

THE POETS OF SPOHR'S SECHS DEUTSCHE LIEDER OP. 94

by Peter Skrine

The Professor of German in the University of Bristol and co-author with Eda Sagarra (Trinity College, Dublin) of A Companion to German Literature (Blackwell, 1997) continues his occasional series intended to provide readers and performers of Spohr's songs with some awareness of what their texts mean, who wrote them, and what may lie or may have lain behind them.

SPOHR began to write his Opus 94 set of German songs (for alto or baritone) in October 1835 shortly after his engagement to the 29-year-old Marianne Pfeiffer in the autumn of that year. They were married on January 3, 1836, and he completed the set that same month. They were published by Simrock in 1837. They therefore are, or should be, full of happiness. But over them hangs the memory of searing grief. On November 20, 1834 Dorette had died. With his heartbroken youngest daughter, Therese, he had promptly fled from the city of Kassel and the funeral arrangements. They took rooms in Wilhelmshöhe, some miles outside the city, and there attempted to 'restore the composure they needed by long and strenuous walks through the wintry woods around it,' as Spohr told his sister-in-law, Wilhelmine Scheidler, in a letter written the same day. The first song in the set captures this mood in its words and music.

1. Anon

Lied der Harfnerin

Schweig, o Herz! Warum dies bange Sehnen
Nach dem süßen längst verlorenen Glück?
Ach! Es rufen deine heissen Tränen
Das Verschwundne doch nicht mehr zurück.
Hin ist hin! Den schönen Traum des Lebens,
Diese Paradieseswelt der Phantasie,
Ach! Du suchst sie immer noch vergebens,
Suchst und suchst, und findest sie doch nie!
 Von den Kränzen die ich mir gewunden
 In den Tagen der Begeisterung,
 Aus der Liebe wonnevollen Stunden
 Blieb mir nichts als die Erinnerung.
 Meines Traumes glühend schöne Farben
 Sind nun längst verwischt, verblüht, sind tot,
 Die Erinn' rung lässt die Sehnsucht darben
 Wo einst Liebe ihr den Nektar bot.

Be silent, heart! Why this anxious longing for sweet but long lost happiness?
Alas! Your burning tears will not be able to call back what has vanished.
It's gone for good. The lovely dream of life, that paradise of the imagination,
Is one you keep on searching for in vain; you search and search, yet cannot ever find it!
 Of all the garlands which I wove myself in times of optimism,
 And of the blissful hours of love, nothing is left me but the memory.

My dream's glowingly lovely colours have long since been erased, they have faded and are dead,

Memory lets longing starve where love once fed it on nectar.

THE words of the first song in Op. 94 are by Anon, that 'unknown poet' whose contributions to the great German song tradition have been considerable. Their relevance to the tragic loss of his wife, Dorette, is, however, obvious. Dorette Scheidler was a famous harpist. They had met soon after Spohr took up his first post as Konzertmeister in Gotha, October 1, 1805, had established a close musical rapport and fallen in love: their marriage took place on February 2, 1806. The young violin virtuoso and his harpist wife soon became well known on the musical scenes of Germany and other countries, too. The poem approaches the composer's personal loss obliquely. By putting its words into the mouth of the woman harpist herself, his grief is mediated; this effect is complemented by the obvious associations between it and the poems entitled 'Wer sich der Einsamkeit ergibt' ('He who gives himself up to solitude') and 'Wer nie sein Brot mit Tränen aß' ('Who has never watered his bread with tears'), the first two so-called 'Songs of the Harpist' from Goethe's novel, *Wilhelm Meister* (1795-6), which had already been set to music by Zelter in 1795 (and again in 1816) and by Schubert in 1826. The torment and loneliness of loss expressed by Goethe is developed in other directions in Spohr's 'Lied der Harfnerin', where the experience of bereavement is described as putting an end to a career garlanded by success and satisfaction — or was it but a dream? Indeed the words are related so closely, if not directly, to Spohr's own recent experience that it is tempting to speculate that the song's composer may have written its text as well. 'Anon' has no doubt often been a pseudonym for authors who for personal or political reasons felt it necessary to conceal their identity. Moreover, since the rediscovery of folk poetry in Britain and Germany in the later eighteenth century, 'anon' had advanced from being a nonentity to being an indication that the poem in question was the work of mankind's creative spirit rather than of a specific poet. Yet somebody must have written it. Are there any clues? Where, to the right of the title, the other songs in the published edition of Op.94 carry the names of their poets, this song merely states 'L: Spohr - Op: 94'. This was normal practice. By preserving anonymity Spohr shares his grief, expressing it on behalf of us all.

2. Schmid

Bitte, bitte!

Bitte, bitte! Einen Blick aus den holden blauen Augen;

gönne mir das süsse Glück Himmelshoffnung einzusaugen!

Bitte, bitte! Einen Gruss aus dem schöngeformten Munde;

Gönne mir den Hochgenuss einer schön durchlebten Stunde!

Bitte, bitte! Einen Schwur ew'ger Liebe ew'ger Treue;

In dem Tempel der Natur kröne unsre Bundesweihe!

Bitte, bitte! Reiche mir einen Kuss von deinen Lippen,

Neige Dich herab zu mir, lass mich Himmelsbalsam nippen!

Please, please, grant me just one glance from your lovely blue eyes

And the sweet happiness of imbibing a hope of heaven!

Please, please, grant me a greeting from your shapely mouth,

And the delight of one happily spent hour!

Please, please, swear me your eternal love and fidelity,

And crown our union in the temple of nature!

Please, please give me a kiss from your lips;

Incline yourself to me and let me savour the balm of heaven!

UNLIKE the previous song, which evoked Dorette and the past, 'Bitte, bitte!' looks to the future and is implicitly dedicated to Marianne, a talented pianist with whom Spohr saw hopes of recreating their working partnership as a sound basis for marriage and mutual fulfilment despite the disparity of age between them: he had already turned fifty, she was twenty-nine. The author of its text is uncertain. Schmidt, like Smith, is a common surname, and a number of minor poets bore it. Could it have been Georg Philipp Schmidt, known as Schmidt of Lübeck? He was born in the Hanseatic port on January 1, 1766 and studied medicine at Jena, where he knew Schiller — like him a doctor by training — as well as Goethe, Wieland and Herder, and was drawn to the 'bardic' mode associated with Klopstock and his admirers, the young poets of the 'Göttinger Hainbund', such as the tender Ludwig Hölty, who successfully fused fashionable 'Ossianic' melancholy with a cult of Nature, folksong and Germanic traditions symbolized by the grove of trees in which they swore eternal friendship. The third stanza of the poem would support this attribution. Schmidt of Lübeck was certainly popular during Spohr's lifetime: a collected edition of his poems appeared in Altona in 1821, followed by an enlarged edition in 1847, and he caught the attention of other composers including Schubert, who set his poem 'Der Wanderer' in 1816 and was haunted by it ever after.

A different attribution suggests itself, however. 'Schmidt' was the cover-name of Karl Pfeiffer, Spohr's friend, collaborator, and fellow liberal. Pfeiffer had written the libretto for his operas *Pietro von Abano* (1827) and *Der Alchymist* (1829), and was the author of the poem on which the Fourth Symphony ('Die Weihe der Töne') is based. Indeed the symphony was in a sense a lament on Pfeiffer's early death in 1831 at the age of twenty-eight.¹

That event, and the death in the same year of Spohr's brother Ferdinand, who had produced the piano reductions of both operas, marked a change of mood in Spohr's life which was to culminate in 1834 in the death of Dorette. But Pfeiffer was also the brother of Marianne, and Marianne now embodied his hope that better, happier times might after all return — and that is the sentiment the song conveys.

3. Robert Reinick (1805-1852)

Der Bleicherin Nachtlied

Wellen blinkten durch die Nacht,
 Blass der Mond am Himmel stand,
 Mägdlein sass an Ufers Rand,
 Hielt bei ihrem Leinen Wacht,
 Sang in wildem Melodei'n
 In die weite Nacht hinein:
 Bleiche, bleiche weisses Lein
 In des stillen Mondes Hut,
 Bist du bleich, dann bist du gut,
 Bist du bleich, dann bist du rein.
 Bleiche, bleiche weisses Lein,
 Bleich muss alles Ende sein!

War ein töricht Mägdlein,
 Rot und frisch mein Angesicht
 Rote Wangen taugen nicht,
 Locken Unglück nur herein.
 Bleiche, bleiche weisses Lein,
 Bleich muss alles Ende sein!
 Sonne gibt zu lichten Schein,

Lässt dem Herzen keine Rast;
Ist der Tag nur erst erwacht,
Wird das Herz auch ruhig sein.
Bleiche, bleiche weisses Lein,
Bleich muss alles Ende sein!

Waves sparkled through the night, pale the moon stood in the sky,
As the little maid sat at the water's edge keeping watch over her linen
And singing her wild melody far out into the night.
Bleach, bleach, my white linen, in the care of the silent moon;
If you are bleached pale then you are clean. Bleach, bleach, my white linen;
The end of all things must be pale.

I was a foolish little maid, red and fresh of face; but red cheeks are not worth having;
They just attract misfortune and unhappiness. Bleach, bleach, my white linen;
The end of all things must be pale.
The sun's light is too bright; it gives the heart no rest; but when the day has just awoken
Then the heart will be at peace. Bleach, bleach, my white linen;
The end of all things must be pale.

THE urgent optimism of the second song gives way to a forlorn mood in this haunting song. Spohr set Reinick on a number of occasions, notably in his later set of German songs Op. 103, and he has therefore already been considered in my previous article in *Spohr Journal* 25 (Winter 1998, pp. 11-20). Here we find him in more sombre mood. The poem is a kind of folk-ballad though without the narrative element. Instead Reinick concentrates on contrasts of light and shade, and by skilful attention to rhythm and repetition conjures up a picture of nocturnal loneliness and despair as the young washerwoman sings her song with its bleak premonitions of death.

4. Wilhelm Müller (1794-1827)

Ungeduld

Ich schnitt' es gern in alle Rinden ein,
ich grub' es gern in jedes Kieselstein,
Ich möcht' es sä'n auf jedes frische Beet
Mit Kressensamen, der es schnell verrät,
Auf jeden weissen Zettel möcht' ich's schreiben:
Dein ist mein Herz
Dein ist mein Herz,
Und soll es ewig bleiben.
Ich möcht' mir ziehen einen jungen Star,
Bis das er spräch die Worte rein und klar,
Bis er sie spräch mit meines Mundes Klang,
Mit meines Herzens vollem heissen Drang,
Dann säng er hell durch ihre Fensterscheiben:
Dein ist mein Herz,
Dein ist mein Herz,
Und soll es ewig bleiben.
Ich mein' es müsst' in meinen Augen stehn,
Auf meinen Wangen müsst man's brennen sehn,

Zu lesen wär's auf meinem stummen Mund,
Ein jeder Atemzug gäb's laut ihr kund,
Und sie merkt nichts von all' dem bangen Treiben;
Dein ist mein Herz,
Dein ist mein Herz,
Und soll es ewig bleiben.

I'd like to cut it into the bark of every tree, I'd like to carve it into every pebble;
I'd love to sow it on every fresh-dug bed with cress seeds which would soon reveal it;
On every white page I'd love to write
'Yours is my heart, yours is my heart, and shall be yours forever!'
I'd like to train a young starling to speak the words audibly and clearly,
Train him to speak them with the sound of my voice
And with all the passionate urgency of my heart;
Then, through her casement, he would sing out loud and clear:
'Yours is my heart, yours is my heart, and shall be yours forever!'
I think it must be obvious in my eyes, that it must be visible burning on my cheeks,
That it can be read from my silent mouth
And that each breath proclaims it aloud;
Yet she notices nothing of all this tremulous urgency:
'Yours is my heart, yours is my heart, and shall be yours forever!'

LOOKING back, we see Spohr here in open competition with another, greater song-writer: Schubert. The poem is from *Die schöne Müllerin*, the cycle which Schubert had set in 1823. Wilhelm Müller, its author, was born in Dessau in 1794 and died in 1827. Like Schubert, he packed a lot into an all too brief life. He fought in the last stages of the Napoleonic Wars, became a notable classicist, a librarian, an expert on Greek folksong and, like Byron, a champion of Greek independence, earning himself the epithet 'Griechen-Müller' to distinguish him from the many other men of note who share his workaday name. His translation of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* is a notable contribution to Germany's obsession with Shakespeare and his age, and to the efforts of Goethe and others to create a national literature of international dimensions, with the figure of Faust at its centre. But his most famous work is the oddly titled *Aus den hinterlassenen Papieren eines reisenden Waldhornisten* ('From the posthumous papers of a travelling horn-player', 1821), a characteristically romantic fusion of whimsical escapism and intense emotion which contains the *Schöne Müllerin* and *Winterreise* poems which have kept Müller's name alive. In recent years his stock, like Spohr's, has been steadily rising, and he is at last being accepted as a writer of complex aesthetic and psychological distinction.

5. Siegfried August Mahlmann (1771-1826)

Schwermut

Als mein Leben voll Blumen hing,
Als ich im fliegenden Kleide
Lächelnd der Zukunft entgegen ging,
Wie klopfte mein Busen voll Hoffnung und Freude!
Ach hin ist hin, und tot ist tot!
Euch verschwundene schöne Tage
Weckt kein Morgenrot!
Freundschaft als mich dein Arm unwand,

Als ich in seligen Stunden
Endlich ein Herz wie das meine fand,
Da heilten sie alle die blutenden Wunden!
Ach hin ist hin, und tot ist tot!
Was der Zeiten Flug zertrennte,
Eint kein Morgenrot!

Als mein Busen voll Liebe schlug,
Als mich der höchste der Triebe
Über die Nebel der Erde trug,
Wie war ich so selig im Arme der Liebe!
Ach hin ist hin, und tot ist tot!
Um das Grab gestorbner Liebe
Glänzt kein Morgenrot

Trostlos steh' ich voll bitterm Schmerz
Einsam im bangen Ermatten!
Brich o du armes verwaistes Herz,
Und suche dir Frieden im Reiche der Schatten!
Ach hin ist hin, und tot ist tot!
Schimm're bald auf meinen Hügel
Goldnes Morgenrot!

When my life was in full flower and in my billowing dress I hastened smiling towards the future,
how my bosom palpitated with hope and pleasure!

But all is over and as dead as can be!

Lovely days, vanished, no sunrise will reawaken you.

When, friendship, your arm embraced me, and at last, in moments of bliss, I found a heart
like my own, all the bleeding wounds healed.

But all is over and as dead as can be!

What the flight of time has severed no sunrise can reunite.

When, full of love, my bosom beat and the noblest of urges lifted me above the mists of the earth,
how happy I was in the arms of love!

But all is over and as dead as can be!

Over love's grave no sunrise gleams.

Disconsolate I stand in bitter pain, alone, faint with anguish!

Break, poor orphaned heart,

Seek peace in the realm of the shades!

All is over and as dead as can be!

Shine soon on my grave, golden sunrise.

MAHLMANN was born in Leipzig, the centre of German publishing, on May 13, 1771 and died there on December 16, 1826. He spent most of his career in his busy and prosperous home-town, though as a young man he experienced a long sojourn in Riga as a private tutor, and saw a good deal of Russia and Scandinavia as well. When he came home it was with hopes of setting himself up as a publisher. Initial setbacks were followed in 1805 by his appointment as editor of the fashionable *Zeitung für die elegante Welt*, from 1810 to 1817 he managed the *Leipziger Zeitung*, a newspaper which he steered adroitly through the turbulent politics of the era which saw the triumph and fall of Napoleon and the nearby Battle of Leipzig (1813). A staunch freemason in later life, he was in his younger days a talented satirist in the romantic-ironic vein perfected by his

friend Ludwig Tieck, one of Germany's major Romantic writers. His own poems appeared in 1825 and ran to five editions by 1863; their fluency and metrical variety appealed to composers such as Hummel and Reichardt, and some occur in popular song-books well into the twentieth century. It is therefore not surprising that they attracted Spohr's attention. The poem he selected emphasizes the sadness that dominates the Op. 94 set. The contrasts Mahlmann develops between 'then', 'now', and 'tomorrow' end not so much in resignation as in despair. Dorette seems to be singing.

6. Anon

Sonntag und Montag

(Music marked *vivace*, the voice part 'munter')

Heute ist Sonntag und Montag ist morgen:

Heute gibt's Freuden und morgen gibt's Sorgen.

Tanzt und singt und freuet euch heut,

Dass euch am Montag der Sonntag nicht reut.

Lustig ihr Bursche! Nehm' jeder sein Mädchen;

Nimm du die Lisel, ich nehme mein Gretchen;

Heute gibt willig das Liebchen den Kuss,

Den man am Montage stehlen ihr muss!

Schwinget das Glas!

Glüt's auch oben im Stübchen,

Scheint euch noch einmal so lieblich das Liebchen.

Tanzt und singt und freuet euch heut',

Dass euch am Montag der Sonntag nicht reut.

Today is Sunday, and Monday's tomorrow; today there is fun, and worry tomorrow.

Dance, sing and be happy today so that on Monday you don't regret wasting your Sunday.

To it, boys: each of you take your girl; you take Lisel, and I'll take my Gretchen;

Today a girlfriend will willingly give us the kiss which on Monday we'll have to steal from her.

Raise your glasses!

When the light's on in the little room your girlfriend will seem to you twice as lovely;

Dance, sing and be happy today so that on Monday you don't regret wasting your Sunday.

IS THIS by Spohr? Whoever its author, this amiable compilation of folksong and student-song motifs — amusingly interrupted by a characteristically Germanic toast — restores stability at the end of a set of songs which covered a wide emotional span. Its moral — make the most of Sundays so that on Mondays you don't feel you have wasted them — harmonizes the two threads that run through the whole of Op. 94. Spohr's new-found happiness in his relationship with Marianne bodes well and will prosper precisely because his relationship with Dorette was so close and complete, and so satisfying emotionally as well as artistically.

In overall structure it may be said that Op. 94 is particularly characteristic of Spohr because of the ways it reflects, in miniature, the sense of emotional, moral and aesthetic purpose typical of the man and his music at a period of central importance in his creative and personal life.

Note:

1) See 'The Context of Spohr's Symphony No. 4' in *Spohr Journal* 20 (1993), pp. 4-8.