

THE PERFORMANCE PRACTICE OF RICHARD WAGNER'S *WESENDONCK-LIEDER*

A CREATIVE PROJECT

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

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MASTER OF MUSIC

BY

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## Introduction

Richard Wagner (1813-1883) is best known for his numerous contributions to German opera in the nineteenth century, as well as for being one of the key figures in opera history. However, what most do not realize is that he also composed grand, lush art songs for students and performers to sing. The *Wesendonck-Lieder* song cycle, for example, is well known for being one of Wagner's most regularly performed song works outside of opera.

When just listening to a recording, there is no indication of there being a higher level of preparation and technique. However, learning the music and then analyzing each song makes the singer realize the intense level of complete focus and virtuosity that is required, almost as if Wagner had taken elements of *bel canto* singing and applied them to his compositions. The songs provide a challenge, of which there has been minimal research on how to conquer the difficulty in each movement. It is important to note the text and how Wagner meticulously arranged the music to encompass the meaning of the words. While there are numerous performances of the lieder cycle, there is a limited amount of research on the performance practice of this cycle. This makes listening to recordings a crucial necessity to be familiar with the general flow of the songs. Different interpretations are needed to familiarize the general performance practices used whenever this cycle is sung.

## Background

Richard Wilhelm Wagner was born to Johanna Rosine and Carl Friedrich Wagner in 1813. Soon after his birth, his father died of typhoid fever, and actor-painter Ludwig Geyer took on the fatherly role in his life. Richard speculated throughout his life about his real paternity,

ultimately never finding any reason to conclude on the matter.<sup>1</sup> He grew up in Dresden, Germany, where he attended school as a young boy after his parents relocated their family there to allow Geyer to work for the Hoftheater. Soon thereafter, he was enrolled in the Nicolaischule, where he produced his first drama, *Leubald*.<sup>2</sup>

In school, Wagner discovered a genuine love and passion for Beethoven and his works, going so far as to transcribe the Ninth Symphony into a piano reduction. According to one of his school teachers, the boy had no talent for music, describing his playing as “torture in the most abominable fashion.”<sup>3</sup> He was considered by others to be arrogant and conceited in his abilities, even having the *New York Times* writing in his obituary about his ability to never lose his confidence in himself, even when facing failures and discouraging banter from others.<sup>4</sup> Eventually, Wagner enrolled at Leipzig University, where he studied music. He wrote in his autobiographies that the importance of his musical education was insignificant, wanting to truly embody the idea of being a musical genius and prodigy without tutorage.<sup>5</sup>

In the following years of his life, Richard Wagner navigated different roles in music positions, rotating back to Dresden as the second Kapellmeister at the King of Saxony’s court. It was here that he became involved in the political insurrection (organized and usually violent act of revolt) outbreaks.<sup>6</sup> The Dresden barricades were put up, and the king was hounded by demands for reform. Wagner presented his own plans and ideas for German national theatre

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> “Richard Wagner,” in *A&E Television Networks*, 2014, <https://www.biography.com/musician/richard-wagner>.

<sup>4</sup> “Richard Wagner,” in *A&E Television Networks*, 2014, <https://www.biography.com/musician/richard-wagner>.

<sup>5</sup> Barry Millington and others, “Wagner family (opera),” in *Grove Music Online*, 2002, <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

organization, including the election of a director, the building and start of a drama school, expansion of the court's orchestra, and even self-management of the administration. As excited as he was for his plans, they were ultimately rejected.<sup>7</sup>

Wagner officially joined the insurrectionists in June of 1848, continuing to keep his post as Kapellmeister. His assistant conductor, August Röckel, began publishing a weekly journal of inflammatory, republican tirades, which include some by Wagner himself.<sup>8</sup> The composer soon found himself with a terrible reputation, including being quarrelsome and manipulative.<sup>9</sup> In an article recounting the German composer, Dirk Kurbjuweit quotes a biography, recalling how Wagner "used women, deceived friends and constantly groveled for money to pay for a luxurious lifestyle."<sup>10</sup> This was recounted by many people, including a This, along with his active role in the Dresden insurrection led to him fleeing when Prussian troops took control in May of 1849.<sup>11</sup> It was during this time of political exile that he wrote and composed the *Wesendonck-Lieder*.

### ***Wesendonck-Lieder***

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Jamie Katz, "The Brilliant, Troubled Legacy of Richard Wagner," in *Smithsonian Institution*, 2013, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/the-brilliant-troubled-legacy-of-richard-wagner-16686821/>.

<sup>10</sup> Dirk Kurbjuweit, "Richard Wagner: A Composer Forever Associated with Hitler," in *Der Spiegel*, 2013. <https://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/richard-wagner-a-composer-forever-associated-with-hitler-a-892600.html>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

The government fell during the time of the *Wesendonck-Lieder's* composition, which led to the end of Wagner's revolutionary actions.<sup>12</sup> He fled the country to Weimar, ending up in Zurich, Switzerland with support from his friends, most notably Liszt.<sup>13</sup> Because of his precarious, sensitive situation, Wagner found that he was short of any useful amount of money. It was this that led to the birth of *Tristan und Isolde*, and he put aside any works to focus on the poetry of this opera.<sup>14</sup>

As Wagner worked on the libretto of his new work, he moved, with his wife, into a spare cottage owned by his close friend, Otto Wesendonck. Wesendonck, a notably wealthy silk merchant, financed Wagner with a generous loan. It was here that the composer met Wesendonck's wife, Mathilde, becoming close to her, and eventually becoming involved in a scandalous love affair.

Mathilde Wesendonck, born Mathilde Luckemeyer, was fifteen years Wagner's junior when they met. At one of his concerts in hiding, the Wesendonck couple were in the audience, immediately coming up to Wagner afterwards.<sup>15</sup> The twenty-three-year-old woman appealed to the composer with her attractiveness and intelligence. The woman also fed his conceited ego, as she praised his music and creative mind. After their meeting, Otto Wesendonck allowed the Wagner family to move into one of his owned cottages, where the man began to compose

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<sup>12</sup> "Wesendonck Lieder (Richard Wagner)," *LA Phil*, Accessed 13 October, 2022.  
<https://www.laphil.com/musicdb/pieces/4655/wesendonck-lieder>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> "Sealed by Love's Kiss: Richard Wagner and Mathilde Wesendonck," *Berliner Philharmoniker*, Accessed 24 January 24, 2023, <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/stories/richard-wagner-wesendonck/>

music in honor of Mathilde.<sup>16</sup> He even went so far as to leave notes in the margins of his music, such as “Gesegnet sei Mathilde,” roughly translated to “Blessed be Mathilde.”<sup>17</sup>

Though intense, their love affair was rumored to have not been consummated, resulting in an emotional connection that crossed into *Tristan und Isolde*, which Mathilde Wesendonck and Wagner collaborated on. As their relationship developed, Wagner found himself spending more and more time with Wesendonck, even going so far as to read this progress in the music to her each night. This inspired Mathilde to write five particularly passionate poems, of which Richard Wagner set the music to for voice and piano.<sup>18</sup> Their relationship ended in 1858 when Wagner was forcibly removed from the borrowed home after their affair was discovered.<sup>19</sup> Today, historians have concluded that their love was partly dramatized in the famous opera that was partially inspired by the *Wesendonck-Lieder*<sup>20</sup>.

### Lieder

The definition of German Lied (or Lieder in plural tense) by the Britannica Encyclopedia are any number of German songs, as they are referenced in English and French writings.<sup>21</sup> Lied, has a vocal line set to poetry, sung by a singular vocalist and piano accompaniment.<sup>22</sup> Lieder largely focuses on the equality of the voice and piano parts, letting both evenly share melodic

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> “Wesendonck Lieder (Richard Wagner),” *LA Phil*, Accessed 13 October, 2022.  
<https://www.laphil.com/musicdb/pieces/4655/wesendonck-lieder>.

<sup>19</sup> Barry Millington, “Wesendonck {Wesendonck; née Luckemeyer}, Mathilde,” in *Grove Music Online*, 2001.  
<https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000030144>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Britannica and T. Editors of Encyclopaedia, “lied,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, November 28, 2014,  
<https://www.britannica.com/art/lied>.

<sup>22</sup> Lucy Chaudhuri, “What are Lieder in Music?,” in *BBC Music Magazine*, June 15, 2021, <https://www.classical-music.com/features/articles/what-are-lieder/>

content in order to create a cohesive partnership.<sup>23</sup> Today, Lieder are known for their frequent modulations, poetic imagery, and rich harmonic structures.<sup>24</sup>

The earliest Lied date from the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries from poets and singers of courtly love, called *minnesingers*. In most Lied proper, there are two definitive sections, the first being a phrase of music with different words (*a* form), and the second being a second phrase with differing words (*aaB* form).<sup>25</sup> Lieder is usually through-composed or strophic, occasionally let for full orchestra accompaniment.

As time went on, the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw composers of Lied taking poems and setting them to music. This happened after a time where those composers saw the old Lied tradition begin to disappear, changing under the influence of the polyphonic Italian secular form called madrigal.<sup>26</sup> During this time, Franz Schubert, Hugo Wolf, and Johannes Brahms became some of the most notable lied composers. In much of the German Lieder from the Romantic era, composers structured the songs for voice with piano accompaniment, usually with a virtuosic technique required from the vocalist.<sup>27</sup> The songs were particularly known to be used as salon music, as lieder by itself did not carry the scope of the operas at the time, leaning toward an intimate and emotional refinement.<sup>28</sup> Rather, Lieder has a more intimate subject, and are generally more refined emotion-wise in topic.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Britannica and T. Editors of Encyclopaedia , "lied," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, November 28, 2014, <https://www.britannica.com/art/lied>.

<sup>27</sup> Britannica and T. Editors of Encyclopaedia , "lied," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, November 28, 2014, <https://www.britannica.com/art/lied>.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

*Der Engel*

Translated as “The Angel,” this through-composed and reserved opening movement uses arpeggiated chords to evoke the memories of childhood, reminiscent of a child’s bedtime lullaby. The movement is based on a passage of *Das Rheingold*, the first opera in Wagner’s Ring Cycle.<sup>30</sup> There is little chromatic change, making the entire piece diatonic. The text is incredibly important, as it speaks about the early days of youth, and hearing the voices of angels singing of the bliss of heaven from the skies.

In der Kindheit frühen Tagen	In the early days of childhood
Hört ich oft von Engeln sagen,	I often heard tell of angels
Die des Himmels hehre Wonne	Who exchange heaven’s pure bliss
Tauschen mit der Erdensonne,	For the sun of earth,
Daß, wo bang ein Herz in Sorgen	So that, when a sorrowful heart
Schmachtet vor der Welt verborgen,	Hides its yearning from the world
Daß, wo still es will verbluten,	And would silently bleed away
Und vergehn in Tränenfluten,	And dissolve in streams of tears,
Daß, wo brünstig sein Gebet	And when its fervent prayer

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<sup>30</sup> “Wesendonck Lieder (Richard Wagner),” *LA Phil*, Accessed 13 October, 2022.  
<https://www.laphil.com/musicdb/pieces/4655/wesendonck-lieder>

Einzig um Erlösung fleht,	Begs only for deliverance,
Da der Engel niederschwebt,	That angel will fly down
Und es sanft gen Himmel hebt.	And gently raise the heart to heaven

Ja, es stieg auch mir ein Engel nieder,	And to me too an angel descended,
Und auf leuchtendem Gefieder	And now on shining wings
Führt er, ferne jedem Schmerz,	Bear my spirit, free from all pain,
Meinen Geist nun himmelwärts!	Towards heaven! <sup>31</sup>

Text painting is evident within the piano and vocal line. The first three measures, as stated above, give off a childlike lullaby feeling with the arpeggios, noted in Figure 1 below. It is in G Major, starting on a I cord and moving through the major chords in the scale (V, back to I). The first few bars are a suspension of the diatonic I chord.

Fig. 1: Richard Wagner, *Wesendonck-Lieder*, "Der Engel," mm. 1-3.<sup>32</sup>

The musical score for the first three measures of "Der Engel" is shown. It is in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The tempo is marked "Sehr ruhig bewegt". The piano part features arpeggiated chords in the first three measures. The dynamics are marked "p (sehr zart und weich)" and "piu p".

<sup>31</sup> Richard Stokes, "Der Engel," in *Oxford Lieder*. <https://www.oxfordlieder.co.uk/song/4578>.

<sup>32</sup> Richard Wagner, "Der Engel," in *Wesendonck-Lieder*, 1.

When the vocalist comes in, Wagner has one of the clearest moments of text painting, shown in Figure 2. The words are the remembrance of angels singing of heaven in the skies, with the vocal line steadily climbing in pitch. The climax of this phrase is on the word “heaven,” which is the highest note of the sentence. This note is then repeated when the vocalist sings “sun,” another clear use of text painting. Underneath the vocal line, the piano is playing at a pianissimo, not only bringing out the high notes, but highlighting and emphasizing the importance of the text setting.

Fig. 2: Richard Wagner, *Wesendonck-Lieder*, “Der Engel,” mm. 9-12<sup>33</sup>

The image displays a musical score for the vocal line and piano accompaniment of "Der Engel" from Wagner's *Wesendonck-Lieder*, measures 9-12. The vocal line is written in G major and features a steady climb in pitch, peaking on the word "Himmels" (heaven) with a high note. The piano accompaniment is in G major and features a pianissimo texture with high notes. The lyrics are: "Him - mels heh - re Won - - - ne tausch - ten mit der Er - - - den -".

The second verse brings a shift in musical content and energy, illuminating the change that the text brings. It is more solemn, speaking of the sorrowful heart bleeding and dissolving in tears. The peacefulness of childhood is disrupted by the ever-evolving loss of naivety and the heart’s cries for redemption. Wagner takes us into the parallel minor (G minor) almost abruptly. This can be challenging for the singer, as the sudden change can be daunting, not only with its

<sup>33</sup> Richard Wagner, “Der Engel,” in *Wesendonck-Lieder*, 1.

notes, but with the shift in textual meaning. This happens only for a few lines, before Wagner completely changes the atmosphere by going back into the major key. The singer's text is now focused on angels flying down to lift the heart to heaven, which is reflected in the vocal line. The soprano part gradually lifts, reaching its peak on a G5 on the held word "niederschwebt," translating to "fly down." It is the opposite of what is expected but makes sense because the line on the word rises and falls.<sup>34</sup> Opposite of it, the piano part continues its rising melodic line, echoing the textual meaning, as shown in Figure 3. The ending of this section of music is perfectly executed text painting, as the words "Und es sanft gen Himmel hebt," meaning "And gently raise the heart to heaven"<sup>35</sup> have the soprano in a higher tessitura, ascending to an F5 in the melodic line.

Fig. 3: Richard Wagner, *Wesendonck-Lieder*, "Der Engel," mm. 23-26.<sup>36</sup>

The image shows a musical score for Richard Wagner's "Der Engel" from the *Wesendonck-Lieder*. It consists of two staves: a vocal line for soprano and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The tempo markings are "poco riten." and "a tempo". The lyrics are "fleht, da der En - gel nie - - - - - der schwebt, und es". The piano part has a rising melodic line, with dynamics "p" and "p".

<sup>34</sup> Richard Wagner, "Der Engel," in *Wesendonck-Lieder*, 2.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Stokes, "Der Engel," in *Oxford Lieder*. <https://www.oxfordlieder.co.uk/song/4578>.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Wagner, "Der Engel," in *Wesendonck-Lieder*, 2.

The final section of the movement starts with another repetition of the angels descending on shining wings, paired with a repeated action of the voice line ascending, representing the heavenly angels. The last of the words are in the middle range of the soprano voice, using the “sanft” or “gentle” marking as if to be reminiscent of the singer ridding themselves of the pain and rising to heaven. Textually and melodically, it is a peaceful ending to the first song of the cycle, echoed by the piano part repeating the music from the opening. The pianist plays with the G chord triad leitmotif, using it to expand the ending line until it is played up an octave in the final measure, with a V chord finishing the song.

### *Schmerzen*

“Schmerzen” is translated to “Anguish,” and the first few, opening measures are identical to the harmonic structure of the vorspiel of *Tristan und Isolde*.<sup>37</sup> This song shifts emotions, ranging from suspenseful and sorrowing. Through-composed, the song speaks of the sun’s setting, and how it brings agony each evening. The focus of the piece is reminiscent of the Romantic Era, as it is completely situated around the theme of “nature.” In many ways, the piece almost seems to be depicting Wagner’s inner feelings and thoughts, meaning the singer must force themselves into the mindset he was in during his emotional affair, and reflect those in the performance.

Sonne, weinest jeden Abend

Early evening, sun, you redden

Dir die Schönen Augen rot,

Your lovely eyes with weeping.

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<sup>37</sup> Robert Cart, “Dreams: Richard Wagner’s Five Poems by Mathilde Von Wesendonck: an Analysis by Robert Cart,” in *Artsong Update*, Accessed 11 February, 2023.  
<https://artsongupdate.org/Articles/WesendonkLiederRobertCart.htm>

Wenn im Meeresspiegel badend	When, bathing in the sea
Dich erreicht der frühe Tod;	You die an early death;
Doch erstehst in alter Pracht,	Yet you rise in your old splendor,
Glorie der düstren Welt,	The glory of the dark world,
Du am Morgen, neu erwacht,	When you wake in the morning
Wie ein stolzer Siegesheld!	As a proud and conquering hero!
Ach, wie sollte ich da klagen,	Ah, why should I complain,
Wie, mein Herz, so schwer dich sehn,	The glory of the dark world,
Muß die Sonne selbst verzagen,	When you wake in the morning
Muß die Sonne untergehn?	As a proud and conquering hero!
Und gebietet Tod nur Leben,	If only death gives birth to life,
Geben Schmerzen Wonnen nur:	If only agony brings bliss:
O wie dank'ich daß gegeben	O how I give thanks to Nature
Solche Schmerzen mir Natur.	For giving me such agony! <sup>38</sup>

Wagner starts this melancholy movement with a *forte* I chord, rolled in the piano part. The dotted rhythms become a frequently used motif in the song, used in the accompaniment, as well as the soprano vocal line. The first two measures have the pianist playing the vocal

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<sup>38</sup> Richard Stokes, "Schmerzen," in *Oxford Lieder*. <https://www.oxfordlieder.co.uk/song/4581>.

melody, only to cut off with another vii chord. It gives it a dramatic flair, as the next few beats of music are alternated between rests and chords. When the vocalist comes in, the accompaniment doubles the melodic line as the singer emotes the feeling of the evening sun reddening and weeping. The downward motion of the line reflects the oncoming sunset, another obvious use of text painting, shown in Figure 4.

Fig. 4: Richard Wagner, *Wesendonck-Lieder*, "Schmerzen," mm. 1-4.<sup>39</sup>

**Langsam und breit**

Son-ne, weinest je-den Abend dir die

There is a slight shift on the next line, as the soprano sings of the sun dying an early death each night. The accompaniment changes, now playing eighth note chords as a pedal underneath the vocal line. The notes move through a fast progression in C minor, a V-IV progression before a temporary key change into Ab Major. The new key lasts only a measure, and the next we are back with a I chord, with a held Ab from the held soprano note.

<sup>39</sup> Richard Wagner, "Schmerzen," in *Wesendonck-Lieder*, 13.

A classic moment of text painting occurs in the next line, as the singer now sings of the interest waking each morning as a proud and conquering hero.<sup>40</sup> Wagner gives a regal accompaniment, and it is common practice for the pianist to play the sixteenth note as a staccato to give space between the double dotted quarter note, shown in Figure 5.<sup>41</sup> It gives it the “courtly” sounding accent needed to reflect the tone of the line. It is also reflective of the sword leitmotif in *Das Ring des Nibelungen*, showing even further the nobility of the singular line.

Fig. 5: Richard Wagner, *Wesendonck-Lieder*, “Schmerzen,” mm. 11-14.<sup>42</sup>

The image shows a musical score for Richard Wagner's "Schmerzen" from the Wesendonck-Lieder. It consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in G major (one flat) and features a melodic line with a double dotted quarter note followed by an eighth note. The piano accompaniment consists of a right hand with chords and a left hand with a rhythmic pattern of sixteenth notes. Dynamics include f, ff, p, and p.

The moment is gone within the same measure, as Mathilde’s text shows a frustration at the complaining that is going on. We have the same melodic line from the beginning in the voice line and right hand of the piano, but with a different harmonic pattern in the left hand. This pulls the vocalist from the seemingly strophic set up of the entire song, as the music changes after the first measure. Despite the melancholy feeling, Wagner composed the music

<sup>40</sup> Richard Stokes, “Schmerzen,” in *Oxford Lieder*. <https://www.oxfordlieder.co.uk/song/4581>.

<sup>41</sup> Richard Wagner, “Schmerzen,” in *Wesendonck-Lieder*, 13.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Wagner, “Schmerzen,” in *Wesendonck-Lieder*, 13.

to ascend to the sun on the word “Sonne,” in both lines asking if the sun must complete its nightly duties in setting.<sup>43</sup>

The movement is ended with a beautiful ascension in melodic content before the voice sinks to the middle chest register. Wagner writes “mit großer Steigerung,” translating to “with great increase” in the middle of the first line “Und gebietet Tod nur Leben,” meaning “If only death gives birth to life.”<sup>44</sup> Starting here, the tempo and intensity increases, steadily rising in pitch as the climax of the lieder approaches. The vocal line starts in the lower register of the voice on an Eb4, the death painted with the lowness. As the word “Leben” or “life” is sung, we it has already risen to a Db5 and included multiple syncopated rhythms to ascend to that note.

The last line from Mathilde’s text is giving thanks to Nature for giving such terrible agony and is dutifully shown in the music.<sup>45</sup> The first “O” is held on the highest note of the movement, a G5 with the marking “sehr breit” in measure twenty-two.<sup>46</sup> Translated as “very wide,” Wagner is dictating for the singer to be broad, which lets the soprano use the moment for complete release whilst singing. Another meaning for the “sehr breit” could be to widen the tempo, lengthening that high note as the sustaining climax so as to allow the listener to know the ending is near. This final line sinks down and resumes the *a tempo* in measure twenty-three to gather the previous intensity as a way to show the frustration for the agony. The last four lines (starting at measure nineteen) until the end are a final example of text painting used to represent the theme of the lieder. The vocal line gradually rises, as does the sun each morning.

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<sup>43</sup> Richard Stokes, “Schmerzen,” in *Oxford Lieder*. <https://www.oxfordlieder.co.uk/song/4581>.

<sup>44</sup> Richard Stokes, “Schmerzen,” in *Oxford Lieder*. <https://www.oxfordlieder.co.uk/song/4581>.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Richard Wagner, “Schmerzen,” in *Wesendonck-Lieder*, 14.

has its peak in measure twenty-two, almost reminiscent of the noon hours when the sun is at its highest. It ends with the descent of the melody, representing the sun's setting and the finality of the piece.

### *Träume*

The translation for *Träume* is "Dreams," which is the closing movement for the song cycle. This movement is extraordinarily reminiscent of *Tristan und Isolde* with its ever-persistent theme of dreaming.<sup>47</sup> This is because Wagner wrote it as a study for the opera, using it as an impression and sketch.<sup>48</sup> Written in December of 1857, this last piece of the song cycle takes the listener through a dreamily whimsical journey through the mind through dreams by use of extremely long phrases and dynamic contrast. The poem is set structurally the same as "Der Engel," with four lines to a stanza, but has the rhyme scheme of "Schmerzen," with the first rhyming with the third, and the second and fourth rhyming.

There are many things drawn from the famous opera that appear in this lieder movement, including the opening prologue and the use of diminished and seventh chords. This is parallel to Act II "O sink' hernieder, Nacht der Liebe," opening, which has the same harmonic progression, shown in Figure 6 and Figure 7.<sup>49</sup> The ending of the movement also features this

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<sup>47</sup> Robert Cart, "Dreams: Richard Wagner's Five Poems by Mathilde Von Wesendonck: an Analysis by Robert Cart," in *Artsong Update*, Accessed 11 February, 2023.

<https://artsongupdate.org/Articles/WesendonkLiederRobertCart.htm>

<sup>48</sup> Wesendonck Lieder (Richard Wagner)," *LA Phil*, Accessed 13 October, 2022.

<https://www.laphil.com/musicdb/pieces/4655/wesendonck-lieder>

<sup>49</sup> Wesendonck Lieder (Richard Wagner)," *LA Phil*, Accessed 13 October, 2022.

<https://www.laphil.com/musicdb/pieces/4655/wesendonck-lieder>

exact melodic content, where the text lets the listener know that there is now a peaceful conclusion, not only to the movement but for the entire song cycle.

Figure 6: Richard Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*, “O sink hernieder,” mm. 1-8.<sup>50</sup>

Tristan Act II "O sink hernieder"

Tristan Act II "O sink hernieder"

Figure 7: Richard Wagner, *Wesendonck-Lieder*, “Träume,” mm. 1-14.<sup>51</sup>

Sehr mäßig bewegt, aber nie schleppend

*pp*

*dolcissimo*

*un poco cresc.*

*dim.*

<sup>50</sup> Robert Cart, “Dreams: Richard Wagner’s Five Poems by Mathilde Von Wesendonck: an Analysis by Robert Cart,” in *Artsong Update*, Accessed 11 February, 2023.

<https://artsongupdate.org/Articles/WesendonkLiederRobertCart.htm>

<sup>51</sup> Richard Wagner, “Schmerzen,” in *Wesendonck-Lieder*, 15.

Sag, welch wunderbare Träume  
 Halten meinen Sinn umfängen,  
 Daß sie nicht wie leere Schäume  
 Sind in ödes Nichts vergangen?

Say, what wondrous dreams are these  
 Embracing all my senses,  
 That they have not, like bubbles,  
 Vanished to a barren void?

Träume, die in jeder Stunde,  
 Jedem Tage schöner blühen,  
 Und mit ihrer Himmelskunde  
 Selig durchs Gemüte ziehn!

Dreams, that with every hour  
 Bloom more lovely every day,  
 And with their heavenly tidings  
 Float blissfully through the mind!

Träume, die wie hehre Strahlen  
 In die Seele sich versenken,  
 Dort ein ewig Bild zu malen:  
 Allvergessen, Eingedenken!

Dreams, that with glorious rays  
 Penetrate the soul,  
 There to paint an eternal picture:  
 Forgetting all, remembering one!

Träume, wie wenn Frühlingssonne  
 Aus dem Schnee die Blüten küßt,  
 Daß zu nie geahnter Wonne  
 Sie der neue Tag begrüßt,

Dreams, as when the Spring sun  
 Kisses blossoms from the snow,  
 So the new day might welcome them  
 in unimagined bliss,

Daß sie wachsen, daß sie blühen,

So that they grow and flower,

Träumend spenden ihren Duft,	Bestow their scent as in a dream,
Sanft an deiner Brust verglügen,	Fade softly away on your breast
Und dann sinken in die Gruft.	And sink into their grave. <sup>52</sup>

As stated above, Wagner wrote the opening prologue to be reminiscent of a dreamlike state, wanting to reflect the calmness of the state of sleep. He gives the marking “sehr mäßig bewegt, aber nie schleppend,” translating to “very moderately moved, but never sluggish,” which sets the mood for the entire piece. The melancholy idealization from *Schmerzen* transfers and carries over into the opening passage, shifting in its approach to reflect the tranquility of the dreaming state. The accompaniment part’s staccato gives, at first glance, the thought of a firm and boisterous piece, but because of the slowness of the movement, the staccatos become more of a tenuto to emphasize each note.

When the vocalist comes in, it is with a question, pondering the dreams they are having. The melodic line has this constant arch in pitch, rising and descending on each phrase and giving the emphasis on the questioning. The second phrase echoes the first, only up a second, with a flat IV (Db). There is a leap between the first and second notes, a fourth interval, and even with the Db, we keep the same intervals between each of the notes (a third between the second and third notes). The third phrase, which starts to show the turmoil by asking if their dreams have not vanished into the barren void (almost as if asking where dreams go when we awaken), does not follow this. Instead, the first leap is a third, followed by a fourth, the exact

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<sup>52</sup> Richard Stokes, “Träume,” in *Oxford Lieder*. <https://www.oxfordlieder.co.uk/song/4582>.

opposite of the first two phrases, shown in Figure 8. This leads to a different feeling, melodically speaking, with the constant pushing and pulling of keys in the next section.

Figure 8: Richard Wagner, *Wesendonck-Lieder*, “Träume,” mm. 20-29.<sup>53</sup>

The musical score for "Träume" from Wagner's *Wesendonck-Lieder* is presented in two systems. Each system includes a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in G major and 4/4 time, with lyrics: "Träu - - - me hal - ten mei-nenSinn um - fan - - - - gen, daß sie nicht wie lee - re Schäu - - - me sind in". The piano accompaniment features a right hand with chords and a left hand with a steady eighth-note accompaniment. A *pp* dynamic marking is present in the piano part.

The next “Träume” that is sung, has a decrescendo, giving it a sweeter introduction to the following section. It reflects more of the quietness of sleep but has the excitement of the blossoming of the dreams.<sup>54</sup> Considering the history of the *Wesendonck-Lieder*, or rather, the relationship between Richard Wagner and Mathilde Wesendonck, it is easy to conclude that the text here reflects the dreams they would have of each other. Dreams blossoming more and

<sup>53</sup> Richard Wagner, “Schmerzen,” in *Wesendonck-Lieder*, 16.

<sup>54</sup> Richard Stokes, “Träume,” in *Oxford Lieder*. <https://www.oxfordlieder.co.uk/song/4582>.

more each day and floating blissfully through the mind is something that could only be referenced to people in love. The dotted eighth and sixteenth repeated rhythm signifies this but also brings difficulty to the piece.

Frequently, Wagner uses the syncopated sixteenth and dotted eighth passage throughout the *Wesendonck-Lieder*. In this song of the cycle, it is easy for the singer to emphasize each note because of the way it is written. However, to have the vocal line float above the accompaniment and portray the tranquility of the dreamlike state, it is essential that the singer maintains a steady and smooth legato line.

The next section is a shift in the music, moving to major IV for a moment. Wagner writes “belebt” meaning “busy,” which translates to the musical change. The vocal line picks up in rhythmic speed and intensity, rising to approach the climax. The words before the climactic moment are “Allvergessen, Eingedenken” translating to “forgetting all, remembering one.” Underneath those words, the piano plays held chords under the first measure, and then has the right hand echoing the voice part through the high note. This residual “Träume” is sung as the highest note in the entire movement, which is followed by stunning poetry that references the sun and snow blossoms kissing as the new days greet them in bliss.<sup>55</sup>

Following the high point of the lied, the piano part resumes the stagnant, stacked eighth note chords under the voice, supporting the idea of the blossom and sun kisses. Now at the end of the movement and song cycle, the vocalist sings “Sanft an deiner Brust verglühen, Und dann sinken in die Gruft,” translating to “Fade softly away on your breast and sink into the grave.” Wagner uses the music to reflect the text, bringing a more solemn feeling with held

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<sup>55</sup> Richard Stokes, “Träume,” in *Oxford Lieder*. <https://www.oxfordlieder.co.uk/song/4582>.

chromatic notes suspended over a diminutive piano accompaniment. There is a marking, *immer mehr nachlassend*, which Wagner writes as a meaning for the vocalist to decrease more and more. The goal is to have the vocal part fade away into the piano line, sinking into the air as we sing notes that are in the lower voice range for a soprano.<sup>56</sup> The vocal line fades into nothing, letting the piano accompaniment from the opening take over as an iridescent and shimmery ending to the entire lieder cycle.

### Recording Comparison

Two recordings will be compared musically, the first being a performance of Anne Sofie von Otter, a mezzo-soprano performing in 2013. Von Otter is a Swedish singer, known for her lieder, opera repertoire, and oratorios. Her recording of the first movement of the *Wesendonck-Lieder*, which is in the lower voice key, seems to be more relaxed with a slower tempo and an abundance of push and pull with tempo. She relies heavily on vibrato to portray the dramaticism, something expected of any singer of Wagner's music to do.

One thing that is noticeable about the performance is how von Otter takes her time with each phrase ending and beginning. She does not rush her entrances, using the break between the phrases to get good, deep breaths to carry out those long legato lines. On some of the longer phrases, such as the "Engel nieder schwebt" on page two, she elongates them, a feat that is daunting considering her slow pace and the length of the line. Her diction is also extremely crisp, and any listener would be able to hear and understand each word she sings. However, there are moments where her vowels are misconstrued, most likely due to the

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

differing Swedish accent. For example, on the top of page two, she pronounces “daß” with a bright, /æ/ instead of a darker /ɒ/ that is suitable for German language. She also puts a bit of a glottal onset on the word “Ja,” on page 3, scooping the glide of the starting consonant before going to the vowel. This is not recommended, as it wastes time and lets air escape that could be better used on the long phrase that she breaks off.

Her performance of “Schmerzen” is much faster than most singers take the piece. Faster tempos contribute to the persistent problem of emphasis on the sixteenth and dotted eighth note syncopated rhythms, but von Otter manages to maintain the legato phrase despite the quickness. However, the further in the song we go, the more that emphasis starts to show, especially on the “du am Morgen neu er wacht” in measures ten through thirteen. In this instance, the integrity of the vocal line was affected by the quick tempo chosen by the singer, instead of a relaxed, yet still agony-inducing speed.

Throughout the piece, von Otter makes many breathing choices that are not appropriate, not only for the language but for the legato line. There are a couple of instances, particularly in measure thirteen, where she breathes in the middle of the word, which is heavily frowned upon in classical singing. Other times where she breathes, rather than it being in the middle of the word, she allows the vocal line to break in moments that pull the listener out of alignment with the melodic flow. Starting in measure fourteen, she chooses to breathe every few words, making the song sound much more frantic than it needs to be. She continues this until the end of the movement, constantly breaking the line to get deep breaths for the next few notes.

Contrary to the previous movement, von Otter's performance of "Träume" was spectacular. She chose a much slower tempo, which would have been worrisome considering the breathing issues during "Schmerzen." However, she consistently shows the entire phrase line by singing through the line. She chose to speed up her tempo starting at measure forty-one, which most likely helped stabilize her phrasing, only slowing around measure fifty-eight.

The vocalist used an extensive amount of dynamic contrast to showcase the dreamlike state of the piece, which translates perfectly from what Wagner wrote. However, this is, once again, overshadowed by her choice of vowel shaping. At the very end of the cycle, we have a very exposed and delicate line, the final line sung in the entire song. Here, von Otter chooses to warp her mouth shape, taking away from the beauty of what is supposed to be an incredibly tender moment.

Contrary to von Otter's performance, we have a performance by Stuart Skelton in more recent years. He is one of the best heldentenors (a vocal fach frequently featured in Wagner's music), known for his tonal beauty and dramatic portrayals. His opening number of "Der Engel" is much faster than von Otter's. In the recording, his voices' pure resonance and depth can be heard. The German language seems to fly off his tongue, and he uses the ease of that to give the listener a more visual performance. He stands still, but his facial expression and the intensity of his eyes speak loudly across the room.

His interpretation of the second section on page two is to make it much softer but electrifies it with punctual diction and vibrato that dramatizes the movement. He gives us a noticeable shift in music but does not let it take away from the music by overdoing it. However, the pure size of his voice makes the high notes pop out from the legato line in measure twenty-

five, which does not suit the piece that takes about angels. He chooses to breath right before a final note in the phrase at measure twenty-eight, which seemed to shift the line, something that should be avoided if at all plausible. Contrary to von Otter, Skelton chooses to end the piece with a loud climax, only slightly softening in the last two measures that he sings.

Like the previous recording mentioned, the singer chose a much quicker tempo. Skelton's rhythmic integrity is affected by this, as he begins making the dotted rhythms equal eighth notes in measure six. The orchestra and vocalist do not line up whenever the accompaniment doubles the melodic line because of this. He chooses to breathe in places that are not necessarily mainstream but does not let them affect the legato line, of which he executes beautifully. Some of this is due to Skelton modifying his vowels ever so slightly, allowing him to resonate on each note even in the quick tempo.

Skelton immediately lures the audience in on "Träume," giving the first word a beautiful example of chiaroscuro. He plays with the melodic line's dynamics, using crescendos and decrescendos to give each line shape. He also pushes the tempo, while giving unusual huskiness to the onset of his phrases. It is a technique that is baffling, as it cannot be distinguished from an artistic or stylist choice, or his voice becoming tired.

### **Conclusion**

The *Wesendonck-Lieder* are Richard Wagner's hidden gems in a lifetime of intense, operatic compositions. The historical background during the time of writing led to the emotional affair of Wagner and Mathilde Wesendonck, which led to the birth of this song cycle. There are many examples of pure text painting, used to portray the scandalous love they had

for one another. As standard examples of Romantic, German lieder, these five movements, of which three were dissected above, remain to be a popular choice for advanced singers to increase their repertoire levels. From the childlike lullabies in “Der Engel,” to the deep agony felt by the singer in “Schmerzen,” and even the dreamlike state of being in “Träume,” the cycle remains to give any singer a challenge.

Today, many question the desire to perform the composer’s music, especially considering his ties to the Nazi regime. Though Wagner predates the Nazi party and Holocaust, they used his music and sharing of anti-Semitic ideology to further their reach during the early twentieth century. However, these songs can give a performer, even one with no hopes of becoming a Wagnerian voice type, a chance to sing high-quality repertoire by the distinguished composer. The songs have an incredible challenge level, given the long phrases and intense, German language, but are manageable if one dedicates themselves to their craft. Listening to different recordings is the groundwork for learning such difficult music, as there are different interpretations of such a rich and hefty text. While there are not many analyzed performances of the song cycle, there is a foundation that has the immense potential to be built upon and further studied, especially considering the footwork the *Wesendonck-Lieder* laid out for *Tristan und Isolde*.

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