

Wolf's Great Sensitivity Integrating the Poetic Structure and Meaning into Music:

A Musical Analysis of His Lied, An eine Äeolsharfe

*The University
of Texas
at Austin*

*Undergraduate
Research
Journal*

*Volume 1
Spring 2002*

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Most music historians and scholars agree that Hugo Wolf contributed significantly to the development of the art song in the second half of the nineteenth century. Eric Sams and Graham Johnson describe this famous and prolific art song composer as “a representative of the opposite end of the spectrum of lied composition [from Schubert]” (677), and indeed, Wolf’s historical status in the lied could be compared to that of Brahms in the genre of symphony. Especially, as a Wagnerian advocate, Wolf achieved a new standard in art song composition in which both the poem and music are treated equally as an inseparable entity. In this model, all the musical devices unmistakably support and reinforce the meanings and connotations of the poem. To this point, Sams and Johnson state: “As an originator rather than a traditionalist, he had to create his own models by assimilating the wide variety of

vocal and keyboard techniques and devices needed to express the deep emotive content of verse” (677). Lawrence Kramer wrote similarly about Wolf’s interest in poetic setting: “[Wolf] understood [poetry] preternaturally well, and ‘expressed’ them to perfection by repeating their sound and meaning in the form of music...Wolf was more intent on perfect declamation than most lied composers, and he made a point of demanding high-quality poetry” (186).

Thus, as these and other music scholars have pointed out, there is no doubt that Wolf deals carefully with the poet’s structure and declamation in his music. The close synthesis of poetry and music interested Wolf to such an extent that he wanted the poem declaimed on stage prior to the performance of his songs. With such a close interaction of poetry and music, it can be insightful to first analyze each of these components independently.

In this regard, I will focus on two main tasks in this paper. First, I will analyze Wolf’s technique of integrating poetic and musical structures into his song, and then discuss the aesthetic impact of his technique. Second, I will analyze Wolf’s extensive use of musical devices to incorporate poetic meaning into his songs. The use of

radical harmonic progressions which deviate from the traditional harmonic idiom, irregular voice leadings, and interesting rhetorical gestures will be emphasized in my discussion with regard to text painting.

Wolf’s collection, *Gedichte von Eduard Mörike*,¹ has many songs that represent his distinctive compositional features. Wolf loved Mörike’s poems more than that of any others because Mörike’s poems contain the psychological depths and avoidance of overt subjectivity, which are Wolf’s concern. The set of Mörike’s Fifty-three songs was composed in one year, between 16 February 1888 and 26 November 1888, and these belong to Wolf’s third stylistic period (Sams and Youens 491-493).² I will analyze his eleventh song, *An eine Äeolsharfe*, which was composed on 15 April 1888. This poem consists of two stanzas. The first stanza has eighteen lines, and the second stanza contains seven. To illustrate how the composer creates a musical structure by integrating its poetic structure in the art song, a careful examination of

¹ This is the song collection published in 1889, which consists of 53 Wolf’s songs using Mörike’s poem.

² Eric Sams and Susan Youens divide Wolf’s stylistic periods into four: the first period is labeled ‘formative year’ (1860 – 1883); the second period ‘years of uncertainty’ (1883 – 1887); the third period as ‘mastery and fame’ (1888-1897); and the fourth ‘breakdown and terminal illness’ (1897 – 1903) (463).

Table 1 THE POETIC STRUCTURE

Stanza	Division by Grammar	Division by Meaning
I (1st-18th)	First: 1st-7th line	First: 1st-7th line – address to the harp
	Second: 8th-11th line	Second: 8th-18th line – description of the harp’s sound played by winds which came from far away
	Third: 12th-18th line	
II (19th-25th)	Fourth: 19th-23rd line	Third: 19th-25th line – connects harp, wind and poet’s soul
	Fifth: 24th-25th line	

Table 2 THE MUSICAL STRUCTURE OF THE LIED, AN EINE ÄEOLSHARFE

Division by Meaning	Musical Structure by Wolf
First: 1st-7th line	A Section – Mm. 1-12: recitative like section
Second: 8th-18th line	B Section – Mm. 13-69: aria like section (An interlude between the second and third of poem)
Third: 19th-25th line	

the poem should precede the musical analysis.

Two ways of considering the poetic structure are possible. First, if one observes this poem from a grammatical and syntactical point of view, he would divide the stanzas into three and two parts, respectively. On the other hand, a consideration of the division by meaning of the poem leads us to divide the poem into three parts. The first part consists of the first to seventh lines in which the poet addresses the harp. The second part is the eighth to eighteenth lines, which describe the harp's sound played by winds that came from far away. The third and final part is the nineteenth to twenty-sixth lines, which draw a connection between the harp, the wind, and the poet's soul. Thus, the first and second parts correspond to the first stanza of this poem, and the third part corresponds to the second stanza of this poem. The poetic structure is summarized in Table 1.

Hugo Wolf must have first carefully observed the poetic structure of this poem, and then attempted to integrate it into the musical structure in a distinctive manner. He takes the poetic meaning as his starting point for designing the large-level musical structure. The music is split into two sections: the first section (mm. 1-12) corresponds to the first part of the poem, and the second section the second and third parts of the poem. In this second section, Wolf continues the same pattern of the music throughout the second and third parts of this poem only once with a four-measure piano interlude between them. [SEE TABLE 2]

The musical structure of this piece resembles a recitative and aria pair of the 18th-century Neapolitan opera. A series of chords in the first section of this lied is reminiscent of a simple accompaniment by the basso continuo, which is used to give a harmonic background for the recitative. The recitative section, where Wolf uses some radical harmonic excursions, is more complex than the following aria in terms of harmony. For example, the recitative section of the piece starts not on a tonic, but on a ii in E major. Also, there are sudden shifts of successive dominant-7th chords at mm. 4-8. [SEE EXAMPLE 1]

On the other hand, the aria section starts with an arpeggio figuration on a clear harmonic background, and offers more lyrical melodies than the first section.

Numbers in George Frideric Handel's operas and oratorios, as exemplars of the 18th-century Neapolitan opera, have a similar musical structure as seen in this lied. The pairing of a recitative, with more chromatic harmonic progression and declamatory rhythm, and an aria, with more predictable harmonic progression and lyrical melody, characterize these genres. In Handel's opera, *Serses*, the famous aria "Ombra mai fu" and a preceding recitative, for example, represent such a stylistic association. The recitative section, "Frondi tenere," does not give any sense of establishing a single tonal center overall, but harmonic progressions are broken up into blocks which are connected by some radical voice-leading. Finally, a stable key F major is established together with the initiation of the lyrical and tuneful aria. [SEE EXAMPLE 2]

Example 1

RADICAL HARMONIC EXCURSION:

Non-functional use of dominant 7th chords (the harmonic synopsis at mm. 4-7).

m.4 m.6 m.7

$B\frac{3}{4}$ (=V $\frac{4}{3}$ in E) ——— $C\frac{6}{5}$ ——— $A7$ (= Ger.+6 in C#)

A question arises regarding why Wolf adopted a musical structure typical of the 18th-century opera. The reason seems related to the composer's choice to integrate poetic meaning and the musical structure. The speech-like mood for the first section corresponds to the recitative, whereas the second section expresses an elegant playing, which sounds like a modern harp with its arpeggio-figure. Another reason might be that, as Eric Sams and Susan Youens report, Wolf had already started considering a relationship between musical characteristics and atmospheric expression and had planned to compose an opera since his early career (472). Thus, his prior interest in opera might be another explanation for his adopting an operatic genre.

The grammatical and syntactical division governs the local level of the musical structure, while the division by the poetic contents affects the large-level musical struc-

ture. Following a pattern of punctuation for clause and sentence, the aria section has been divided into four parts. Wolf accents these units by creating some important pauses between parts using an interlude, many cadences, predictable harmonic progressions, sudden changes of harmony, and short rests. Also, each of the four units is distinctive in its treatment of harmony. [SEE TABLE 3]

In part (1) of the aria section, the harmonic progression becomes more predictable than it was in the recitative; it even threatens to become monotonous because of the repetition of a single harmonic progression and immediate resolutions of any chromatic chords. At the beginning of part (2), Wolf builds up more tension through chromatic and embellished harmonic vocabularies, although these progressions can still be readily heard in terms of a traditional harmonic idiom. A cadence is delayed by prolonging the dominant pedal with an inter-

Example 2 | THE HARMONIC SYNOPSIS OF THE RECITATIVE SECTION
"FRONDI TENERE" FROM HANDEL'S SERSES

Table 3 | SUBLEVELS OF THE MUSICAL STRUCTURE IN THE ARIA

Division by Grammar	Musical Setting
First: 1st-7th line	First part: Recitative section
Second: 8th-11th line	Second part: Aria section
Third: 12th-18th line	
Fourth: 19th-23rd line	
Fifth: 24th-25th line	
	(1) Mm. 13-20: At the end, there are authentic cadence and one measure rest in the voice.
	(2) Mm. 21-39: Four-measure interlude follows this section.
	(3) Mm. 44-51: At the end, the piano continues chromatic harmonies; voice rests one measure.
	(4) Mm. 52-57: Authentic Cadence, followed by piano postlude (mm. 58-69)

changeable repetition of Ger.⁶ and V⁷. Unlike the earlier ones, the last two parts of the aria section are closely connected in Wolf's setting even though the texts are grammatically separated. The background harmonic structure of these two parts, (3) and (4), outlines ii – V – I (F[#] - B – E) in E. Interestingly, the recitative section is also framed by the same progression with a long stretch of the F[#] in mm.1-10. A similar prolongation of F[#] is embedded in part (3) and (4); it covers mm.43-56 as part of the same fourth, F[#] - B. Therefore, one could argue that the fourth characterizes the large structure that the bass motion articulates. Both fourths are part of ii – V – I progressions that connect to the opening recitative and the second half of the aria to the postlude, respectively. Hence, both contribute to the tonal unity of the entire piece. [SEE EXAMPLE 3]

In addition, the large-level fourth motive appears at local levels of both harmony and melody. For example, the bass line moves directly from B[#] to E[#] at mm.26-28, and again from B to E in the cadence of mm.30-31. In mm.47-51, the bass line alternates between F[#] and C[#] inside the F[#] prolongation. Moreover, the fourth often appears in the melody of the recitative. This and other instances of the fourth promote a sense of openness and emptiness in the sound, and might have been deliberately adopted for the purpose of reflecting the Aeolian harp's sonority. According to Stephen Bonner, the

Aeolian harp historically was believed to have symbolic meanings, and such claims began to appear in the literature from the 1740s on (175). Thus, the poet often describes less of the Aeolian harp as the man-made medium through which Nature speaks to man than as the tragic reflection of his own life-experience, an 'Actor, perfect in all tragic sound!' (Bonner 175).

Thus, Wolf, who was probably familiar with the poetic connotation, attempts to reflect such a mood in the music by using the fourth appropriate for the expression of the poetic contents. In addition to this reflection, he tries to directly borrow the characteristic sound of the harp. The accompaniment imitates ways of performing the modern harp by providing the figuration of broken chords in the recitative section and of arpeggios in the left hand in the aria section. The aria section is unified by a single pattern of arpeggios. In order to reflect the subtle sound effect of the Aeolian harp in which the winds generate the sound and then its gradual echoing away, the left-hand part of the accompaniment also moves from the lower to the higher register in every single measure. This is especially apparent in the postlude, in which the same accompaniment figuration is combined continuously with softer dynamics and higher register.

I have thus far examined how the poetic structure has been integrated into the music. Wolf established the

Example 3

THE BASS OUTLINE OF THE RECITATIVE AND THE ARIA SECTION

The Recitative Section

The Aria Section

poetic structure, considering the meaning and syntax of the poem into this music on several different layers. Also, he used an accompaniment figuration to evoke the sound of a harp. As seen in Wolf's lieder, the most remarkable characteristic lies in the melody. The musical elements of this melody such as high and low pitches and long and short rhythmic values are integrated toward a correct declamation of the words. Gorrell reports the close relationship between poet and music as seen in Wolf's lied, "Because of Richard Wagner's influence, both Wolf and Debussy wrote with a heightened sensitivity to poetic and musical synthesis" (284). In this song, Wolf uses many ways to set the melody considering the poetic declamation. The eleventh line of the poem "Wie süß bedrängt ihr dies Herz" is repeated twice. The repetition highlights the fact that this line has poetic importance as a first expression of the poet's own mood: "how sweetly you oppress my heart" (Miller 68). This is a dramatic moment in that the poet's own subjective feeling is synthesized with the description of the harp's sound.

Wolf considers the poetic declamatory and text painting as an important aspect of expression. First, in order to describe expressive word such as "du," "ach," or "und hier," Wolf assigns long notes to those words at m. 4, 17, and 52. Second, melodic contour, such as ascending, descending, or leaping, is related to the poetic meaning. For example, at mm.5-6, the ascending melodic line represents the poetic words of "Muse, born of the air!" (Phillips 245). Also, at mm.32-33, the downward melodic line expresses the motion of the wind on "and gently sigh in the string" (Miller 68). In addition, the leap of A to F# at mm. 24-25 is the expression of a sense of overflowing, reaching the strong fragrance on "and touching

the spring flowers along the way, satiated with fragrance" (68). For these two lines, the music accumulates much dissonance: D in the bass of the piano against E in the voice at m.22 and A# of Ger.¹⁶ in the piano against A in the voice at m.24. These dissonances seem a deliberate choice to prepare the most important line "Wie süß bedrängt ihr dies Herz." The most intriguing passage of text painting is mm.4-8, which has already been illuminated in Example 1. This example shows non-functional harmonic progressions: a succession of unresolved dominant seventh chords, which symbolize the mysterious state of the text, "mysterious strings-playing" (Phillips 246). This colorful harmonic vocabulary might be understood as an influence from Wagner's chromaticism.

Consideration of the poetic effects also involves rhythmic aspects. Gorrell discusses the rhythm in Wolf's songs in general: "The rhythms of accompaniment are so independent from both text and meter of the song" (286). In the aria section, the rhythmic motion of the voice and piano were quite complex. As he invites the triplet in the accompaniment, Wolf achieves this rhythmic complexity by two-against-three in which the piano-part rhythm becomes more independent from the voice. Also, using a mixture of duple and triplet in the vocal part, he pursued freer and more declamatory treatment of the melody, which makes more independent vocal line from the accompaniment.

This song illustrates Wolf's great sensitivity to the poetic structure, and his skill in integrating the poetic meaning into the song. He achieved this poetic and musical integration by means of text painting, sudden shifts of harmony, declamatory melody, and accompaniment which evokes and creates the appropriate poetic mood.

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