'implausible' that *Tristan und Isolde* 'could have been composed at a time of emotional fulfillment' (Millington, 1992, p.120). Instead, the more optimistic songs were 'the symbolic expression of a mutual feeling that could not be displayed openly' (Voss, 1976), and perhaps the embodiment of their shared understanding of Schopenhauer's notion of the renunciation of the Will.

In some ways more complicated is Wagner's peculiar relationship with Otto Wesendonck, the husband of his muse, who continued to support him artistically and financially when both his conservative musical tastes (Dürer, 1999, p.44) and his social humiliation might suggest otherwise. Of all the roles in Wagner with which he has been compared, the most apt is probably King Marke, honourable to the end in his treatment of both Tristan and Isolde, although Wagner may have originally been thinking of the more vengeful Hundig in *Die Walküre*. The argument that he was dominated by his younger wife does not bear scrutiny; Walton (2002, p.37) shows that he had persuaded her to change her name from Agnes to Mathilde before marriage, without being aware until after his death that this was the name of his first wife and a younger sister, both of whom had died young and that his family history was a 'strange mesh of latently incestuous relationships' (ibid, p.44), the links with these themes in Wagner's work (*Walküre*, *Lohengrin* and *Tristan und Isolde*) being 'too many and too striking' (ibid, p.46) to be written off as mere coincidence. Whatever the reasons, they raise interesting questions on the relationship between Wagner, the 'Master' and Mathilde, often addressed 'my child' in his correspondence (Ellis, 1905).

Exactly when Mathilde wrote the poems, or whether she asked Wagner to set them is not known. Only fragments of her letters to him survive, and virtually none at all from the 1850s, probably destroyed by Minna (his wife at the time), Cosima (his second wife) or even Wagner himself. Nonetheless, giving musical voice to what he believed to be Mathilde's intentions was evidently of paramount importance during the period he was living in the Asyl, enabling him to overlook the 'amateurishness of the texts' (Millington, 1992, p.318) and set them to some of his most beautiful music. Each of the poems has some direct and immediate resonance with either Wagner's persona, his circumstances or his other works, although Deathridge notes that while Wagner's phraseology may be detected here and there, more significant is perhaps 'a conscious attempt to make her style distinct' (2008, p.129), borrowing more from the German romantic tradition of Goethe and Schiller than Wagner's favoured medieval sources.

Wagner wrote the first four songs for pianoforte accompaniment, orchestrating only 'Traüme'. The remainder of the songs were orchestrated by Felix Mottl in 1880, and all references are to the score of this version, which follows very closely Wagner's style (Hazelwood 2005). The more recent and less conventional orchestration by Hans Werner Henze (1976) is for a smaller chamber orchestra.

'Der Engel', the first song in the cycle was probably written on 30 November 1857, although Manitt (2006, p.17) cites evidence that it might have been earlier. In either case, this was the same time as Wagner was completing the first act of *Tristan und Isolde* - the first draft of the verse poem had been completed in September and read to a small audience, including the Wesendoncks. On 31 December of that year, he wrote a short poem for Mathilde celebrating this milestone, and dedicating the work to 'the angel who has lifted me so high' (Ellis, 1905, p.17). Hazelwood (2005) suggests that Mathilde also saw Wagner as her angel; in the final verse of the poem, the voice changes to the first person ('an angel has come down to *me*') and at this stage, the relationship between the author of the words and the composer of the music becomes intertwined, much as Tristan and Isolde do in the opera. In the opera however, what Groos describes as a 'meta-personal relationship' (1988, p.472) is marked by a move to the third person, where each sings about the other ('no longer Isolde' and 'no longer Tristan') as if part of a single being.

Angels have a long association with music, poetry and other forms of literature, 'Der Engel' being neither the first nor the last song to bear that title. In theological terms, angels have several specific functions; most often, they are God's messengers, and the word originates from the Greek

(ἄγγελος), although they are also more generally 'spiritual beings intermediate between God and men' (Pope 1907). However, they are also seen in the role of guardians of human souls, and even though this does not carry the strength of an article of faith, it is widely accepted in the Christian theology (Pope 1910). It is in this sense that Wagner and Mathilde appear to be using the term.

Harmonically, it is probably the most straightforward of the five songs, with the simplicity of the harmony designed to 'lend sincerity to the text' (Weiler, 2006, p.268). The song begins and ends in G major, although in the process passing through both conventional (G minor and D major) and unconventional (F major) modulations. The 'lightly arpeggiated texture' (ibid.) of the opening to the song, represented by muted strings in Mottl's orchestration (Appendix 1A ❶) is harp-like, the most angelic of instruments. On the word 'engel' in the 6th bar, the voice rises by a perfect fourth ❷ from G to C; this same rising interval accompanies each of the three occurrence of the word in the song, although a tone higher on each occasion. The word is held for an elongated five beats over the barline, while the accompaniment, joined by flutes in the orchestrated version drops to F major ❸, sinking further to E major on the word 'Himmels' before returning to the tonic for the end of the first verse. The gently falling bassline (punctuated by soft double bass pizzicato) forms an earthly grounding against which the melody soars, Wagner's interpretation of Mathilde's secret desires.

In German, the poem is the most symmetrical of the cycle comprising four verses, each of four lines. The first two verses are similar in that each line contains eight syllables. The third verse has only seven syllables to a line, while the first two lines of the fourth and final verse are extended to ten and eight syllables respectively. The rhyme however remains constant in pairs throughout the poem, 'feminine' and syllabic for the most part, although more 'masculine', with the emphasis on the final syllable of each word in the third verse, when the angel (Wagner) floats down to earth.

Even though the verses are regular, the song is not set strophically, and Wagner himself did not generally favour terminal rhyme or repetitive musical structures (Samuels, 2008, p.94). The second verse starts in G minor, and the accompaniment moves to soft, staccato quavers, the chords following the voice line. In Mottl's, orchestration, the darker, more brooding words full of anxiety, dread and hiding from the world are carried by clarinets and bassoons ❹, and the word 'tears' is accompanied by the Tristan chord ❺ (F#, C, D, A), modulating to E minor for the start of the third verse. The word 'prayer' is accompanied by a rising fourth in the first half of the verse, a harbinger for the angel in the second half, rising to a high D, and then moving melismatically up again to a G, the highest note in the song. After sinking to accompany the angel floating down, the melody again

carries the words higher, concluding the verse on 'lifting to heaven' on a high F# over an F# major chord. ⑥

The final verse is the most densely chromatic part of the song, marked *sehr ruhig* in the score. It drops from F# major to E major, reflecting the modulation in the first verse, passing through C major as on glistening wings, marked *mit Enthusiasmus*, the angel leads away from pain (an emphasised B on a 9th over an A major chord) concluding the song in G major.

Although he always intended it to be part of the cycle, Wagner also prepared a version of 'Traüme' for violin and small orchestra, to be performed under Mathilde Wesendonck's window on the morning of her 29th birthday in 1857. Touching as this gesture might have been, it lends weight to the argument that for Wagner, 'the music is the poetic intention, that it pulls the poetry along with it' (Weiler, 2006, p270), and that Mathilde's words were merely a convenient vehicle on which to hang them. It has been suggested that of all the poems, 'Traüme' is the most operatic and least like traditional Lied, where 'the music suffices to explain the content of the poem' (Mannitt, 2006 p.24, citing Dürr (1992)). Both 'Traüme' and 'Im Treibhaus' are generally recognised to be early studies for *Tristan und Isolde*, although Wagner did not add a subtitle to this effect until he had completed the second act of the opera in Venice the following year (Manitt, 2006, p.20).

Dreams, and their relationship to memory were an important theme in Schopenhauer's philosophy that both Wagner and Mathilde had been studying (Magee, 2000, p.254) and indeed, Schopenhauer was an important although undercredited influence on Freud (Young and Brook 1994). Dreams had also been significant for poets of the Romantic era as well, with whose work Mathilde's poems are sometimes compared (Deathridge, 2008, p.129). The poem begins with the transitory nature of dreams, then emphasises their aspirational nature, culminating in what Wagner probably saw as a reference to himself ('thinking only of one') that becomes the climax of the song. The final two verses, as day approaches suggest the fading of dreams before awakening, with the ending, 'and then sink into the grave' becoming the metaphor used by Wagner at the end of *Tristan und Isolde*; the verb 'sinken' also opens the love duet in the second act. However, while the lovers in the opera welcome the end of the day and the coming of the night, Mathilde's poem appears to look forward to daybreak, when 'dreams bloom fairer every day'. The complex relationship between the poet's intentions, the composer's desires and their subsequent reworking in the opera probably explains why this song was the one he chose to perform on her birthday.

The published version of the song begins with sixteen bars of accompaniment before the voice enters, the longest introduction to any of the songs. The original version, written on the previous day, appears to have begun with the voice entry at what is now Bar 17 (Gauldin, 1979, p.35); Wagner then borrowed from the Coda to form an introduction, probably with the orchestrated version in mind, and using the Tristan chord (F, Ab, Cb, Eb) at bars 5 and 6 (Appendix 1E ❶), before settling back into Ab major, Wagner's 'key of love' for the voice entry ❷. The same accompaniment is used at the beginning of 'O sink' hernieder' in *Tristan und Isolde* (Wagner, 1973, p.348), although as Gauldin observes, here Wagner introduces for the first time an element of syncopation to 'obscure the underlying pulse' (1979, p.37), whereas the version in the song is regular. Using Shenkerian (voice-leading) analysis, Gauldin suggests that similarities in the tonal progression between the song and the opera are significant enough to suggest that the one is a parody of the other. It could also however be seen as an indication of Wagner's use of the 'most profound and delicate ... art of transition' (Daverio, 2008, p.126), melodic, harmonic and rhythmic, which he described at length in correspondence with Mathilde after he had left Zurich, and was completing *Tristan und Isolde* in Venice. It was the beginning of his concept of 'infinite melody', first outlined in *Music of the Future* (Wagner, 1895) whereby words are emancipated from 'the constraints of rhyming, metrical verse' (Millington, 1992, p.234). As Samuels suggests, significantly 'the melody [male] ... joins with the harmony [female] as if in a sexual act' (2008, p.94). There is no repetition of words anywhere in the cycle, the melody alone serving as the means of 'expressing the inexpressible' (Weiler, 2006, p.270). The setting moves through a tonal landscape which, while beginning and ending in Ab major, passes through A minor, C minor and Bb major. The Ab tonality is however emphasised throughout the introduction and conclusion with pedal tones carried by muted cellos in the orchestrated version. Except for its first appearance in bar 19, the word *Traüme* is always a 9th above Bb major, C major and finally Eb major at the final forte and climax of the song in bar 48 ❸, maintaining an sense of unworldly suspense.

Weiler (2006) highlights the inherent lack of tension in the song, compared to the others, reflect the quietness of night-time and sleep. The dynamic marking rarely rises above *piano*, only reaching *forte* at the beginning of the third and fourth verses on the word *Traüme*, although the climactic *Traüme* is usually sung *fortissimo*, and held for slightly longer. For the fifth and final verse, Wagner's markings of *nachlassend* and *immer mehr nachlassend* (even more held back) signal a release of tension. It is at this point that Wagner also introduces what will become one of the night motifs in *Tristan und Isolde* (bars 61-64 ❹; Wagner, 1973, p.360), 'Niewiederer wachens', although in the song, it appears to accompany the moments before awakening. It is also important to note that



motifs in *Tristan und Isolde* are harmonic rather than melodic (Samuels, 2008, p.97), and tied more to changing emotional states than to specific objects or characters. Scruton (2004, p.78) describes them as 'musical magnets, around which meaning slowly accumulates'.

Of the other songs, 'Stehe still!', the second song espouses most clearly Mathilde's interpretation of the philosophy of Schopenhauer. Set against the 'roaring and rushing wheel of time', the noise and imagery of factories and railways being a popular early modernist theme, the slurred semiquaver accompaniment begins darkly and uncertainly in C minor, moving to a serene C major in the final verse, 'when each hope's fulfillment is finished', effectively a Schopenhaurian renunciation of the Will and of desire, which can never be truly satisfied (Samuels, 2008, p.104). 'Im Treibhaus', about plants in a greenhouse and possibly the most naïve of the poems, becomes, in Wagner's hands a poignant commentary on the impossibility of earthly fulfillment, and release only through death - 'Unsre Heimat ist nicht hier!' (Appendix 1C ❶) is possibly the most telling phrase in the cycle, and impossible to translate. The end of the penultimate verse, veiled in the darkness of silence ❷, echoes Wagner's letter to Liszt describing the conception of *Tristan und Isolde* (Spencer and Millington, 1987, p.323-4), of which Mathilde must have been aware. The sentiment and the music to the song are also closely tied to Act III of the opera when a dying Tristan languishes in Brittany, hallucinating about the return of Isolde. The music is dark, carried increasingly by cellos, basses and bassoons in the orchestrated version, the 'heavy drops' in the final verse being marked by soft pizzicato strings. (Hazelwood, 2005). 'Shmerzen', the penultimate song begins with the same chord as Act II of *Tristan und Isolde*, and the phrase 'proud victorious hero' in the second verse is accompanied by the Tristan chord (Appendix 1D ❶). The theme of the song is again earthly suffering, life and death being marked by the setting sun.

Songs about unrequited love are commonplace; those about love that is requited but unconsumed less usual; those involving a relationship as complex as that between Wagner and the Wesendoncks are almost certainly unique. After completing *Tristan und Isolde* in Venice however, his feelings for Mathilde appear to have cooled somewhat (Deathridge, 2008, p.162), although he still referred to her as 'my first and only love' in 1863 (Millington, 1992, p.184) and they continued an extensive musical and philosophical correspondence for several years. The Wesendoncks also maintained their financial support for the Wagner project, and were present at significant premieres of his works which they had partly funded. However, the published title of the songs in 1862 carried no mention of Mathilde Wesendonck, nor was she credited as author of the poems and it appears that Wagner had 'subtly begun to erase all traces of her' (Deathridge, 2008, p.125) from his artistic

legacy after meeting his future wife, Cosima von Bülow in 1864. In the end, the words to the songs that today bear her name, although no doubt conveying some measure of her own secret intentions become drowned by the music that conveys Wagner's interpretation of those intentions, and which almost inevitably assumes primacy; profound ideas that are expounded at even greater length in the opera with which they are so closely connected, and after which, 'no other pair of lovers ... can ever be the same again' (ibid. p.131).

*3,973 words*

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## Appendix 1 - Music

### Funf Gedichte für eine Frauenstimme, WWV 91, Wagner, R. (1862)

- A Der Engel, (orchestration by Felix Mottl)
- B Stehe still! (piano score)
- C Im Treibhaus (piano score)
- D Schmerzen (piano score)
- E Träume (orchestration by the composer)

[[http://imslp.org/wiki/5\\_Gedichte\\_f%C3%BCr\\_eine\\_Frauenstimme,\\_WWV\\_91\\_%28Wagner,\\_Richard%29](http://imslp.org/wiki/5_Gedichte_f%C3%BCr_eine_Frauenstimme,_WWV_91_%28Wagner,_Richard%29)]

## Appendix 2 – Text of the songs in German and English

- A Der Engel (The Angel)
- B Stehe still! (Stand Still)
- C Im Treibhaus (In the Greenhouse)
- D Schmerzen (Pain)
- E Träume (Dreams)

## Appendix 3 – Recordings (CD)

Wagner, R. (orch. F. Mottl) *Funf Gedichte für eine Frauenstimme*, op. 91  
Kirsten Flagstad  
Berlin Stadtischen Opera Orchestra, conductor Georges Sebastian  
Audite23.416  
Recorded 1952

Wagner, R. (orch. H.W.Henze) *Funf Gedichte für eine Frauenstimme*, op. 91  
Birgit Schickler  
Jena Philharmonic Orchestra, conductor Paulus Christmann  
COV30102  
Recorded 2002