

Des Knaben Wunderhorn

Notes from the Universal Edition (<https://universaledition.com/gustav-mahler-448/works/wunderhorn-lieder-1958>)

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(Translation by Sybil Marquardt)

Gustav Mahler documented his preference for certain literary genres by setting to music 14 pieces from Des Knaben Wunderhorn (Lieder from the Youth's Magic Horn) over a period of almost ten years, music that he created while and in between working on his symphonic oeuvre. At the same time, he also gave life to a musical genre which before was not very widely employed: the ballad-like, humorous orchestra lied.

Early in his life, Mahler found a source for the linguistic basis of his vocal compositions, a source that was said to be available to him in book form only after the composition of his own work Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen (Songs of A Wayfarer): the widely known and read 19th century 'folk song' collection of poems titled Des Knaben Wunderhorn, publication of which had been begun by Romanticists Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano in 1805. This is to say that Mahler at that time went back exclusively to 'old German' literature in his vocal compositions. Alte deutsche Lieder (Old German Songs) is the original subtitle of the collection of folk songs.

His treatment of the textual models far exceeds the process usually understood as selection and setting to music. Mahler's artistic re-arrangement not just affects individual phrases, but instead whole passages and stanzas, which are often replaced by his own words or verses. His reasoning behind this process, which extended towards a technique of montage, was that the Wunderhorn texts are 'boulders of rock for one to shape in his own way', as he allegedly stated. Accordingly, for the composer, the Wunderhorn texts are part of his compositional creation and structure.

During the theatre season of 1892, Mahler, then opera and concert conductor in Hamburg, apparently was so motivated by the (at least subjectively felt) success of the printing of this first three volumes of piano lieder by Schott (among them are already nine lieder on Wunderhorn texts) that he committed to paper a new Wunderhorn series in less than three months. He himself referred to them as '10 new songs' – they are the five Humoresques for voice and piano and then the five orchestra versions of the same lieder; the latter are the first five titles of the present edition.

As varied as the texts, the musical structure and the philosophical statements of Mahler's orchestra lieder is their individual fate with regard to performance and print. For example, Das himmlische Leben (The Heavenly Life) was performed by Mahler himself as an orchestra lied at least once – in Hamburg in 1893. In fundamentally different orchestration, it later became the final movement and core of motif and thought for his Symphony No. 4, composed in 1899. This

may be one of the reasons why this orchestra lied was first published 106 years later – in 1998 in the Complete Critical Edition.

The way Mahler thought and orchestrated when creating a lied for orchestra in contrast to a symphonic work is best documented by the astonishing fact that the Fischpredigt (St. Anthony's Sermon to the Fishes), created in 1893, was composed as an independent lied in the middle of the conception of his Symphony No. 2: the fair copy of the orchestra version is dated 'August 1, 1893', i.e. 16 days after the sketchy, but in terms of content almost complete draft for the considerably different and conceptually much bigger work that was to become the third movement of the symphony. With a view to his Revelge (Reveille, a 'Humoresque'), created in 1899, Mahler said that 'the rhythm of this lied had to be preceded by nothing less than the 1st movement of my Third [Symphony] as a study'. This clearly outlines the importance of his lied creations in his symphonic thinking.

The 14 lieder from Wunderhorn were never intended to be a song cycle. The fact that Mahler never even attempted to perform all songs at one time, their very separated time of creation, and the different stylistic levels of the 'humoresques', 'ballads' or 'grotesques' are all evidence of this. It is a mistaken belief of the 20th century, certainly helped by the publication of the lieder as a collection, that the order of the songs as they are in print ought to be obligatory for a performance. In this collection, the lieder are simply sorted according to their time of creation, just as in the Complete Critical Edition (see below). Taking their respective keys into account (the last four 'Songs of War' are all written in d minor!), they should not necessarily be performed in this order, nor is it obligatory that all be sung in one concert. Furthermore, the performance practice of two singers 'in duet' for the respective 'Songs for Two People' – caused by an (almost 'humorous') misunderstanding dating back to the first decade of the Mahler renaissance (1950–1960) – should finally be done away with forever: these 'Songs for One Voice with Orchestra Accompaniment' are always basically ballads which require a narrator who sometimes comments from a distance, sometimes tells the story with emotion and who recounts the appropriate moods; in most cases this role can be filled by either a man or a woman.

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