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Grasping Toward the Light: A Reassessment of Wolf's *Michelangelo-Lieder*

Iain Gillis

In surveys of the Lied and of music history, Hugo Wolf is often mentioned, but seldom discussed. He is positioned, rather problematically, at one end of a continuum representing the Lied tradition, with Schubert at the other. The music he wrote is represented by a couple (at most) of his songs, usually presented comparatively next to Schubert's and Schumann's settings of poetry from Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. David Ossenkop published an invaluable bibliographic guide on the composer in 1988. One finds few essays or monographs published on the *Michelangelo-Lieder*, and among those few, the great majority date from around the turn of the century by late contemporaries of Wolf's circle (such as Edmund Hellmer) or by his earliest biographers a generation later (notably Ernest Newman).¹ In any case, the extant literature favours the second song, "*Alles endet, was entstehet*," to the near-total exclusion of the other two. Remarkably, John Daverio, in his

¹ While one cannot dispute the importance of such a publication with respect to Wolf scholarship, I may cite two reservations about it. First, it has been twenty years since it was published, and several publications on Wolf, including those that deal with his *Michelangelo-Lieder* specifically, have come out since then. Second, by virtue of the fact that the biographies by Frank Walker and Ernst Decsey are not cited as treating the cycle even though they are both landmark studies on Wolf's life and works, one may wonder about some of Ossenkop's editorial decisions. He cites Walker's study only in the prefatory remarks and cites Decsey elsewhere, and both of those are well-indexed.

chapter about the song cycle for Rufus Hallmark's volume, makes no mention of the *Michelangelo-Lieder* in the two full pages he devotes to Wolf.² Although his is undeniably a monument in Wolf literature, especially in English, Ernest Newman addresses the songs, but does not subject them to any musical or textual analysis.³ Susan Youens's introduction to her paragraph about the *Michelangelo-Lieder* in *Grove* is indicative of critical reception of the cycle: "At the end, inspiration slipped, regained control, faltered again."⁴ This curiously uncritical standpoint that a late change in style is due to a faltering mind is disappointing, but it befell the late Lieder of Robert Schumann, too. Great danger lies in the too-hasty treatment of generalised biography as musicological criticism. That said, it is my contention that Wolf very deliberately associated himself with the lyric persona in the song cycle at hand. His particular appropriation of the genre "Romantic song cycle" evidences his stylistically late engagement with a historical tradition.

I hope that through the present study, Wolf's *Michelangelo-Lieder* may also begin to be appreciated and understood on their own terms. I shall first

² John Daverio, "The Song Cycle: Journeys Through a Romantic Landscape," in *German Lieder in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Rufus Hallmark (New York: Schirmer, 1996): 279- 312.

³ Admittedly, this was characteristic of other biographies of the time: H.T. Finck's early biography on Grieg springs to mind.

⁴ Susan Youens, "Wolf, Hugo: Mature songs," in *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/52073pg7> (accessed 24 April 2010).

tender a workable definition of “song cycle,” then summarise the key tenets of “late style” as discussed by Edward Said. I will provide a brief compositional history of the songs, and then proceed to analyze them, text and music, in turn. If my tone strikes the reader as personal, I beg his or her indulgence: my personal experience with these songs has been characterised by much retrospection. This retrospective understanding speaks to one aspect of “lateness” that Said does not address, but that is inherent to the phenomenon of music. I hope that the lens of late style may be one through which my analyses of the three *Michelangelo-Lieder* may be seen.

In a sense, my starting point is akin to Ernest Newman's. In the three songs, “the throb of feeling is as profound as in anything Wolf ever wrote”: I was struck by austerity of the set and their effectiveness as a cycle from my first hearing of them.⁵ While it is not my goal to suggest why the first and third songs have been neglected, Wolf's own enthusiasm for the second song may have provided the impetus for this trend, as numerous sources cite. Walker quotes a letter from Wolf to his friend, Oskar Grohe: “Most significant, however, seems to me the second poem, which I consider the best that I have so far knocked

⁵ Ernest Newman, *Hugo Wolf* (London: Methuen, 1907), 217. Newman twice makes erroneous statements (pp. 136, 216) about the forms of the poems: he claims that Wolf set three sonnets of Michelangelo's; in fact, only the third of the *Michelangelo-Lieder* has a sonnet as its text.

off.”⁶ I experienced the three songs as a cycle – as Wolf himself considered them to be – and have a hard time “hearing” one without the others. This interconnectedness is for me an important criterion toward defining a song cycle.

It turns out that the term “song cycle” is rather difficult to pin down. Numerous eloquent scholars have reached the same conclusion, and the multiplicity of their tentative definitions serves to amplify that truth. John Daverio says succinctly: “Clearly, the song cycle resists definition.” Arthur Komar’s widely cited study of *Dichterliebe* presents “less a set of prescriptions than a series of possibilities” [Daverio’s terms]. Other writers have approached that problematic term in various ways, typically resorting to “types” of cycles (as do Ruth Bingham and Walter Bernhart), problems with cyclical conceptions for analysis (as do Suzanne Lodato and Leon Platinga), or by, not surprisingly in the field of Lied studies, addressing the song cycle primarily as a literary genre (as does Cyrus Hamlin).⁷

⁶ Frank Walker, *Hugo Wolf: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1951), 408. It should be stated that if this is in fact the reason for the virtual overlooking of the remainder of the cycle, then this is a grotesque oversight on the part of those studying Wolf. For instance, Walker also translates two letters, a day apart in March of 1888, from Wolf to his friend, Edmund Lang. On the 20th: “*Erstes Liebeslied eines Mädchens* (Eduard Mörike) is by far the best thing that have done up to now.” On the 21st: “I retract the opinion that the *Erstes Liebeslied eines Mädchens* is my best thing, for what I wrote this morning, *Fussreise* (Eduard Mörike), is a million times better.” See Walker, *Biography*, 203.

⁷ See Bingham in *The Cambridge Companion to the Lied*, ed. James Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004). See all others in

For my purposes, I define the song cycle as having elements of poetic and musical unity. That is, themes and motifs in both the poetic and the musical senses appear from piece to piece. If a meaningful tonal scheme exists (and one does, I believe, in the *Michelangelo-Lieder*), all the better, although this is not necessarily the case for all cycles. In the absence of a discernable narrative (as one can trace, say, in Schubert's *Winterreise*) or one that is implied by the poems' having come from a novel [as is the case in Brahms's *Romanzen*, op. 33 (*Magelone-Lieder*), in which the lyrics are drawn, in order, from Tieck's *Wundersame Liebesgeschichte der schönen Magelone und des Grafen Peter aus der Provence*], conceptualising a common 'Lyric I' for a cycle may be helpful in trying to fashion a narrative, if it aids understanding and makes sense musically. Following Bernhart, I consider the *Michelangelo-Lieder* to be a literary song cycle, that is, to be characterised by the "flux of mental states" experienced by a "lyric persona."⁸ This cycle is one that is unified by subtle key relationships and melodic figures, as well as by some of the twenty-four motifs

the series *Word and Music Studies*. Tellingly, both the first and third volumes of the latter series, from which these examples are drawn, bear the subtitle, "Defining the Field."

⁸ Walter Bernhart, "Three Types of Song Cycles: The Variety of Britten's 'Charms'," in *Word and Music Studies*, vol. 3, ed. Walter Bernhart and Werner Wolf with David Mosley (Atlanta: Rodopi, 2001), 211-226.

that Eric Sams outlines as being prominent in Wolf's entire published output.⁹

The greater element of unity, and perhaps the hardest to pin down, is the permeating idea of "lateness." This has been the missing link for my achieving some kind of peace with these songs, and it is important that it has come to me *after* I have come to 'know' the pieces quite well – a sort of late understanding in itself. Following Charles Rosen, Cyrus Hamlin's fourth approach to the Romantic song-cycle is one characterised by "retrospective understanding."¹⁰ Like "song cycle," "lateness" is a slippery term. Said's posthumously-collected essays devoted to the subject address lateness by way of different examples to circumscribe and to illustrate an unnameable thing.¹¹ In that he draws upon very diverse examples from music, film, and literature, Said's approach is remarkably similar the early Romantics' writings about the fragment: his is a collective work meant to elucidate a concept by outlining, rather than drawing *per se*, much as an art student ends up with the image of a chair by drawing all the "negative spaces" prescribed by its boundaries. Said, a fine rhetorician, lays out some key lines that may be synthesised after

⁹ Eric Sams, *The Songs of Hugo Wolf* (London: Methuen, 1961). Esp. 1-22, 259-262.

¹⁰ Cyrus Hamlin, "The Romantic Song Cycle as Literary Genre," in *Word and Music Studies*, vol. 1, ed. Walter Bernhart, Steven Paul Scher, and Werner Wolf (Atlanta: Rodopi, 1999).

¹¹ "Lateness" is explored by Edward Said, who borrowed the term from Theodor Adorno's writings on Beethoven.

one has closely read the whole as a kind of distillation, almost an *Urfinie* of Schenkerian analysis.

There is an element of exile that is central to Said's inquiry. He discerns an "overall assumed pattern to human life"¹² that he divides into "problematics, three great human episodes common to all cultures and traditions."¹³ These are beginnings, continuity, and the "last or late period of life." The last of these gives rise to Said's study, with its "focus on great artists and how near the end of their lives their work and thought acquires a new idiom, what I shall be calling a late style." Late style can be understood as one of two types: either the "accepted notion of age and wisdom in some last works that reflect a special maturity" or "late style that involves a nonharmonious, nonserene tension, and above all, a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness going *against...*"¹⁴ It is the second definition that is of particular interest for Said, and for the current study, and it is this quality of against-ness that I have chosen to tentatively summarise by the term "exile." In each of his many examples, Said points to some kind of non-sequitur, a discontinuity. The flexibility of this model of identifying significant departures from a perceived or assumed smooth teleology is its greatest strength: it may be applied equally to concepts with respect to

¹² Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (New York: Vintage, 2006), 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

time, or to style — in short, to any human philosophical or philological construction.

Said's examples are in some cases quite interconnected, and these connections take on great significance after the conclusion of the book — that is, retrospectively. Beethoven's late works are characterised by Adorno as being representative of *des "Spätstil Beethovens;"* Adorno carries this notion, according to Said, into his analyses of *Parsifal* and Schoenberg. Adorno's prose, which is well-known and oft-cited for its difficulty and inaccessibility, as well as his chosen subject matter, are indicative of Adorno's own lateness of style. Because of Adorno's "lateness" within the twentieth century, Said extends his inquiry to Adorno's contemporaries. He encounters the traits of resistance and against-ness in Strauss, Britten, and Glenn Gould as well. These traits, of course, are relative to each subject's biography, early- and middle- styles, and the circumstances in which he lived. Said's take on Adorno's reading of late Beethoven is worth quoting at length:

Beethoven's late works remain unreconciled, uncoopted by a higher synthesis: they do not fit any scheme, and they cannot be reconciled or resolved, since their irresolution and unsynthesised fragmentariness are constitutive, neither ornamental nor symbolic of something else. Beethoven's late compositions are in fact about "lost totality," and are therefore catastrophic.¹⁵

¹⁵ Said, *Late Style*, 13.

One thinks of the jagged opening of the last piano sonata, so far removed from the opening of the Fifth, or of the juxtapositions of 'mini-movements' in the *Grosse Fuge* or the finale of the Ninth. How different is the aesthetic ideal of unity that they present when compared to the finales of those works in which Beethoven first shifts dramatic weight to the last movement, such as the "*Moonlight*" *Sonata*. For Strauss, on the other hand, the splintering is in a different direction. After *Elektra*, in which Strauss so famously pushed tonal harmony to its limits, his *Vier letzte Lieder*, *Metamorphosis*, and *Capriccio*, among other late works, are characterised by a kind of chronological-stylistic retreat backwards (compared, perhaps, to Beethoven's retreat *inwards*?). This is evidenced by the subject matter of *Capriccio* and at least the harmonic language of those other pieces.

Glenn Gould, whose works include both musical and prosaic compositions as well as virtuosic piano performances, is a late figure on account of his multifarious activities in an age of specialisation (marking him a sort of quirky Renaissance man) as well as for his personal definition of the role of the piano virtuoso. Rather than the piano recital staples of Beethoven, Mozart, Liszt, Brahms, and the like, Gould made a career out of the heady and antique works of Bach, the English virginalists, and the Second Viennese School, as well as composers like Wagner and Strauss, not known for their keyboard works. When he did play repertoire more commonly associated with the virtuoso pianists of his era, his performances sound totally apart. This kind of exile, like that of Beethoven or Strauss in their creative

pursuits, is an intellectual mode that was also explored by Wolf. Said's paradoxical characterisation of late style as being "in, but oddly *apart*" from the present is quite helpful in the case of Wolf's *Michelangelo-Lieder*.

Heinrich Walter Robert-Tornow (1852-1895), whose translations of *Michelangelo's Rime* were given to Wolf by his friend Paul Müller as a Christmas present in 1896, had worked from Cesare Guasti's 1863 edition of the complete poems. According to James Saslow, Guasti had grouped the poems by formal type, rather than chronologically, as is now standard.¹⁶ The German scholar Carl Frey was working on a critical edition of the *Rime* that was published in 1897; in his introduction, he reports that "he continually advised Robert-Tornow during the translation work, and that Robert-Tornow in no way considered his work to be finalized."¹⁷ The *Verein für die Geschichte Berlins* also informs us that although Robert-Tornow took Guasti as his starting point, he entrusted Georg Thouret with the task of seeing the "ready-to-print manuscript" through to publication. Thouret took some liberties, however: "the printed version differs greatly from the manuscript, above all in regards to the ordering of the

¹⁶ James M. Saslow, *The Poetry of Michelangelo* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1991), 53.

¹⁷ "...dass er Robert-Tornow laufend bei der Übersetzungsarbeit beriet und dass dieser sein Werk keineswegs als abgeschlossen betrachtete."
<http://www.diegeschichteberlins.de/geschichteberlins/persoentlichkeiten/persoentlichkeitennot/394-robert-tornow.html> (accessed 3 April 2010).

poems.”¹⁸ Using Saslow’s comparative table of ordering in different editions of Michelangelo’s poetry, it is clear that Wolf was, as we have come to expect, very particular about choosing his texts and ordering them as he saw best. Whether the Robert-Tornow translation was ultimately ordered according to the precedent of Guasti or of Frey, Wolf took his three poems from rather disparate parts of the volume and rearranged them (Figure 1). He must have known the volume well to have selected from across the set and yet have maintained his uncommonly high demands of the poetry and of his own musical ability. It is for the latter reason alone, presumably, that of a projected six songs, he “destroyed the fourth and last [that he had completed] as ‘unworthy.’”¹⁹

Figure 1: Comparative table of orderings used by Wolf and by possible sources for the Robert-Tornow edition Thouret volume from which he made his selections.

| Wolf | Guasti (page no.) | Frey | Chronological |
|------|-------------------|--------|---------------|
| 1 | 329 | 36 | 54 |
| 2 | 350 | 136 | 21 |
| 3 | 199 | 75 | 76 |
| 4 | 33 | 109.99 | 107 |

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Susan Youens, “Tradition and innovation: the Lieder of Hugo Wolf,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Lied*, ed. James Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 219.

I shall address each of the songs in turn. First, Wolf composed them in that order, according to the dated manuscripts as well as references to them in correspondence. Second, Wolf saw them through to publication in his lifetime (while he still had his mental faculties about him) and chose to leave them in that order. Third (a corollary of my second reason), that order is how they are experienced in performance. Following Wolf's own compositional paradigm, I shall begin with the poetry, then turn my attention to the musical notes.

Figure 2: German, Italian, and English with rhyme schemes for the German and Italian of *Michelangelo-Lieder* No. 1: "Wohl denk ich oft." The English is rendered literally after the German by Knut W. Barde.

| | | | | |
|--|---|--|---|---|
| Wohl denk ich oft an mein vergangnes Leben, | A | I'vo pensando al mio vi- ver di prima, | A | It is quite often that I think of my past life, |
| Wie es vor meiner Liebe für dich war; | B | Inanzi ch'ì t' amassi, com'egli era. | B | The way it was before my love for you; |
| Kein Mensch hat damals Acht auf mich gegeben, | A | Di me non fu ma' chi fa- cesse stima; | A | Then no one had paid any attention to me, |
| Ein jeder Tag verloren für mich war; | B | Perdendo ogni dì il tem- po insino a sera. | B | Each and every day was lost to me; |
| Ich dachte wohl, ganz dem Gesang zu leben, | A | Forse pensavo di cantare in rima, | A | I thought that I would dedicate my life to song, |
| Auch mich zu flüchten aus der Menschen Schar. | B | O di ritirarmi da ogni al- tra stiera? | B | As well as flee from human throng. |
| Genannt in Lob und Tadel bin ich heute, | C | Or si sa 'l nome, o per tristo o per buono; | C | Today my name is raised in praise and criticism, |
| Und, daß ich da bin, wissen alle Leute! | C | E sassi pure ch' al mondo i' ci sono! | C | And that I exist, - that is known by all! |

"Wohl denk ich oft" is an excerpt taken from a much longer poem ("To crederrei, se tu fussi di sasso") written in *ottava rima*, stanzas of eight lines that usually comprise eleven syllables. Specifically, the lines that Wolf excerpted for his setting form a *strambotto toscano*. "Strambotto" denotes a single stanza of *ottava rima*,

while “*toscano*” refers to the rhyme scheme, abababcc. Robert-Tornow strove to keep the rhyme scheme and meter of Michelangelo’s poems intact. He also preserved a volta, or turning point, at the last couplet when the rhyme scheme changes. The first six lines are a recounting by Lyric I of his past. The narrative voice is the first person singular, and the beloved is strikingly absent. She is replaced instead by the poet’s love for her. It is an important difference, for the direction of the narrator’s intent is completely inward. The tale is selfish one: the first person singular pronoun, in some declination, appears in every line. These lines are primarily a lament of the narrator’s obscurity in his youth.

The parallels to Wolf’s own life are striking: he was a shameless self-promoter who badgered Wagner during the elder master’s visit to Vienna to look at his compositions, and recounted the event late into his life. The third couplet is also telling: Wolf “never stopped specializing in songs” (a fact that he lamented at one point) and was strangely withdrawn from the “Menschen Schar” – a descriptor with derisive animal connotations, that could equally be rendered as “flock” or “gaggle.” It is sufficient here to note that Wolf was not tied down to any one family or fixed address, and that ideologically he strove always to set himself *apart* from his greatest influences – Wagner, Schubert, and Schumann.²⁰

²⁰ Lawrence Kramer treats Wolf’s social withdrawal within a Freudian framework, most convincingly with his analysis of Wolf’s own performance of “Epiphanas.”

The first two couplets introduce our narrator's philosophy of love: it is an enriching force in a person's life, and it is far from a universal privilege. The first couplet establishes the narrator's primacy by his taking possession of the love as a commodity: "meiner Liebe für dich." The second focuses again on the narrator, claiming that he that giveth suddenly had none for himself. It is a pitiful statement that "kein Mensch hat damals Acht auf mich gegeben," and the consequence is that every day was a waste.²¹ Before he was able to love another, the narrator could not elicit either external love for himself or artistic expressions of self. In other words, he could in no way stand out.

The final couplet is a marked change. In this, the second of the poem's two discrete moments, all external references drop away in a moment of *Stimmungsbruch*.²² The love for the absent muse is repossessed and reallocated, evidently upon the narrator himself. Rather than wasting his time pining away for others to love him, he becomes enamoured of himself. The desire to be *known* is revealed to be the true desire of the narrator, not to be loved. He is convinced that his love for himself is enough. He exclaims triumphantly, "Genannt in Lob und Tadel bin ich heute, / Und, daß ich da bin, wissen alle Leute!" If we take this to be representative of Wolf's self-reflection, we might suggest a hint of bitterness, a

²¹ This is a stark contrast to the message in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, set by Brahms as the last of his songs (and powerfully, the last of his *Vier Ernste Gesänge*, also for bass and piano, dating from 1896).

²² Roughly translated as "mood-break."

type of Romantic irony. Wolf was indeed well-known in his lifetime: he was buried alongside Beethoven and Schubert.

His own romantic life was frustrated, however. His longest-standing romantic relationship was an affair with Melanie Köchert, the wife of the court jeweller, Heinrich, who invited Wolf into his home. If Wolf's true wish was to be loved in a pure and romantic way, that wish was not granted. The proclamation is made to himself, as is the rest of the bitter confession. The consolation is superficial, for the Lyric I, onto whom Wolf mapped himself, knows that if anyone else were listening, he would have no need to proclaim his greatness.

Wolf is no slave to the text, but in this case he follows the lines of the poem in his musical phrasing. The piano's introduction is low in register, both hands in the bass clef, and presents a chromatic line in unison octaves, containing a series of rising and falling semitones. The falling from B \flat to A and the rising pitches D – E \flat – E – F \sharp emphasise the dominant and tonic of G minor quite strongly. It is characteristic of Wolf's harmonic language that he should extend the dominant function as he does. If we take the opening by way of example, we can see that the pitches that immediately precede the tonic, F \sharp and E \flat , along with the A still impressed on the aural memory from the strong beats of the of the opening, outline a diminished seventh chord, vii^{o7}. By resolving to G minor, the horizontalised chord of the first two measures functions precisely as V^{7 \flat 9} would, although the root and fifth are omitted. (See Ex. 1)

Example 1: Chord function duality in the opening of the piano part.

1 Ziemlich getragen, schwermütig
Wohl denk'

Late nineteenth century harmonic practice would theoretically allow for the resolution of the $\text{vii}^{\text{o}7}$ to any number of key areas. The introduction of the voice of the Lyric I affirms the dominant function of that chord complex. Furthermore, the root of the dominant is present in all further V – I resolutions (in mm. 7, 9, and 13). Just as the first two couplets are loose variations on the narrator's view of love, the second musical phrase is essentially a variation on the first. The harmonic direction is from i (m. 2) to V/V (m. 4) to $V^{(7)}$ (m. 6) in the first phrase, comprising 2 + 2 measures. Measures 2 and 7 begin with the same harmonic progression from i to $\text{vii}^{\text{o}7}$ ($= V^{7\text{b}9}$), and the piano figuration in the latter is a derivative of the former. The chromatic raising of $E\flat$ to $E\sharp$ in the vocal line at m. 4 is mirrored by a chromatic lowering of $D\sharp$ to $D\flat$ in the analogous place in the second phrase, and a motion of $V/N \rightarrow N$ is introduced. The close of the second phrase is to V^9 , leading into a dominant pedal preparation for G.

Beginning in m. 9, Wolf introduces the pattern of a melodic descending third in the top voice of the right

hand. This is Sams' "sorrow" motif, "sorrow or despair induced by loss or deprivation."²³ This musical sub-text continues the sentiment of the poem's text in the first two couplets, reinforcing the words' message, and ensuring that the first six lines of the *strambotto* are understood as inextricably linked in Wolf's reading. The motif is taken up in inversion by the left hand. (See Example 2) According to Sams, two converging lines *in the right hand* (my emphasis) symbolizes love in many of Wolf's songs. In "Wohl denk ich oft," the separation of that musical idea between the two clefs may represent the apartness of the narrator from the ideal object of his love.

In m. 11, a further symbol from Sams' catalogue creeps in: that of worship. "A particular rhythm i.e. $\frac{4}{4}$ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ very often appears, usually in open fifths in the left-hand piano part."²⁴ (See Example 3) This foreshadows the narcissistic self-worship of the final couplet.

Example 2: "Wohl denk ich oft," mm. 9 – 10. "Sorrow" motif in usual form, A, and inversion, B. Piano part only.

The musical score for Example 2 shows measures 9 and 10 of the piano part for "Wohl denk ich oft." The music is in 4/4 time and features a "Sorrow" motif. In measure 9, the right hand (RH) plays a melodic line starting on G4, moving up to A4, B4, and C5, with a slur over the first three notes. This is labeled 'A'. The left hand (LH) plays a bass line starting on G3, moving up to A3, B3, and C4, with a slur over the first three notes. This is labeled 'B'. The dynamic marking is *pp*. In measure 10, the RH continues the melodic line with a slur over the first two notes, and the LH continues the bass line with a slur over the first two notes.

²³ Sams, *Songs*, 17.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

**Example 3: “Wohl denk ich oft,” mm. 13 – 14. “Worship”
rhythmic motif in lowest voice of LH. Piano part only.**



The sudden shift to E major coincides with the volta of the poem. The third-relation is jarring because of its radically different tonal space. The first 14 measures of the song are very much in G minor, albeit a heavily chromatic G minor that avoids alluding to the submediant. The B \natural “bells” in the right hand of mm. 13 and 14 (see Example 3) not only toll to announce the death of G minor (by annulling the B \flat so prominent in the piece up to then), but also to announce a V – I move to E. A crescendo to fortissimo on the downbeat of m. 15 further signifies the departure from the earlier realm. In contrast to the single accent of the first fourteen measures (on “ganz,” m. 14.4), the music of the final couplet is rife with declamatory accents in the octave-laden piano part. The tessitura is notably higher through these final measures, and the instruction “*gemessen*” tempers the third couplet’s *etwas belebter*.

But what of the bitter reading I had anticipated? The radical tonal departure seems to suggest a rebirth, a genuine happiness. Sams reads it as such, claiming that the narrator’s “suddenly vivid” fame, accompanied by “a paean of exultant fanfare,” coincides with “a strong tonic major chord” at the

words “da bin.”²⁵ I disagree: the strength of the tonic major is seriously undermined by the voicing of the tonic major as second inversion. This complicates and dulls the vividness of what was only an image to begin with. The vocal line ends on the scale degree of the dominant, a less than convincing statement of authority within the tonal tradition. Wolf further removes the tonic’s authority by a plagal motion to IV: G major tonic is made to wait again by the subdominant fanfare in C major.

The lateness of the moment comes from its breaking away from normal harmonic conventions. Wolf’s ironic treatment of the narrator’s experience is evidenced by his subversive employment of the typical “hero” progression of tonal music (minor to major). The bravado is a lie, and the deception is made all the more poignant by the fact that Wolf wrote to Kauffmann to name “inexorable truth — truth to the point of cruelty” as the highest principle in art.²⁶ The hero is only a hero in the narrator’s own eyes, and that image is a fleeting one, being a reflection in the water. The ripples that distort that image beyond recognition are the same ripples that delay the progression to G major via E major and C major. A more correct tonal path for the hero paradigm would be dominant-rich, functionally denoted as D/D → D → T. Instead, Wolf turns this progression literally on its head, giving us $\mathcal{S} \rightarrow S \rightarrow T$.

²⁵ Ibid., 259.

²⁶ Walker, *Biography*, 409.

This ironic depiction of a heroic “tale” recalls Adorno on Beethoven’s treatment of death in the latter’s late works: “death appears in a refracted mode, as irony.”²⁷

“Alles endet, was entstehet” is usually regarded as the strongest song of the cycle. Wolf set only 12 lines of a 16-line original, a significant departure from his normal practice. Unlike Schubert, for instance, Wolf seldom altered the text of a poem: one is hard-pressed to find many instances in Wolf’s oeuvre of word repetition, or the creation of a refrain when none existed in the poem. It is also quite a different case from the first song, in which Wolf extracted an entire stanza – a whole – from a much larger original (“Wohl denk ich oft,” unabridged, numbers over 100 lines, although certain stanzas are incomplete). Like “Wohl denk ich oft,” “Alles endet” is a fragment: it breaks off midway through the second stanza.

²⁷ Said, *Late Style*, 24.

Figure 3: German, Italian, and English with rhyme schemes for the German and Italian of *Michelangelo-Lieder* No. 2: “Alles endet, was entstehet.” The translation of the final four lines of the Italian, not set by Wolf, are my own. The English is rendered literally after the German by Knut W. Barde.

| | | | | |
|---|---|-----------------------------------|---|--|
| Alles endet, was entstehet. Alles, alles rings vergehet, | A | Chiunque nasce a morte arriva | A | Everything ends which comes to be. Everything everywhere passes away, |
| Denn die Zeit flieht, und die Sonne | B | Nel fuggir del tempo, e 'l sole | B | for time moves on, and the |
| Sieht, daß alles rings vergehet, | A | Niuna cosa lascia viva. | A | Sun sees that everything around passes away, |
| Denken, Reden, Schmerz, und Wonne; | B | Manca il dolce e quel che dole, | B | Thinking, speaking, pain, and joy; |
| Und die wir zu Enkeln hatten | C | E gl' ingegni e le parole; | C | And those who had been our grandchildren |
| Schwanden wie bei Tag die Schatten, | C | E le nostre antiche prole | C | Have vanished as shadows flee the day, |
| Wie ein Dunst im Windeshauch. | D | Al sole ombre, al vento un fummo. | D | As a breath of wind dispels the mist. |
| Menschen waren wir ja auch, | D | Come voi uomini fummo | D | Yes, we once were people too, |
| Froh und traurig, so wie ihr, | E | Lieti e tristi, come siete; | E | Glad and sad, just like you, |
| Und nun sind wir leblos hier, | E | E or sian, come vedete, | E | And now we are here lifeless, |
| Sind nur Erde, wie ihr sehet. | A | Terra al sol di vita priva. | A | Are but earth, as you can see. |
| Alles ended, was entstehet. Alles, alles rings vergehet. | A | Ogni cosa a morte arriva. | A | Everything ends which comes to be. Everything everywhere passes away. |
| | | Già fur gli occhi nostri interi | | Once were our eyes fully whole, |
| | | Con la luce in ogni speco; | | With light in each hole; |
| | | or son voti, orrendi e neri, | | Now are they empty, horrifying, and black: |
| | | e ciò porta il tempo seco. | | That is brought in time's passing. |

The narrator of this poem is an Everynarrator of sorts, and the time and place are non-specific. For the only time in the cycle (and more significantly, a relative rarity within Wolf's entire output), the "lyric I" is here instead a "lyric we." The non-specificity and communal aspects of the poem serve to stress the universality of its truth. Indeed, as in Wolf's aforementioned letter to Kauffmann, this universal truth bordering on fate is almost unbearable for its gravitas.²⁸ The message of the song is bleak and fatalistic, and strongly representative of the Renaissance-era view of death. It is a fear of the afterlife that characterises this view, although "to have fear" is precisely "to be afraid." In a rather ironic twist of the *barzalletta*, or *frottola*, form that the poem assumes, Michelangelo uses that medium to reflect on two concepts of time: human time, which is finite, and divine Time, which is infinite. Robert-Tornow focuses on the cyclical image of "dust unto dust" in his translation, and Wolf picks up on it acutely.²⁹ That

²⁸ Walker, *Biography*, 409.

²⁹ I believe that Robert-Tornow's translation, while laudable for its retention of the meter of the poem, misses out on some important imagery of Michelangelo's original. Michelangelo thrice uses "sole," the sun, to characterise the eternal, and contrasts this quite starkly with the extinguishable light of human life, seen in the eyes, in the second stanza. With the passing of Time, the sun continues to burn, while human lights go out. The flow of Time cannot be stopped. There is a curious flip-flop of what Robert-Tornow has translated as "Alles endet, was entstehet; alles, alles rings vergehet" in Michelangelo's poem: the opening, "whoever is born must come to death" is not the same as line 12, "everything must come to death." The first utterance is re-

all living things share a common fate is the moral of this dark lesson.³⁰

For those seeking an exhaustive study of the motivic coherence of “Alles endet,” I shall point them toward Susan Youens’ 1980 study. In her contribution to *The Cambridge Guide to the Lied*, she distils the construction of the song quite wonderfully:

[T]he music [is] distilled to skeletal essence. Every note in the song is derived from the bleak, unharmonized, four-bar piano introduction, in particular two figures that permeate the song: a descending tetrachord that first appears at the words “Alles endet” in m. 5 and the cambiata-like figure in the piano in mm. 5-6, 7-8, made up of an ascending and a descending semitone at the distance of either a major or a minor third.³¹

The tonality of the piece is torn between the two keys suggested by the key signature, C# minor and E major. The almost coincidental tonality – the oscillation

stricted to humans (as indicated by “chiunche,” or “whoever,” rather than “qualunche,” or “whatever”) and is qualified by “with the flight of time” and joined to the idea of the sun as a metaphorical stand-in for Time. The second statement of the same idea is bleaker still, restricted not by a passage of time – the gaze of the sun – or even by the condition of having been born.

³⁰ This song in particular recalls the first of Brahms’s *Vier ernste Gesänge*, in which the narrator philosophizes on the fate common to “Menschen wie dem Vieh,” that is, to return to the nothingness whence they come.

³¹ Susan Youens, “Tradition and innovation: the Lieder of Hugo Wolf,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Lied*, ed. James Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 220-221.

between the two is subtle and frequent – is a compositional-theoretical parallel to the two concepts of time presented in the poem. The flow of Time is also represented in the near-constant steady beat, either as half notes (mm. 5-8) or as pulsing eighth notes (e.g., mm. 9-16, left hand). One particularly interesting response to the text comes in mm. 13-14 (See Example 4). The rhythmic pattern in the vocal line is Sams’ “weakness” motif, here paired with a list of human faculties and experiences (thought, speech, pain, and joy). The weak narrator is reminded of his place in the next measures where the piano, entering [subito] forte and crashing to a fortissimo on a G above middle C (m. 15.3), outdoes the voice in amplitude and range.

Example 4: „Alles endet, was entsteht,” mm. 13-16.

The musical score for Example 4 consists of three systems. The first system shows measures 13 and 14. The vocal line (soprano) has the lyrics "Den - ken, Re - den, Schmerz und Won - ne". The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note pulse in the left hand and chords in the right hand. The second system shows measure 15, where the piano accompaniment becomes fortissimo (ff) and features a prominent G5 note. The third system shows measure 16, where the piano accompaniment returns to a dynamic marking of *dim*.

A second “motivic” moment comes in the following measures. The “submission” motif (a variant interpretation of the “worship” motif heard in “Wohl denk ich oft”) is paired with the “isolation/loneliness” motif: “the right hand has repeated chords, from which the left hand moves away downwards....”³² (Example 5).

³² Sams, *Songs*, 13.

Example 5: “Alles endet, was entsteht,” mm. 17-19. The submission motive is in the RH piano throughout; the “isolation/loneliness” motif is in the LH piano, mm. 17 and 19 only.

The concept of cyclicity may be seen as having been composed into existence at several levels: the cambiata figure throughout the piece is built, by definition, on a rising and falling motion. The pairs of chords in mm. 5-6 represent another instance – the balance that is lost by the rising step is restored by the descending step in the following measure. It is worth noting that these devices are in the piano’s part. (Unlike Sams, I am hesitant to call it accompaniment.) The vocal line is full of imbalance, best illustrated by mm. 5-8 and mm. 36-39 (see example 6).

Example 6: “Alles endet, was entsteht,” mm. 5-8 (= mm. 36-39). The small notes for “rings vergehet” denote the vocal line in m. 8; the regular notation, m. 39.

The only difference between the two settings of the refrain is that in m. 39, the voice ends on B#. The finiteness and flawed nature of mortals' time is represented by the imbalanced downward trajectory of the vocal line. It is built upon descending minor seconds, a well-established symbol of grief, including divisions of the line into Sams' "sorrow" motif. The vocal part also ends on the leading tone. The B# importantly clarifies the tonality as being C# minor, a key that Sams identifies as having been used with some frequency by Wolf when setting poems on the subject of death.³³ There is a reflection on the powerlessness of mortals, recalling in some respects "Wohl denk ich oft," in which the harmonic route to the tonic is driven by the piano and plays a mocking fanfare along the way. Here, it is only the piano that is able to resolve the B# to bring closure to the piece. When it does so, the resolution is to bare fifths and traditional associations with infinity (importantly different from incompleteness) and perfection, or divinity. My commentary on the "lateness" of "Alles endet" shall serve as the conclusion to this essay.

³³ Ibid., 6. It is not insignificant that the opening octaves, as Sams points out, are strongly reminiscent in "Der Genesene an die Hoffnung," which Wolf had chosen as the first song in the *Mörrike-Lieder*. A few comments may be made: the return to what was effectively the beginning of Wolf's career is here reinterpreted in a powerful way. The linear development of that through-composed song result in a teleological progression philosophically more akin to the *Bildung* of the Romantics than the fear of being negated expressed in Michelangelo's poem.

Figure 4: German, Italian, and English (rendered literally after the German by Knut W. Barde) with rhyme schemes for the German and Italian of *Michelangelo-Lieder* No.3: “Fühlt meine Seele.”

| | | | | |
|--|---|--|---|--|
| Fühlt meine Seele das ersehnte Licht | A | Non so se s'è la desiata luce | A | Is my soul feeling the longed-for light |
| Von Gott, der sie erschuf? Ist es der Strahl | B | Del suo primo fattor, che l'alma sente; | B | Of God who created it? Is it the gleam |
| Von andrer Schönheit aus dem Jammertal, | B | O se dalla memoria della gente | B | Of a different beauty from the valley of misery, |
| Der in mein Herz Erinnerung weckend bricht? | A | Alcun'altra beltà nel cor traluce; | A | Reflecting in my heart and evoking memory? |
| Ist es ein Klang, ein Traumgesicht, | A | O se fama o se sogno alcun produce | A | Is it a sound, a dream vision, |
| Das Aug und Herz mir füllt mit einem Mal | B | Agli occhi manifesto, al cor presente; | B | That suddenly fills my eye and heart |
| In unbegreiflich glühnder Qual, | B | Di sè lasciando un non so che cocente, | B | In incomprehensibly burning pain, |
| Die mich zu Tränen bringt? Ich weiß es nicht. | A | Ch'è forse or quel ch'a pianger mi conduce; | A | That brings me to tears? I do not know. |
| Was ich ersehne, fühle, was mich lenkt, | C | Quel ch'ì sento e ch'ì cerco: e chi mi guidi | C | What I long for, the sense of what directs me, |
| Ist nicht in mir: sag mir, wie ich's erwerbe? | D | Meco non è; nè so ben veder dove | D | Is not within me: Tell me, how do I acquire it? |
| Mir zeigt es wohl nur eines Andren Huld; | E | Trovar mel possa, e par c' altri mel mostri. | E | To me it reveals only another's grace and love; |
| Darin bin ich, seit ich dich sah, versenkt. | C | Questo, signor, m'avvien, po' ch'ì vi vidi; | C | I have been their captive since I first saw you. |
| Mich treibt ein Ja und Nein, ein Süß und Herbe | D | C'un dolce amaro, un sí e no mi muove: | D | I am driven by a yes and a no, a sweet and a bitter— |
| - Daran sind, Herrin, deine Augen Schuld. | E | Certo saranno stati gli occhi vostri. | E | That, mistress, is the doing of your eyes. |

To close his *Michelangelo-Lieder*, Wolf selects the complete “Fühlt meine Seele.” It is a textbook Italian form, with the rhyme scheme abba abba cde cde. In the first half of the octave, the narrator alludes to a

beautiful but bittersweet object, presented as a mirage of some type. The imagery is visual, but amorphous. The memory is of something metaphorical rather than real, imagined rather than experienced. Visual gives way to aural in the second half of the octave: perhaps we are in for a process of elimination of the senses as in Descartes' *Method*. Somehow, sound brings about clarity of experience, but at the cost of the visual. An absence of physical sensation in the first quatrain is replaced by "incomprehensibly burning pain" in the heart and eyes. Tears blur the narrator's vision, recalling the ripples that destroy the narcissistic image in the first poem. The first declarative statement occurs immediately before the volta. The powerlessness of the mortal Everynarrator that is heard so strongly in the second song is echoed and transformed back into the first person singular, thereby organising the entire cycle, with regards to the identity of the lyric persona, into a loose ABA form. As was the case in "Wohl denk ich oft," the narrator is searching for self-completion through love. While in the earlier song, the narrator naively half-believed that he had found a superficial love of his own reflection to be sufficient, in "Fühlt meine Seele," the narrator is aware of the fragile and fleeting nature of that same self-love.

In the first half of the sestet, the narrator is admitting his inability to sort out his misery on his own. He asks for help. His fragile image of bravado and self-sufficiency had not been enough to protect him from the reality "Alles endet," and the narrator appears here, scared of the yet-to-come and hoping for redemption in his finite time. Looking back over his experience through the cycle, the narrator's doubts

about the certainty of his existence and relevance to others (signified by the unstable second inversion sonority) were well-founded. A second volta occurs with the second half of the sestet. There is a sort of hemiola in the sestet: the three couplet-sentences grate against the two groupings by rhyme scheme. Once again, as in the first poem, the narrator speaks of some past time marked by an experience of a loved one. In "Wohl denk ich oft," the time frame in the narrative occurred before the loved one. Here, the time that is addressed, is that time since he first sees the beloved. In the final two lines, we have the first real (empirical, experienced) interaction with the loved one in the entire cycle. It is here that the narrator returns to the mindset of the first song, when external objects are blamed for his state of discontent.

The song is framed by yet another piano prelude and postlude. The upward trajectory of the bass line resembles an inversion of the morose descending vocal line of the second song; the right-hand figuration in m. 4 seems to recall the oscillating opening of the cycle and is a diminution of the pattern found in mm. 1-3. A series of cambiata-like figures create motivic unity with the other songs: witness the top note of the left hand in mm. 5-8, or the piano's right hand counterpoint to the voice in mm. 7 and 8.

Example 7: “Fühlt meine Seele,” mm. 1-9.1

The musical score for Example 7, "Fühlt meine Seele," measures 1-9.1, is presented in two systems. The first system (measures 1-5) features a vocal line in E minor, 4/4 time, with the lyrics "Führt mei-ne See-le das er-". The piano accompaniment consists of a steady eighth-note pattern in the right hand and a more complex bass line in the left hand. The second system (measures 6-9) continues the vocal line with the lyrics "sehen-te Licht von Gott, der sie er-schuf? ist es der Strahl von and-ree Schönheit aus dem Jam-mer-tal,". The piano accompaniment includes dynamic markings such as *poco cresc.* and *p*.

The “weakness” or “childishness” motif appears here, too, this time in the piano. It pervades most of the song. The voice is curiously independent: unlike in the first song, the vocal line’s phrasing is worked out independent of the poetic form, following instead the grammatical structure of the sentences. The song is roughly in ABA’B’ form, as marked first and foremost by the key signatures. The motive that unifies the song is first presented in the voice in m. 5. The voice is allowed this motive only in the E minor-dominated sections of the song; it later reappears in m. 30. The piano is allowed a slightly altered form of that motive (an alteration that gives the motive — and thus the piano — the external, a forward momentum, a generative ability that is not possessed by the narrator) in mm. 12, 13, 19, 20, 23, 36-38, and 42. Measures 12-13, upon the switch to the major mode, is a textbook instance (literally – Sams uses this song as one of his examples) of the first “love” motif in Wolf’s arsenal, characterised by the two converging musical lines in the right hand.

Example 8: “Fühlt meine Seele,” mm. 11.4-13.1. Sams’ “love” motif can be seen between the two voices in the RH piano.

ist es ein Klang, ein Traum - ge-sicht,

The moment of rupture comes in m. 40: for all of the chromatic alterations of the beginning of this song, and with those of the first two songs, a new sense of time arrives here and we hear the first moment of harmonic clarity in a classical sense. In E major, Wolf presents us with $I^6_4 - VI - IV - II^7 - V^7 - I$.

Example 9: “Fühlt meine Seele,” mm. 40-42.1, with Roman numeral analysis underlay.

Her - rin, dein - ne Au - gen Schuld

I^6_4 VI IV II^7 V^7 I

The clarity is again undermined by other motivic connections and the text: the voice’s “turns” with the recurring motive are to the texts “is my soul yearning

for the longed-for light [of God]” and “[what I long for] shows me only the benevolence of another.” The notions of longing and absence are thus encapsulated in this motive. Immediately after the poet has his moment of clarity, the piano repeats this new – and specific to this song – “unfulfilled” motive four times in the coda. The lower part of the right hand traverses both up and down in counterpoint against the principal motive of the piece, bringing the lovers together and pulling them apart. It is the descending counterpoint that gets the last word, and the narrator’s love appears to be unrequited. The more telling tale about late style in this song is that, in contrast to the German Romantics’ ideal of *Bildung*, the narrator’s journey has not resulted in his knowing himself any more thoroughly. The pervasion of “Fühlt meine Seele’s” “unfulfilled” motive indicates the narrator’s yet-remaining lack of self knowledge.

To use Biblical imagery, meeting his love was a Damascus moment for the narrator... but this conversion, unlike Paul’s, is incomplete. Before his love for the “dich” of the first poem exists, he turned in a chaotic fashion, wasting each day. Afterward, rather than “turning with” his world, as the word “conversion” denotes, he continues to oscillate as a stagnation – there is change in him without development, that is, a continual change of place without any change of state.

The lateness *in* the cycle comes in its timelessness – a contrast to Said’s timeliness. The change without development, so against the requirements of *Bildung* required of the Romantic protagonist, occurs in some amorphous relative time. There is a single discrete

moment in the cycle – the meeting of the beloved, and we do not know when that was. The concepts of past and future are mutable, and neither we nor the narrator have any real sense of where or when the present is. The poet is caught in a constant state of “in-betweenness” but without a place of his own. He is between “Ja und Nein”, “Süss und Herbe,” between major and minor, between C# and E. Most terrifyingly for the narrator, he is somewhere between his *Entstehung* and his *Endung*, but without direction – he is stuck in “rings vergehende,” even in “life.” The truest and bleakest expression from the poet comes in “Alles endet:” the sway of C# and E is rendered absolutely powerless at the text “Und nun sind wir leblos hier,” set to an almost atonal melody that indicates that wherever “hier” is, it is not of this place – it is totally foreign and horrifying.

In appropriating the Romantic song cycle for such a bleak statement, Wolf is placing himself very much within and yet apart from that tradition. Subject matter aside, the fact that Wolf turns to translations for his last songs places him apart from his models. The Lied was very much bound to German language (a requirement of culture (*das Volk*) for Schlegel and of *Heimat* for Heidegger) and folk poetry. For the *Michelangelo-Lieder*, Wolf turns to a Renaissance Italian source. The poetry speaks from the distant past, and across space, having originated in a radically different *Weltanschauung*. Rather than folk verse, Wolf has set classical, strict forms, and fragmented two of those texts. It is a deeply personal statement that Wolf has fashioned, difficult to grasp because of its bizarre language and complex weaving of musical symbols.

The cycle has turned the poems into a sort of distilled novel, and one that cannot be paraphrased at all. It packs a great deal of philosophy and experience into a short space, giving it immense weight. Music is an event that is strangely “late”: it is experienced in the present, ceases to exist the moment the sound stops, and is always understood retrospectively. Through the narrator’s bleak experience, one that we experience *with* him as we listen to the cycle, we get the sense of catastrophe that is inherent, for Adorno, to late works of art.

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