

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF
MIGNON'S SONG
KENNST DU DAS LAND

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Introduction

“Music is often praised for its poetic expression, and poetry for its musical sound... When combined, poetry and music create a new kind of sensibility, with unique qualities to notice and study.”¹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1649-1832) is often recognized for finding a perfect balance in his poetry. Thus, he is a favored poet with composers of song, because his poetry tends to fit into music with ease. Goethe is among the poets whose poetry has been set to music by multiple composers. In fact, sixty-five of his poems were set by twenty-four different composers. The only poet who comes even close to having that many of his texts set is Heinrich Heine, with about sixty of his poems being set to music.² Among the sheer volume of musical setting of Goethe poems are the songs sung by the character Mignon from *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre*. One of these songs which has been a favorite text of composers was *Kennst du das Land* (Know you the Land?). The numerous settings of this song have become very popular, and have become favorites of many singers.

With the lyricism of Goethe's poetry, it seems obvious to say that Goethe would become involved with German lieder. His association with German lied can be traced all the way back to his years at the University in Leipzig.³ Goethe was always interested in the main elements of any intellectual product, and thus found interest in the theory of music beginning at the early age of twenty.⁴ Goethe was taught the pianoforte when he

¹ Carol Kimball, *Song: A Guide to Style and Literature* (Redmond, WA: PST...INC, 2000), 1.

² Jane K. Brown, “In the Beginning was Poetry,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Lied*, ed. James Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 13.

³ Lorraine Byrne, *Schubert's Goethe Settings* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 10.

⁴ Lorraine Byrne and Dan Farrelly, ed. *Goethe and Schubert: Across the Divide* (Dublin, Ireland: Carysfort Press, 2003), 26.

was a child, but he never excelled at it enough to pursue it further. He also took lessons at Strassburg on the violoncello, also without result. He discovered that to him, music implied the inclusion of the voice, and because of this he was eventually drawn to the song and the aria as his “chief delight”.⁵ At one point, Goethe stated that he believed poetry was meant to be sung.⁶

Goethe had an innovative lyric power.⁷ He also had strong opinions about how the poetry should be set to music. He wrote something in his personal diary that was originally written by Johann Adam Hiller. It said, “A composer has to pay attention to the structure of the language as far as the grammatical and rhetorical accents and logic are concerned. Furthermore, a composer should regard the idiosyncrasy of the music.”⁸ He also believed that the music should only be in place as a modest embellishment of the poem. It should not compete for the attention of the words of the poem, but it should simply enhance the inherent musicality of the poem itself. He also thought that the musical setting should be flexible in order to change the mood and atmosphere in the different stanzas of the poem.⁹

Some of Goethe’s texts that were set to music the most were pulled from his series of novels *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. The first record of *Wilhelm Meister* was made in Goethe’s diary on February 16, 1777.¹⁰ The books were published by Unger in

⁵ Scott Goddard, “Beethoven and Goethe,” *Music and Letters* 8, no. 2 (April, 1927): 166.

⁶ Jane K. Brown, “In the Beginning was Poetry,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Lied*, ed. James Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 14.

⁷ Harry Seelig, “The Literary Context: Goethe as Source and Catalyst,” in *German Lieder in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Rufus Hallmark (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996), 5.

⁸ Lorraine Byrne and Dan Farrelly, ed. *Goethe and Schubert: Across the Divide* (Dublin, Ireland: Carysfort Press, 2003), 26.

⁹ Jack M. Stein, “Was Goethe Wrong about the Nineteenth-Century Lied? An Examination of the Relation of Poem and Music,” *PMLA* 77, no. 3 (June, 1962): 233.

¹⁰ Lorraine Byrne, *Schubert’s Goethe Settings* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 246.

multiple volumes, the last of which was published in 1796. The poem is a song that is sung in the novel by the character Mignon, who first appears in the second book, chapter four. From the first time she is introduced, she has an air of mystery about her.¹¹ She first appears with a traveling circus, and she was a riddle to everyone. She had striking features, and although she looked to be about twelve or thirteen, though nobody was really sure because “no one had counted”.¹²

Mignon is essentially presented as a hermaphrodite in the novel. People are unsure based on her appearance and mannerisms whether she was male or female. Also, ‘Mignon’ is not just a feminine proper noun, but is also the feminine and masculine version of the French word meaning “darling”. There is reasoning behind this presentation of sexual ambiguity. In the myths of Greek Antiquity, the protagonists were often presented in a sexually ambiguous way. With this gender duality Mignon symbolizes two of man's natures. She represents the earthly and spiritual sides, and the masculine and feminine sides. She is also a representation of the laws of rebirth and fulfillment of personalities and also the symbol of hidden conflicts in all men.¹³

Regardless of the mystery that Mignon presented, Wilhelm was always kind to her and so they were able to become friends. He became a father figure to her, because she was never sure who her actual father was.¹⁴ However, her father was actually another member of the traveling circus, the Harper. Mignon discovers that she is the result of an incestuous relationship between the Harper and her mother, who is also his sister,

¹¹ Lorraine Byrne, *Schubert's Goethe Settings* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 246.

¹² A.H. Fox Strangways, “The Songs in ‘Wilhelm Meister’,” *Music and Letters* 23, no. 4 (October, 1942): 293.

¹³ Lorraine Byrne, *Schubert's Goethe Settings* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 246-248.

¹⁴ A.H. Fox Strangways, “The Songs in ‘Wilhelm Meister’,” *Music and Letters* 23, no. 4 (October, 1942): 293

Sperata.¹⁵ Both characters have poetry and song within the book that has been set to music by the major German lied composers and both of their songs represent both beauty and misery throughout their journey within the poetry.¹⁶

Mignon's songs deal with her inner emotional life. All of her songs are varied, which show her confusion and changing emotions. In the novel she always refers to herself in the third person, with the exception of in her songs. In the songs she refers to herself in the first person. She is seeking solace through her songs.¹⁷ Mignon has four songs in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*.¹⁸

His most popular poem from *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* is *Kennst du das Land* (Know you the Land?). There are at least eighty-four settings of this poem. This is more than any of the other poems drawn from the same novel, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*.¹⁹ It is a rhythmical parody of the English ballad *Summer* by James Thomson in 1746. The parallels to the first stanza of Goethe's poem are unmistakable.²⁰ Lines 663-671 of this poem read:

Bear me, Pomona! To thy citron Groves
To where the lemon and the piercing lime
With the deep orange, glowing through the green
Their lighter glories blend. Lay me, reclined
Beneath the spreading tamarind, that shakes
Fanned by the breeze, its fever-cooling fruit

¹⁵ Lorraine Byrne, *Schubert's Goethe Settings* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 246.

¹⁶ John R. Williams "Goethe: The Crisis of the Lyric Poet," *The Modern Language Review* 78, no. 1 (January, 1983): 98.

¹⁷ Lorraine Byrne, *Schubert's Goethe Settings* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 248.

¹⁸ Harry Seelig, "The Literary Context: Goethe as Source and Catalyst," in *German Lieder in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Rufus Hallmark (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996), 9.

¹⁹ Jack M. Stein, "Musical Settings of the Songs from Wilhelm Meister," *Comparative Literature* 22, no. 2 (Spring, 1970): 125.

²⁰ Lorraine Byrne, *Schubert's Goethe Settings* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 252.

Goethe's poem reads:

Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühn,
Im dunkeln Laub die Gold-Orangen glühn,
Ein sanfter Wind vom blauen Himmel weht,
Die Myrthe still und hoch der Lorbeer steht?
Kennst du es wohl? Dahin! dahin
Möcht ich mit dir, o mein Geliebter, ziehn.

Kennst du das Haus? Auf Säulen ruht sein Dach.
Es glänzt der Saal, es schimmert das Gemach,
Und Marmorbilder stehn und sehn mich an:
Was hat man dir, du armes Kind, getan?
Kennst du es wohl? Dahin! dahin
Möcht ich mit dir, o mein Beschützer, ziehn.

Kennst du den Berg und seinen Wolkensteg?
Das Maultier sucht im Nebel seinen Weg;
In Höhlen wohnt der Drachen alte Brut;
Es stürzt der Fels und über ihn die Flut!
Kennst du ihn wohl? Dahin! dahin
Geht unser Weg! O Vater, laß uns ziehn!

The English Translation is as follows:

Know you the land where golden oranges
And lemon-clusters lurk in leafy trees,
Where cooling breezes temper summer skies,
Where myrtle meek and lordly laurel rise.
Know you that Land? Take me, take me!
There, my beloved, I would be with thee!

Know you the house- the roof on pillars light,
The stately hall, the rooms all gay and bright?
The marble statues stand and gaze on me-
"What was it then they did, poor child, to thee?"
Know you that house? Take me, take me!
There, my Protector, would I be with thee!

Know you the path along the mountain side
Where mules adventure ere the mist divide?
Within a cave a dragon rears his brood;
O'er riven rock the torrent pours his flood.
Tell me you know! Take me, take me!

There lies our way, dear Father! Come with Me!²¹

Despite the popularity of this poem and the musical settings of it, its meaning remains elusive. Its deceptively simple exterior hides a truly complex meaning behind the poem.²² Goethe said, “She intoned each verse with a certain solemn grandeur, as if she were drawing attention to something unusual and imparting something of importance. When she reached the third line, the melody became more somber and gloomy, the words, ‘you know it, yes?’ were given mystery and weight, the ‘oh there, oh there!’ was suffused with irresistible longing and she modified the phrase ‘let us go’ each time it was repeated so that one time it was entreating and urging, the next time pressing and full of promise.”²³

Mignon is singing this song to *Wilhelm*, who has recently become a father figure to her, and she is presenting strong imagery of her homeland and a desire for tenderness and protection. This song shows great symbolism of paternal neglect in Mignon’s life. She has an intense longing for her homeland and her questions become more and more urgent as the song progresses.²⁴

As previously mentioned, this intensely emotional song in the novel has been set to music by many of the major composers of German lied. Among the composers who attempted a setting of this poem are Ludwig van Beethoven, Franz Liszt, Franz Schubert, Robert Schumann, and Hugo Wolf. The remainder of this paper will look into

²¹ A.H. Fox Strangways, “The Songs in ‘Wilhelm Meister’,” *Music and Letters* 23, no. 4 (October, 1942): 294.

²² Arnd Bohm, “O Vater, lass uns ziehn!: A Mythological Background to ‘Mignon’s Italian Song’,” *MLN* 100, no. 3 (April, 1985): 651.

²³ Lorraine Byrne, *Schubert’s Goethe Settings* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 253.

²⁴ Lorraine Byrne, *Schubert’s Goethe Settings* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 254-257.

the different choices these five composers made in their settings of this poem and will conclude with a section which gives observations and general analyses of the different settings.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

When one thinks of Ludwig van Beethoven, song is not the first thing that comes to mind. However, Beethoven was arguably quite successful when it came to writing song. That argument would likely be heard from a musician rather than a poet because although he sometimes uses text painting, Beethoven generally uses dramatic vocal passages that highlight the vocalism rather than illustrate the text. One of his most important contributions to the lied was the expanded harmonic range in his songs.²⁵

As far as his choice of poets is concerned, Beethoven is known for choosing poetry that is compatible with his personal convictions and viewpoints. “It is possibly from his early song to identify Beethoven’s own specific attitudes to life’s experiences reflected in his approach to a poetic text.”²⁶ He did nine different settings of Goethe’s poetry, which are arguably some of his most beautifully written lyric songs. He uses the spirit of the poem to inspire the music, rather than the actual text, which often leads to simple texts being overwhelmed by musical development and manipulation of motive.²⁷ This was not looked on well by many poets, for the obvious reason that they were of the opinion that words should always dominate the music.

²⁵ Carol Kimball, *Song: A Guide to Style and Literature* (Redmond, WA: PST...INC, 2000), 31.

²⁶ Amanda Glauert, “The Lieder of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Lied*, ed. James Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 77.

²⁷ Carol Kimball, *Song: A Guide to Style and Literature* (Redmond, WA: PST...INC, 2000), 32.

Herr Gundolf said, “For [Goethe] music was little more than a means of providing adornment, ease, dignity, charm to life, and in no way did he feel for it as being that expression of universal principles that Beethoven both saw in his imagination and realized in his works.”²⁸

The two men did not make good impressions on each other. This is evident in the first recorded words they said about each other. Beethoven once said of Goethe that he “is fonder of the atmosphere of courts than is becoming in a poet. No call therefore, to talk of the absurd behavior of virtuosi when poets, who should be looked up to as being the foremost teachers of the nation, forget all else for the sake of such outward show.” From the reverse perspective, Goethe said “I made Beethoven’s acquaintance in Teplitz. His talent amazed me; unfortunately he is an utterly untamed personality, not altogether in the wrong in holding the world detestable; but he does not make it any more enjoyable either for himself or others by his attitude. He is, however, to be excused, and much to be pitied, as his hearing is leaving him, which, perhaps, mars the musical part of him less than the social. He is of a laconic nature and will become doubly so because of this lack.”²⁹

Beethoven did try his hand at the poetry of *Wilhelm Meister Lehrjahre*. He composed both *Nur wer di Sehnsucht kennt*, in 1808 as well as *Kennst du das Land* in 1810. Prior to Beethoven, song was generally written with simple musical accompaniment and vocal line in order to highlight the poetry. His version of *Kennst du*

²⁸ Scott Goddard, “Beethoven and Goethe,” *Music and Letters* 8, no. 2 (April, 1927): 167.

²⁹ Scott Goddard, “Beethoven and Goethe,” *Music and Letters* 8, no. 2 (April, 1927): 170.

das Land is transitional between that way of treating music and words and the new way of thinking which involves the richness of the musical beauty.³⁰

Kennst du das Land has been referred to as one of the best songs Beethoven ever wrote. It is both beautiful and characteristic, and one of the earlier settings of this poem which helped attract other composers to the same poem. It is obviously experimental, as are many others of his songs. They do not necessarily have the force and conviction of many of his other works, but the association of words and music in a more intimate manner than is expected produces an inflexibility in his personal style. Beethoven was likely aware of this, considering the fact that he stated he did not like writing songs.³¹

It is evident in the composition of songs that this was not Beethoven's real area of expertise because he has a distinctively instrumental treatment of the voice.³² With his setting of *Kennst du das Land* song has left the era of modest musical embellishment where the poem is undisputed as the dominant being between song and poem.³³

Goethe disagreed with Beethoven's style on this song. He believed the contrast the composer introduced in each verse broke the unity of the strophic design too decisively. Goethe said, "I cannot comprehend how Beethoven and Spohr could have completely misunderstood the song in through composing it."³⁴ I would have thought that

³⁰ Jack M. Stein, *Poem and Music in the German Lied from Gluck to Hugo Wolf* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 53-54.

³¹ Erik Brewerton, "Reflections of Beethoven's Songs," *The Musical Times* 68, no. 1008 (February, 1927): 115-116.

³² Amanda Glauert, "The Lieder of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Lied*, ed. James Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 79.

³³ Jack M. Stein, "Musical Settings of the Songs from Wilhelm Meister," *Comparative Literature* 22, no. 2 (Spring, 1970): 132.

³⁴ Amanda Glauert, "The Lieder of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Lied*, ed. James Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 81.

the distinguishing features that occur in the same place in every strophe would be enough to mark out to the composer that I simply expected a type of folk song from him. It is in Mignon's nature to sing a song, not an aria."³⁵ However, Goethe is not entirely correct in this accusation of Beethoven. Beethoven's composition is indeed in strophic form, although Goethe makes the statement that he through-composed it. Goethe probably failed to see it as such because its unprecedented musical richness made it seem more like an aria than a song.³⁶

"It is debatable whether Beethoven's contribution to the through-composed song had much impact on future developments." His influence in the realm of song seems to be in the expansion of the role of the accompaniment, and of harmonic vocabulary, and to a lesser degree with the popularization of the song-cycle."³⁷

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

"It is enough to state that Liszt was so familiar with the substance of all the modern languages that he was enabled, by merely skimming over them, to catch their general spirit and thus express the corresponding sense and form of music."³⁸ Franz Liszt was well known for his orchestral music and his piano music, but also was a prolific writer of Song. He wrote a total of eighty-two songs, fifty-two in German, fourteen in

³⁵ Lorraine Byrne, *Schubert's Goethe Settings* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 259.

³⁶ Jack M. Stein, "Was Goethe Wrong about the Nineteenth-Century Lied? An Examination of the Relation of Poem and Music," *PMLA* 77, no. 3 (June, 1962): 234.

³⁷ J.W. Smeed, *German Song and its Poetry: 170-1900*, (New York: Croom Helm, 1987), 97.

³⁸ Louis Nohl, *Life of Liszt* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg and Company, 1897), 108.

French, five in Italian, three in Hungarian, one in Russian, and twelve in English.³⁹

Although Franz Liszt was not as well known for his songs as he is for his other works, he had a natural lyric gift and a gift for bringing out the musicality of the words. Liszt had many friends in the world of literature and he was an avid reader. It has been said that his “passion for reading [was] insatiable”.⁴⁰ There is some evidence, however, that Liszt had tendency to be careless in his placement of language with the music on his first composition of a song. For this reason, he revised many of his songs and typically made major improvements in the revisions.⁴¹

Even though nobody would argue the fact that Liszt was a remarkable melodist, he was sometimes criticized for “doing violence to words” because poets felt he was putting music before text. His syllabic stress was often wrong, and he would have to correct that in the revisions he made.⁴² He was sometimes characterized as being “careless” in his text setting. Also, even though he had a great understanding of many languages, he was criticized for misunderstanding some subtleties in poetry. Charles Osbourne once said, “If Liszt has one consistent fault as a composer of songs it is that he sometimes tends to be over emphatic, over elaborate, and unsubtle in his response to a poem.”⁴³

This is not to say that Liszt is only criticized for his composition of song. There are many good things said about his songs as well. For instance, his songs were all

³⁹ Carol Kimball, *Song: A Guide to Style and Literature* (Redmond, WA: PST...INC, 2000), 101.

⁴⁰ Derek Watson, *Liszt* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1989), 304.

⁴¹ Ben Arnold, “Visions and Revisions: Looking into Liszt’s *Lieder*,” in *Liszt and the Birth of Modern Europe: Music as a mirror of Religious, Political, Cultural, and Aesthetic Transformations*, ed. Michael Saffle and Rossana Dalmonte (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2003), 255-256.

⁴² Christopher Headington, “The Songs,” in *Franz Liszt: The Man and His Music*, ed. Alan Walker (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1970), 223.

⁴³ Ben Arnold, “Songs and Melodramas,” in *The Liszt Companion*, ed. Ben Arnold (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 2002), 406.

harmonically advanced and his melodies for the voice are very attractive.⁴⁴ The author Martin Cooper points out that although Liszt's songs are all generally flawed, most other Songs are not completely faultless. Any number of other German lieder could be taken and flaws could be pointed out, so Liszt's songs should hold as much merit as all the others.⁴⁵

Liszt wrote very few strophic songs, but he was not insensitive to the way the poet had organized stanzas of a poem. He tried to capture this through repetition of various kinds. Mignon's Lied, *Kennst du das Land*, is an example of this almost strophic writing by Liszt. The three stanzas in his song repeat the same sequence of musical materials which parallel the ternary division the poet used in the original text. Each strophe contains an elaborate question, and then intensifies, and then there is an expression of longing.⁴⁶ In the first version of this song he placed the word "du" on the downbeat of the initial question, which was obviously an example of poor syllabic stress. In the revision of this song, he changed it so that "Kennst" was elongated and tied over to the downbeat and "du" fell on the weak beat. This created a much better flow of language in this piece.⁴⁷

His version of the song also uses many colors that the other composers did not. He exhibits an independence of voice and piano without losing the coherence between

⁴⁴ Ben Arnold, "Songs and Melodramas," in *The Liszt Companion*, ed. Ben Arnold (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 2002), 410.

⁴⁵ Martin Cooper, "Liszt as a Song Writer," *Music and Letters* 19, no. 2 (April, 1938): 181.

⁴⁶ Jürgen Thym, "Crosscurrents in Song: Five Distinctive Voices," in *German Lieder in the Nineteenth Century* ed. Rufus Hallmark (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996), 170.

⁴⁷ Christopher Headington, "The Songs," in *Franz Liszt: The Man and His Music* ed. Alan Walker (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1970), 226.

the two. He also uses varied timbres and colors to illustrate Mignon's colorful visions.⁴⁸ This is why Liszt's Mignon's Lied has been praised as being "one of his loveliest songs".⁴⁹ In this version of the song he is able to adequately capture the nostalgia and Mignon's desperate longing for her homeland.⁵⁰ Liszt himself was pleased with the way this piece turned out and some friends of Goethe's said they thought the poet would be pleased by it too.⁵¹

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Franz Schubert once said, "I have come into the world for no purpose but to compose."⁵² When thinking of German lied, the first composer who comes to mind is typically Franz Schubert. He wrote over six hundred songs and is looked up to by other composers as the "Shakespeare of Song".⁵³ Schubert was the first composer to explore the lied as its own genre and he often had a heightened sense of drama in his songs, in comparison to songs of the past.⁵⁴ Schubert was also known for his efforts in modernizing the lied. Beethoven had previously pushed the balance of the lied to have musical dominance, and Schubert continued this effort and pushed it even further.⁵⁵ One of the ways Schubert worked to modernize the lied was by taking them out of the

⁴⁸ Derek Watson, *Liszt* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1989), 304.

⁴⁹ Ben Arnold, "Songs and Melodramas," in *The Liszt Companion*, ed. Ben Arnold (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 2002), 425.

⁵⁰ Martin Cooper, "Liszt as a Song Writer," *Music and Letters* 19, no. 2 (April, 1938): 176.

⁵¹ Ben Arnold, "Songs and Melodramas," in *The Liszt Companion*, ed. Ben Arnold (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 2002), 425.

⁵² Carol Kimball, *Song: A Guide to Style and Literature* (Redmond, WA: PST...INC, 2000), 63.

⁵³ Susan Youens, "Franz Schubert: The Prince of Song," in *German Lieder in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Rufus Hallmark (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996), 31.

⁵⁴ Carol Kimball, *Song: A Guide to Style and Literature* (Redmond, WA: PST...INC, 2000), 32.

⁵⁵ Jack M. Stein, *Poem and Music in the German Lied from Gluck to Hugo Wolf* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 79.

performing realm of amateurs. Other characteristics that made Schubert's lied more modern than previous lied were his characteristically rich piano texture and his use of harmonic language.⁵⁶ Pianist Gerald Moore said of Schubert's songs, "Their simplicity and purity defeat us and hold us...eternally...through our inability to explain why or how they are so sublime."⁵⁷

Schubert was often praised for his choice of poetry and his ability to have the poetry and the music correlate very closely. He had an affinity for Goethe's poetry, and composed twenty-eight Goethe settings in the year 1815, one in the year 1824, and four in 1826.⁵⁸ Schubert's Goethe settings are often considered the first great example of Schubert's progressive vision of the lied and his new style.⁵⁹ Goethe was fascinated by the songs in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. He set the song *Nur wer die Sehnsucht Kennt* seven different times.⁶⁰ Schubert only composed *Kennst du das Land* once. It was composed in 1815, but was not published by Schubert himself. His version was five years after Beethoven's version and there were obvious influences in his version, although Schubert's arrangement is more elaborate.⁶¹

A comparison between Beethoven's version of *Kennst du das Land* and Schubert's version of the song would show that Beethoven stayed more true to the poets' intentions with the songs. Schubert takes liberties with the poetry; for instance, he

⁵⁶ Susan Youens, "Franz Schubert: The Prince of Song," in *German Lieder in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Rufus Hallmark (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996), 40-42.

⁵⁷ Carol Kimball, *Song: A Guide to Style and Literature* (Redmond, WA: PST...INC, 2000), 63.

⁵⁸ Susan Youens, "Franz Schubert: The Prince of Song," in *German Lieder in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Rufus Hallmark (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996), 49.

⁵⁹ Lorraine Byrne and Dan Farrelly, ed. *Goethe and Schubert: Across the Divide* (Dublin, Ireland: Carysfort Press, 2003), 65.

⁶⁰ Susan Youens, "Franz Schubert: The Prince of Song," in *German Lieder in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Rufus Hallmark (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996), 52.

⁶¹ Jack M. Stein, "Musical Settings of the Songs from Wilhelm Meister," *Comparative Literature* 22, no. 2 (Spring, 1970): 134.

repeats words, such as “Dahin”, more times than they appear in the poem. Beethoven does not take these same liberties. Schubert’s song is harmonically richer than Beethoven’s.⁶²

Schubert sent his songs to Goethe asking for permission to dedicate them to him. The poet never responded. Eventually, Schubert personally wrote a letter to Goethe, which he received no response to. The letter read:

“Your Excellency!

June, 1825

If I should succeed, through the dedication of these settings of your poems, in revealing my boundless admiration of your Excellency today and perhaps win some consideration for these works, I would consider the fulfillment of this wish as the sweetest success of my life.

With the highest respect,
Your devoted Servant,
Franz Schubert”⁶³

Many scholars believe that the lack of response from Goethe signifies that Goethe was displeased with Schubert’s settings of his poems. However, that is not necessarily the only reason Goethe never replied. It is likely that Goethe never assessed songs that were sent to him on his own. He had musical advisors, and it is a likely possibility that he would not respond to composers until he talked to musical advisors. However, considering the fact that hundreds of songs were arriving to Goethe each week, it is possible that he could not keep up with the sheer bulk of music that was being sent to him. He may have never gotten around to taking Schubert’s arrangements to his musical

⁶² Erik Brewerton, “Reflections of Beethoven’s Songs,” *The Musical Times* 68, no. 1008 (February, 1927): 115.

⁶³ Lorraine Byrne, *Schubert’s Goethe Settings* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 17.

advisors. Also, Goethe was known for not writing letters that were simply written for the sake of sending a response. It was more within his character to not respond to a letter than to respond with empty phrases.⁶⁴ It has been said that Goethe may have also avoided responding to Goethe because he recognized Schubert's genius and thought the composer may have expressed the poetry in greater depth than the poet himself did through the words.⁶⁵

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Robert Schumann was probably the most well read composer of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He was the most literary out of most of the major lied composers.⁶⁶ Schumann is traditionally characterized as a composer of romantic lied. He had three different types of songs: lyrical, dramatic, or narrative. Lyric songs are in first person, dramatic songs are when the singer is a character, and narrative songs are when the singer is telling a story. Approximately half of Schubert's songs fall into the category of lyrical.⁶⁷ Both Clara Schumann and Felix Mendelssohn were very probable influences in Schumann becoming an avid writer of song. He was introduced to the genre through them and encouraged to write in this genre by them.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Lorraine Byrne, *Schubert's Goethe Settings* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 17.

⁶⁵ Joseph Wechsberg, *Schubert: His Life, His Works, His Time* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), Quoted in Lorraine Byrne, *Schubert's Goethe Settings* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 21.

⁶⁶ Rufus Hallmark, "Robert Schumann: The Poet Sings," in *German Lieder in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996), 75.

⁶⁷ Rufus Hallmark, "Robert Schumann: The Poet Sings," in *German Lieder in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996), 79-80.

⁶⁸ Rufus Hallmark, "Robert Schumann: The Poet Sings," in *German Lieder in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996), 78.

Schumann's wrote over two hundred songs, and his songs are generally characterized by lyrical vocal phrases, melodies of considerable length, a blurred key center, and the piano being on equal footing with the voice.⁶⁹ His version of *Kennst du das Land* is no exception to this. He wrote this piece with the piano in full participation with the voice. Schumann set all of the songs from *Wilhelm Meisters Lehjähre* except for one. This means he composed nine songs drawn from the novel. *Kennst du das Land* is the only one of these songs that is composed in strophic form, the rest are through-composed.⁷⁰

Kennst du das Land is one of Schumann's sophisticated songs that are difficult for both voice and piano.⁷¹ However, he was very critical of his own song. He said that Beethoven's is the best musical setting of the poem. Critics have said that Schumann's version of the song is not at all related to the novel. The character of the song is Schumann's typical romantic character, with little to no effort to capture the character of Mignon herself. In fact, it has been said that "His *Kennst du das Land* [is in no] way a refutation of his own remark that Beethoven's is the only satisfactory musical rendition of this poem."⁷²

Hugo Wolf (1860-1903)

⁶⁹ Carol Kimball, *Song: A Guide to Style and Literature* (Redmond, WA: PST...INC, 2000), 34.

⁷⁰ Jack M. Stein, *Poem and Music in the German Lied from Gluck to Hugo Wolf* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 122.

⁷¹ Rufus Hallmark, "Robert Schumann: The Poet Sings," in *German Lieder in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996), 104.

⁷² Jack M. Stein, *Poem and Music in the German Lied from Gluck to Hugo Wolf* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 124-125.

“Hugo Wolf’s songs have been characterized as the ‘caviar of Lieder literature’ because they exhibit a highly refined sense of style and intellectual concentration.”⁷³ Wolf was well known for his belief that poetry was the ultimate element which all musical design springs. He used an interdependence of voice and piano where they are so dependent on the other that one cannot function without the other. He includes bold uses of harmony which are reflective of the poetry.⁷⁴

Wolf was very sensitive to literature and once said, “Poetry supplies me with the electricity I need to compose.”⁷⁵ During this time the song was rapidly progressing as a genre and Wolf’s reputation rests entirely on the song. He parallels Chopin as being a specialist in one genre.⁷⁶ Schubert and Schumann were both known for making the song less accessible to amateurs; Liszt took that even farther, Wolf even farther still. Half of Wolf’s songs are not accessible at all to an amateur singer.⁷⁷

Wolf made it a habit to never set poetry that his predecessors had set, unless he felt that they had not done an adequate job with the setting of this poem.⁷⁸ Wolf set four of the *Wilhelm Meister* Mignon poems. The fourth setting was *Kennst du das Land*, which is a recital favorite.⁷⁹ His setting is basically in strophic form, but it has a complex musical texture and varies phrases subtly from one stanza to the next.⁸⁰ Wolf’s version of this song is not even close to being true to character of Mignon, although it portrays the

⁷³ Carol Kimball, *Song: A Guide to Style and Literature* (Redmond, WA: PST...INC, 2000), 116.

⁷⁴ Carol Kimball, *Song: A Guide to Style and Literature* (Redmond, WA: PST...INC, 2000), 35-36.

⁷⁵ Carol Kimball, *Song: A Guide to Style and Literature* (Redmond, WA: PST...INC, 2000), 36.

⁷⁶ Lawrence Kramer, “Hugo Wolf: Subjectivity in the fin-de-Siecle Lied,” in *German Lieder in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996), 186.

⁷⁷ J.W. Smeed, *German Song and its Poetry: 1740-1900* (New York: Croom Helm, 1987), 39.

⁷⁸ Carol Kimball, *Song: A Guide to Style and Literature* (Redmond, WA: PST...INC, 2000), 34.

⁷⁹ Jack M. Stein, “Musical Settings of the Songs from Wilhelm Meister,” *Comparative Literature* 22, no. 2 (Spring, 1970): 145.

⁸⁰ Carol Kimball, *Song: A Guide to Style and Literature* (Redmond, WA: PST...INC, 2000), 116.

longing quality better than other settings. However, it “tears apart the tight structure of the poem in its attempt to squeeze all the emotional juice out of each phrase. This is especially true of the refrain, which is greatly overblown.”⁸¹ However, Wolf’s setting has been called the most passionate and dignified setting of the poem; “a song of most moving beauty.”⁸²

General Comparative Analyses

Beethoven

To start out, it seems fit to say that Beethoven’s version of this song is definitely strophic. The texture is rich and the accompaniment is thicker than folk songs that came before the time of Beethoven. This is probably why Goethe confused this song for being through-composed; because at the time it would have been very modern and an example of forward thinking with the genre of song.

However, it should be noted that the melody is the same in every verse with only subtle differences in the rhythm. Beethoven seems to have a great grasp of the meaning of the words and properly places syllabic stresses and subtle word painting techniques in this piece. For instance, the initial question in each strophe “Kennst du...” is written with an ascending melody which inflects in the way a question should, and the phrase ends with downward inflection, which gives the overall phrase the feeling of a natural speech pattern. The transition from verse into chorus is a question “Kennst du es

⁸¹ Jack M. Stein, “Musical Settings of the Songs from Wilhelm Meister,” *Comparative Literature* 22, no. 2 (Spring, 1970): 145

⁸² Frederic Austin, “The Songs of Hugo Wolf,” *Proceedings of the Musical Association* 38th session (1911-1912): 168.

wohl?” which ascends much higher than the first time the question was asked, giving the same feeling of questioning and adding considerably more urgency to the plea.

One of the most striking melodic moments in this piece is at the very end of the piece. Beethoven uses the open vowel on the word “laß” to differentiate the other pleas earlier in this piece. The vowels in all the high points preceding this one are closed, but this final cry of desperation on the text “laß uns ziehn!” (let us go!) allows Mignon to open up in her final plea of the piece.

Harmonically, Beethoven makes use of both major and minor modes. He begins each verse in a major mode, but shifts into minor about halfway through the verse. However, the refrain finds the return of A major. This gives the feeling of longing and despair in the verses, with a glimpse of hope and nostalgia in the “Dahin!” refrain. The harmonic texture is the thickest on the third verse when the text begins to speak of the dragon in his cave, which is an obvious example of text painting.

Rhythmically, Beethoven creates juxtaposition between the verse and the refrain. The verses are a very straight 2/4 rhythm which abruptly shifts into a smooth 6/8 pattern with longer, smoother melodies. This difference of gesture between the verses and refrain could be symbolic of a number of different things. For instance, it could symbolize the duality of man, as expressed earlier in this paper, or it could show Mignon’s deep rooted confusion and inner emotional turmoil.

The accompaniment is also indicative of the fact that Beethoven has composed this in strophic form with truth to the simplicity of the previous era of song, but it still shows strong steps toward progression into the modernized lied. The accompaniment is generally homophonic, with the melody in the right hand of the piano part throughout.

The arpeggio figures begin halfway through the verse when the harmonic scheme switches into a minor mode. At this point the accompaniment is made up of sixteenth note arpeggios in the left hand which provide a feeling of drive to the music. In the third verse, this moves even faster, as the sixteenth notes become thirty-second notes.

Liszt

Liszt's version of *Kennst du das Land* is the furthest of the five from being strophic. However, Liszt is able to capture emotion in every moment of the music. Liszt varies from Beethoven a lot in the way he presents the initial question. He presents it with a melody that is deliberately descending. It seems almost as though his concept of Mignon singing this song is her asking a rhetorical question, more inward thinking and questioning of herself as she recalls her beautiful homeland. The melody line drops lower and is much darker on the third verse, and the third refrain is much slower and more drawn out, which brings much more intensity to Mignon's longing. In the closing of the piece, Liszt has Mignon hold the word "Vater" (Father) on a fermata. This is the high point of longing within the piece. This is a similar effect as when Beethoven held the word "laß", with the use of the open vowel, but this is more effective because it has Mignon holding the word meaning father, which is an obvious word painting symbol of her longing for paternal care and nurturing. The piece closes with the repeat of the word "Dahin!" fading into the end. This symbolizes her longing in such a picturesque way that it is hard to miss.

The harmonies in the piano are atonal and the texture is thick. Liszt does not do the vocalist the same favor Beethoven does by putting the melody into the piano accompaniment. The accompaniment and the voice are independent of each other, but weave together to create a beautiful masterpiece. Liszt creates the same juxtaposition between the verse and chorus changing the accompaniment to triplets and by changing the key.

Liszt makes a clear distinction between the three sections of the poem. The verses have stable rhythms while Mignon is speaking, but ample pauses in between, and the piano accompaniment and voice happen simultaneously. During the transitional section between the verse and the refrain, where Mignon asks “Kennst du es wohl?”, Liszt has her ask it three times and treats the piano accompaniment and the voice as a call and response, with a more urgent motion on the third question. On the refrain, the harmonies are more tonal and the accompaniment helps to keep the momentum of the phrase going. On the second verse, the texture is bare in comparison to the first, with some phrases even occurring in an a capella fashion. The transitional period and chorus are treated in the same way as the first. In the third verse, the accompaniment drives, with very little gaps in the piano. The texture of the chords is also much thicker. The transitional section builds considerably after the third verse into a serene accompaniment on the third refrain. Here, the triplet accompaniment from the first two refrains is replaced by rolled chords with much higher voicing. This is text painting that illustrates Mignon’s wistful longing. The harmonic texture and interdependence of the voice and piano create the most soulfully honest and vulnerable setting of this poem. It may not

have been the intentions Goethe first had for the song, but it rings true and strongly exhibits the emotions Mignon was experiencing.

Franz Schubert

Franz Schubert stayed much closer to a strophic arrangement of *Kennst du das Land*. The first and second verses, transitions, and refrains are all exactly the same.

There are obvious influences in his version that come from Beethoven's. Similar to Beethoven, Schubert uses the initial ascent of the first question posed. He holds the high point of the question before letting the melody line drop a perfect fourth and continue into the rest of the phrase. Also like Beethoven, the piano accompaniment breaks into sixteenth note triplets halfway through the verse as the mode switches to minor, except the triplets occur in the right hand instead of the left. Another similarity is that at times, the melody is featured in the accompaniment, although Schubert takes more liberties with ornamentation of the right hand of the accompaniment.

The third verse and chorus are similar to the first two, with the exception of some subtle differences. For instance, there is an extra measure between the verse and the transitional phrase. In the first two verses there is a two measure interlude in the piano, and in the third verse there is a three measure interlude. The harmonic texture of Schubert's version of this song is thin, which is probably what Goethe wanted for this, because it would have been true to Mignon's character to sing a song like this one. It is likely that Schubert was the closest out of these five composers to Goethe's intentions for the piece.

Robert Schumann

Schumann's version of *Kennst du das Land* is much different than all the other composers in this comparative study. While it is a strophic version of the piece, which Goethe intended, it is harmonically not what was intended at all. The extremely thick harmonic textures and fast moving piano accompaniment mask the vulnerability necessary to make this moment believable. This version of the poem is lacking any sense of word painting or genuine emotion that is true to the character of Mignon through the music. The vocal lines are difficult and would be nearly impossible for an amateur singer to perform. The high A occurs about three quarters of the way through each verse, making that the unwarranted high point of each section. The song is beautiful, but the true emotion of Mignon is entirely lost.

Hugo Wolf

The version written by Wolf has even less to do with the character of Mignon than Schumann's version of the song. Though, he does illustrate some direct word painting. For instance, the word "hoch" meaning "high" is the highest point of the phrase it is in. Also, he varies the melody that he uses in the later two verses on the word "glühn" meaning "glows" by putting it down an octave, giving it a warmer, glowing sound. He is different than the other composers in the sense that he does not ever use an upward inflection. The others used it either on the initial question, the Dahin section or on both. Wolf uses it on neither. He also is the only composer to use syncopation in the

refrain, which adds a musical complexity that was probably frowned upon by Goethe. He is using these beautiful words written by Goethe, and setting it to beautiful music, but the two beauties are not fully appreciated because they are not given the opportunity to work together and tell the story of Mignon.

Conclusions

As illustrated by the discussion of the different composers and of their different musical settings of *Kennst du das Land* from Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre*. It has been said that Goethe "lives and wants us all to live with him. That's the reason he can be set to music. Nobody else can be set to music so easily as he."⁸³ However, it seems that this poem may be one of Goethe's greatest mysteries. Every composer who has set this to music has had some of the main points the same, but each one shows subtle differences. In Beethoven's setting you will find a firm grasp on the flow of the poetry and the subtle meanings of the words. With Liszt, although Goethe probably would not have preferred this setting, its dissonant harmonies and the relationship between piano and accompaniment create the most emotional drama out of any of the settings. Franz Schubert's version, perhaps the most performed version, shows a lot of influence from Beethoven's version and is probably the closest to Goethe's intent. Robert Schumann's version shows a lot of fast accompaniment with thick textures and no real emotional connection to the character herself. It is nothing particularly special, and the performer himself admits that he believes Beethoven to be the only composer who did

⁸³ Scott Goddard, "Beethoven and Goethe," *Music and Letters* 8, no. 2 (April, 1927): 171.

this poem justice. Hugo Wolf's version of the song uses rich textures and harmonies along with word painting to create a beautiful song that unfortunately has little to nothing to do with Mignon. His perhaps strays the farthest from what Goethe would have intended for this song.

From a twenty-first century performance practice perspective, Franz Liszt's version is the favorite. It shows more raw emotion than all the others, and although it is not accessible to amateur performers because of its difficulty, it is a gorgeous version of this song. Any performer who chooses to perform *Kennst du das Land* or any of the other Mignon texts should spend time getting into the character and being sure they portray her vulnerability as best they can. This vulnerability is most accessible in Liszt, Beethoven, and Schumann's version. Singers are often aware of their duty to do justice to the music, but overlook their duty to do justice to the text. Performing a song is telling the story created by the words which are brought to life through the beauty of the music. The story needs to be prevalent, and the character should not be lost. Unfortunately the meaning behind that statement is different to all composers. It seems fitting to end with a quotation by the composer Virgil Thompson. He said, "If songs really need words (as indeed they mostly do, since the human voice without them is just another wind instrument) then there has to be in the marriage of words and music a basic compatibility in which the text's exact shape and purpose dominate the union, or seem to."⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Carol Kimball, *Song: A Guide to Style and Literature* (Redmond, WA: PST...INC, 2000), 17.

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