Spring 2012

Understanding Korngold's Sechs einfache Lieder

Brigitte Reinke

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/honorsprojects

Repository Citation
https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/honorsprojects/75

This work is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Projects by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@BGSU.
“Understanding Korngold’s Sechs einfache Lieder”

Brigitte Reinke
Honors Project
Fall 2011-Spring 2012
Understanding Korngold’s *Sechs einfache Lieder*

Understanding what a composer intended for his/her compositions is complicated enough, without trying to see if it matches up with the poet’s intentions as well. Although the theory of interpretation, Hermeneutics, shows us the incredible complexity of interpreting and understanding the written word, we will take a systematic approach to this analysis of Korngold’s song cycle, *Sechs einfache Lieder* (Bjørn Ramberg and Kristin Gjesdal). First, we must understand what the genre “*Lied*” is, learn about the composer, and discover the meaning behind the poetry to which the cycle is set. All of the translations done in this project were results of my own knowledge of the German language, Dr. Spohr’s and Mrs. Scholl’s knowledge of German, and through the help of *Dict.cc*, an online English-German dictionary.

*Lieder*

The *Lied*, established in Germany, is a very distinct subgenre of vocal music. “*Lied*” literally translates from German to English as “song,” and the plural of that is “*Lieder*.” Lorraine Gorrell, author of *The Nineteenth Century German Lied*, defines the *Lied* as:

…a genre that melded poetry and music into a unique relationship in which piano and voice were closely linked to the poetic phrase, and the melody, harmony, and rhythm of
the music were crafted to reflect the meaning and mood of the poems they interpreted. (Gorrell 15).

In general, Lieder are sung in German, the verses are often set to the same melody, Franz Schubert is one of the leading Lieder composers. In the online version of the Oxford Dictionary of Music, Michael Kennedy points out that although people generally are referring to the Romantic Movement bi-product commonly performed today, the German Lied was actually established around 1400.

The German Lied as we think of it today was created in the midst and aftermath of the Romantic Movement in the early eighteenth century and late nineteenth century, with an either strophic (repeating the same melody for every verse) or through-composed text (different melodies for each verse), as stated in Michael Kennedy’s entry “Lied, Lieder” in the Oxford Dictionary of Music. Carol Kimball, in her text, Song: A Guide to Art Song Style and Literature, writes that the birth of the Lied, as we think of it today, was on October 14, 1814, when Schubert composed “Gretchen am Spinnrade,” developing the “High Romantic Lied” (39). Schubert’s Lied forever changed the accepted Lied compositional style.

Burkholder, Grout, and Palisca (BG&P) write that when the German Lied was being developed, “song was central to musical life and aesthetics in Germany…. [and] German writers on music believed all music and musical instruments should emulate the singing voice, and insisted that song should be simple and expressive” (500). This led to the creation of the straightforward accompaniment and melody. However, German Lieder would be nothing without their expressive texts. Gorrell opens her book by commenting: “The nineteenth century German lied owes much of its origin and inspiration to German poetry” (15). The importance of the poetry to the music is emphasized by Kennedy, who states that the piano part, just like the vocal
part, “demands artistic interpretation.” The collaboration between the piano part, vocal melody, and their portrayal of the text define the main elements of the Lied.

The content of German Lieder differed based on the style of the poem. BG&P explain that “poets drew elements from both classical and folk traditions…[and were] built on a strong eighteenth-century tradition” (606). They further explain a key feature of German Lieder, that there is generally only one syllable per note sung (500). BG&P list Telemann, C. P. E. Bach, and Carl Heinrich Graun as examples of those who managed to capture the simplicity required of the Lied while their other compositions show the talent of these composers for musical complexity and elaboration (501). Telemann, Bach, and Graun intended for their Lieder to be simple and expressive, very different from other genres of the time.

BG&P cite frequent themes as “an individual confronting the greater forces of nature or society, vulnerable yet ennobled by the encounter [or] another was nature as a metaphor for human experience” (606-607). Kimball adds “night, longing, moonlight, fantasy, and magic” to the list of themes, emphasizing that the range of themes created “limitless possibilities” for the composers of this genre (40). BG&P explain that strophic lyric poems, conveying specific viewpoints or feelings, were used for the early Lieder, and then ballads, with one or more speakers and romantic or supernatural themes, were later used to expand the Lied (607). This allowed the piano part to be equal to the voice, forcing the two to truly collaborate. Edward F Kravitt, author of The Lied: Mirror of Late Romanticism, goes so far as to say the late romantics managed to expand the solo piano excerpts in Lieder to “monumental proportions” (229). Lieder have interludes and solos surrounding the vocal melody which allow for more singular expression than the mere piano-singer collaboration.
This collaboration combined with the themes provided in the evolution of German *Lieder* cleared the path for song cycles. Kimball states plainly that song cycles “developed naturally” from *Lieder*, because it was an easy way to continue a topic from one piece to another (41). BG&P even add that Beethoven’s *An die ferne Geliebte* is considered the first song cycle (607). Korngold’s *Sechs einfache Lieder* originated from this first song cycle, but because the pieces were written in a much different compositional period than when *An die ferne Geliebte* was written, there are many differences, stylistically, between the two song cycles.

There are countless composers and poets with whom we can associate the creation and development of the *Lied*. Kennedy cites Schubert, J. Loewe, Schumann, Franz, Brahms, Wolf, Mahler, and Strauss as some of the great *Lied* composers; and Goethe, Dehmel, Eichendorff, Heine, Hesse, Rückert, Schiller, and Tieck (to name a few) as influential poets whose works were often set in to German *Lieder* by the aforementioned composers due to the beautiful and lyrical poems written by these poets. Of the poets named above, only Eichendorff wrote poetry that was set in the *Sechs einfache Lieder*.

Kimball writes that “the *Lied* declined as a form in the twentieth century,” although “composers continued to create orchestral song compositions…and began to explore new techniques with tonal colors and sonorities” (41). Elisabeth Schmierer, author of *Geschichte des Liedes*, disagrees, writing that Alban Berg, Arnold Schönberg, and Anton Webern composed numerous *Lieder* at the time and in the fashion of the nineteenth-century *Lied* (222). Kimball does add, however, that those composers who did still write *Lieder* “blended contemporary techniques into existing formal patterns” (41). In other words, they took the twentieth-century, atonal, twelve-tone, or polytonal techniques they had been practicing and added them into the general form of nineteenth-century *Lieder*. This is similar to what Korngold did with his *Sechs*
einfache Lieder. He kept the pieces tonal, but the keys may have changed frequently or undergone transformations like what would have been seen in the early twentieth-century music. He applied the new techniques to the old style of the Lied.

Although there are many variations within the labeled German Lied genre, the guidelines we use to define the Lied have stayed generally true, allowing for slight elaborations or simplifications. It developed from the Minnelied into the Lied, and through the years its beauty has been established by its simplicity. In the early twentieth century, the composers of the time added in some new compositional techniques, but the overall form of the Lied stayed the same. In this way Korngold’s Sechs einfache Lieder is a song cycle with a few new tricks added in that wouldn’t have previously been used, while still retaining the traditional elements of the Lied.

Erich Wolfgang Korngold

Erich Wolfgang Korngold was born in Brünn, Austria (now Brno, Czech-Republic) on May 29, 1897 as the second son to the Jewish couple Dr. Julius Korngold, a music critic, and his wife Josefine Korngold (Korngold 9). Brendan G. Carroll, author of the article “Korngold, Erich Wolfgang” in Grove Music Online, writes that Erich Korngold “was a remarkable child prodigy composer.” Troy Dixon, who wrote a biography of Korngold on the Korngold Society web site, writes that Erich was “one of the most gifted composing child-prodigies in the history of music.” Luzi Korngold, later Korngold’s wife, writes in her husband’s biography Erich Wolfgang Korngold that Erich’s father Julius was a driving force in his efforts to train Erich musically, noting that Julius never let an opportunity pass to show off the astounding leaps in progress his son made with music (10). With that kind of encouragement, Dixon notes, Erich began composing when he was only eight years old. At only eleven years old (in 1908), Erich Korngold
composed a ballet, *Der Schneemann* (The Snowman), which became very popular in Vienna, where it was performed in 1910 (Carroll). Erich’s father had privately published *Der Schneemann* and two of Erich’s other compositions in 1909 and showed them around to “musical authorities” in order to get recognition for his son’s talent (Dixon). This nicely led to the acceptance and performance of *Der Schneemann*, allowing Erich Korngold a very early success in his life.

Korngold’s *Sechs einfache Lieder* were composed at an early age by the child prodigy. As recorded on the score saved to the *International Music Score Library Project (IMSLP)*, Korngold composed the six-piece song cycle from 1911-1916, between the ages of fourteen and sixteen. Shortly thereafter, in 1917, Jessica Duchen, author of *Erich Wolfgang Korngold*, notes that Erich was “called up for military service,” but luckily the doctor who performed Erich’s medical examination recognized the boy-composer and “arranged for a ‘B’ classification to be given which meant that Korngold would not be sent to the front…but instead given the position of musical director of an infantry regiment” (68-70). Following his position in the military, Erich’s father happened to meet the playwright Siegfried Trebitsch on the street one day (Duchen 71). Erich ended up writing his opera *Die tote Stadt* from the translation of the play *Le Mirage* which Trebitsch had been working on at the time that Julius first met him (71-72). In the following years, Dixon notes that Erich became the music director/conductor at the Stadttheater Hamburg and then taught at the Vienna Academy of Music.

Korngold’s notoriety in Europe couldn’t last due to the extreme Anti-Semitism practiced by the Nazi party, and as a result of Nazi persecution, Korngold was forced to relocate. Erich had previously worked with Max Reinhardt on a production in Berlin of *Die Fledermaus* in 1929. In 1934 he came to America “officially” to arrange Mendelssohn’s incidental music for Reinhardt’s
film version of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, but also to escape Hitler’s persecution (Dixon).
The next year, Erich signed a contract with both *Paramount* and *Warner Bros* (Dixon). It was in these years (1934-1938) that Erich pioneered the new art form of film scores: he treated each film as an “opera without singing” so each character had his/her own leitmotif (or theme) and the scores could stand on their own without the film having to play at the same time (Carroll).

Notable films for which he composed music were *Captain Blood*, *Robin Hood*, and *The Prince and the Pauper* (Carroll). It may not have been easy for him to leave his fame and success behind in order to protect himself, but it needed to be done. In 1938, Dixon writes, with the Anschluss of Austria (when Germany and Austria were united under Hitler) and the realization that he no longer would be welcome in his own country because of his family’s Jewish beliefs, Erich moved his family to America to protect them, “choosing to write film scores regularly, and essentially vowing not to compose concert works again until Hitler was removed from power.”

He kept this powerful promise and, despite being unable to visit home, he was at least safe. Korngold, Dixon writes, even helped other Jews to flee Europe, using his earnings from composing film scores.

Carroll reflects that Erich returned to absolute music and concert music, but sadly his fame as a composer had faded. Dixon clarifies that before coming to America, Korngold was known for composing operas, stage music, concert works, and chamber music, and he was well-known for arranging and conducting. Korngold had planned to return to Europe in 1947 (after the war was over) to his life and work in Austria; however, because of a heart attack, he didn’t return to Austria again until 1949 (Dixon). By this point, Viennese musical tastes had changed to embrace the atonal works of Korngold’s fellow composers, so that his works were no longer widely appreciated. As a result, Korngold resigned himself to return to America (Dixon). Carroll
further explains that Erich’s “late Romantic style…was completely out of step with the postwar era and when he died at the age of 60, he believed himself forgotten.” Erich had suffered a stroke in 1956, causing him to be partially paralyzed, and a year later he succumbed to cerebral thrombosis, passing away on November 29, 1957 (Dixon). Korngold died, Dixon states, believing his work was no longer appreciated, but soon enough the public would value Korngold’s music once again.

Carroll explains that “after decades of neglect, a gradual reawakening of interest in his music occurred.” Kimball writes that Erich’s music “began to be discovered again” in the 1980s by the public, “and his major works were recorded” (148). Carroll confirms this, noting that “at the time of his centenary (1997) his works were becoming increasingly popular, appearing on major recordings and concert programmes around the world.” This resurgence in the performance of Korngold’s works was due to their timeless, beautiful qualities – the same traits that I first admired when I heard the Sechs einfache Lieder as I was searching for a song cycle to perform this year.

The Poetry

The title *Sechs einfache Lieder* translates as “six simple songs” - an ironic title, because for the most part, these pieces are anything but simple. It’s almost as if Korngold titled them “simple” in order to make it more convincing that the pieces are in fact intended to be *Lieder*, whose nature we know to be focused around simplicity and clarity of expression.
“Schneeglöckchen”

Kimball informs us that “in 1911, Korngold composed…twelve Lieder, all to texts of Eichendorff, as a birthday gift for his father. Only three were ever published (making up three of the six einfache Lieder) – “Nachtwanderer,” “Das Ständchen,” and “Schneeglöckchen,” the last of which is the first piece in the Sechs einfache Lieder song cycle (148). Emily Ezust, author of The Lied, Art Song, and Choral Texts Archive, adds that the poem is from the set Frühling und Liebe and was written by Joseph von Eichendorff in 1839. Henry and Mary Garland, co-authors of The Oxford Companion to German Literature, give insight into Joseph Freiherr von Eichendorff’s life: he lived from 1788-1857, and at the time when he wrote “Schneeglöckchen,” Eichendorff was finally back in Berlin again, after having been pulled away from the city twice for work. Here is my translation of the piece:

It was like a faint song in the garden tonight
When the soft breezes passed Oh, they couldn’t wait for it,
Sweet little snowbells, awake! But the fields and gardens
Because we bring the warm weather Were still white from the last snow,
Before anyone thought it would happen And in pain they sank to the ground

But it wasn’t singing, it was a kiss Many poets have exhausted themselves (Trying to bring about this change),
That softly stirred the flowers And the spring that would awake them
So that they all could ring, Foreshadowing the future colorful splendor
Foreshadowing the future colorful splendor Rustles over their graves.
The poem has two separate sections. The first three stanzas illustrate the explanation that is then provided in the fourth stanza. On a literal level, the poem refers to the coming of the wonderous spring, but symbolically the spring could be a change at the time of poetry. Eichendorff could have been attempting to portray his frustration with his own efforts (and those of other poets of the time) in the Romantic Movement, ranking emotional expression above traditional poetic form. In the end of the poem, Eichendorff states that the change (movement) has come about, but none of the poets lived to see it. This may have been Eichendorff’s own way of hoping that despite the efforts and frustrations he was feeling, there was hope that (whether he lived to see it or not) the Romantic Movement would succeed in the end.

Korngold begins by setting the *Schneeglöckchen* in F Major, with the vocal line quickly digressing and fluxing the key through the use of frequent accidentals, as shown below in orange highlighter.

Korngold makes it difficult to find a consistent key for the entire piece, constantly changing and merging into something new. This illustrates the change in poetry in Eichendorff’s time. It may be commentary on the fact that things were changing, regardless of whether Eichendorff realized it.
Korngold writes “Ruhig fließend” in the beginning of Schneeglöckchen, meaning “quietly flowing,” and regularly uses the term “zart,” meaning “gently.” These words instruct how the singer and pianist should perform the music, and they are accompanied by many other descriptive terms (in both German and Italian) throughout the song cycle. “Quietly flowing” is a form of text painting, of making the music sound like what it is describing. A faint song with soft breezes is typified in the quietly flowing accompaniment while both parts are “gently” sung/played.

At the end of Schneeglöckchen, the piano part leads into the last line “rauschet über ihrem Grab” (“rustled over their graves”) with raising half-steps in the upper part of the right hand and lowering half-steps in the lower part of the right hand and in the left hand, circled below in pink. The heavily chromatic piano accompaniment is mimicked by the voice, and these two parts together provide a sense of tension for the listener (highlighted in pink). I believe this tension is Korngold’s way of portraying the pain and restlessness that I believe he heard in Eichendorff’s poem, as Eichendorff attempted to express himself in the Romantic Movement. Korngold ends the piece with open fourths (orange highlighted) and fifths (green highlighted) in the piano part, creating a sense of hope and peace, and implying the success of the Romantics.
“Nachtwanderer”

The next two poems were also written by Eichendorff, although the specific date for each is unknown. “Nachtwanderer” was written in the set Romanzen, as stated on REC Music.

He rides on a brown steed at night

He rides past many castles

Sleep, my child, until the day arrives

The dark night is man’s enemy.

He rides alongside a pond

Where a beautiful, pale girl stands and sings,

Her little skirt fluttering in the wind

Faster, faster, I’m afraid of the child.

He rides along a river,

The Aquarius greets him,

Then quickly dives under with a woosh,

And the water’s still again over his cool home.

When day and night struggle in their usual argument,

Roosters already crow in a distant village

His horse shivers and paws at the ground.

Snorting, he digs his master’s grave.
This poem is much more complex and loaded with metaphorical imagery. It’s as if the reader has been transported into their dreams. The poem starts with the man riding on a brown steed, likely the protector of the child he bids to sleep. The pale girl represents the man’s fear, but he ends up racing towards the Aquarius (his fate), and by morning the man is dead, his horse digging the grave. There is an element of surreal mystery to the entire poem.

Korngold interpreted this poem as having a melancholy mood, leading to the fear of confronting the pale girl. Korngold uses descending fifths (highlighted in pink below) to illustrate the movement of the horse and his rider, and directs the pianist to pick up speed and volume relentlessly (“sempre accelerando e crescendo,” highlighted in green; crescendos marked in yellow) as the singer describes the child and the fear associated with seeing her. The emotional weight of this moment is characterized by the combination of high volume and quick tempo. Now Korngold writes “ohne Verschiebung” (“without soft pedal”), allowing the piano to ring as loudly as it can, and he writes accents over every beat in these measures. Eventually the rider fades (along with a fading tempo and dynamic), dying from the exertion
Das Ständchen

As stated, the date for “Das Ständchen” (as a poem) is unknown, but it was probably near that of “Schneeglöckchen,” since they were both included in the same set of poems.

The moon shines on the roofs
Between foggy clouds
A student is on the street,
Serenading his love.

In my youth
I played the lute here
So many summer nights
And thought of many funny songs.

And the splashing of the fountain
Is heard through the quiet solitude
And the woods from the low mountains
Are like they used to be.

And I carried my love
Over the threshold to peace.
And you, my happy lad,
Sing, sing forever!

In this poem, I think Eichendorff is admiring the gift of youth in others and remembering his own youth and a love of his who has either passed away or simply left him. This poem is hopeful, and Korngold exemplifies that by portraying an eager entrance, using stacked chords arranged in such a way as to allow a bright timbre to the sound. He does this by leading the line directly up to a C Major chord at the end of the piano phrase, two octaves above Middle C (highlighted below in pink), while there is a crescendo written in to heighten the dynamics (highlighted in yellow).
The opening section (the first two stanzas) is light and playful, the way a youth in love might act, using a quick tempo and many staccato notes. The next section (third stanza) is lower in the voice, adding an emotional weight to the song that implies age and maturity in this character. Then the last stanza goes back to the eager entrance of the piano and the light feeling that emits hope and joy, as in the beginning of the song.

*Liebesbriefchen*

The next poem in the *Sechs einfache Lieder* is “Liebesbriefchen,” written by Elisabeth Honold. The translation is as follows:

Far away, I think about you, my little child  
Your sound always rings within me.  
I am alone, but true love is with me.  
You alone bring light to my world.  
I think only about you, my heart’s peace.  
And I’m yours, my dear beloved,  
I always see the precious light in your face.  
Think of me, think of me!
The beauty of this poem is in the selfless love given to the subject, who for Honold, must have been a loved one she was separated from. Korngold sets this piece to the most traditional German Lied accompaniment and melody.

For most of the song, blocked chords or open octaves move in the right hand on top of an ever-flowing left hand rhythm (highlighted in pink and green below). The melodic line is simple and beautiful, in almost usual Lied style. In the excerpt included below, Korngold has written “molto espressivo” (highlighted in yellow), encouraging the performers to express the love in the line through the use of legato. Of all the complicated pieces in Korngold’s Sechs einfache Lieder song cycle, Liebesbriefchen is by far the simplest.

Das Heldengrab am Pruth

“Das Heldengrab am Pruth” is the fifth song in the song cycle, and once again we don’t have a date for the poem’s publication. The author, Heinrich Kipper, sets the stage for a dreamy accompaniment with his text:

I have a little garden in Buchenland
Along the Pruth (River),
Covered with dewdrops,

Shining from the sun’s glow.
And I dream that I’m in my little garden,
As I was every day, But the springtime doesn’t leave.
And I drink in the flowers’ scent
And listen to the sounds of the birds.
It adorns my little garden

When the dew froze With wilting leaves.
And the fall killed the little flower,
The love of the hero rests within.
The nightingale fled,

Kipper’s text describes in detail the beautiful, peaceful place where a hero has gone to rest (his tomb). Korngold sets the poem to music that almost dances around itself with triplets and turning notes alternating in the accompaniment, like it’s creating that sense of peace all on its own. The beginning, middle, and end of this piece contain self-supported joy to show that the peace found at this tomb-site will never end.

Korngold illustrates the dreamlike quality of this song, by doubling the melody (an octave above; highlighted in pink below) in the piano accompaniment with triplets underneath (highlighted in green) to continue the dancing feel to the music.
The final piece in Korngold’s *Sechs einfache Lieder* is “Sommer,” the poem by Siegfried Trebitsch (REC Music). Trebitsch is the same man who translated the play I mentioned earlier which eventually Korngold transformed into his opera *Die tote Stadt*. He was known in his time for his novels and translations of G.B. Shaw’s plays (Garland, Henry and Mary, 861).

Trebitsch’s text translates as:

Under sparse green leaves,
Under flowers and tree-blossoms
I hear the faraway bird song
And the little Thrush’s chatter.
Also a faint, pleasant sound
Quicker days and greetings,
A painful summer myth,

Heavy with a last sweetness.
And a glowing passion
Floats on hot wind swells
Reeling, I thought I heard
Unscreamed cries ringing out.
And I sit and tremble,
Feel my hours run out, While dreams spin around me.
And I hold still and live,

I believe that Trebitsch was attempting to communicate the happiness that comes when everything is peaceful and calm and you’re able to think clearly. I interpret the next section as a passionate remembrance of a love Trebitsch once had and wished to have again. I think he was trying to portray that moment when you feel a little broken and have to just sit and let everything else keep moving around you while you stay still, trying to keep a grip and get back on track.

Korngold sets this magnificently, implying a prolonged sweetness in the beginning with sustained low notes and light, feathery higher notes in the piano line (sustained notes highlighted in pink below). The vocal line is smooth and moving constantly up and down in peaceful waves (also highlighted in pink below).

Only at the end of the second stanza does the line get disrupted, and the melodic line is entirely derailed in the intensity of the next stanza. The melody is in a syncopated rhythm (highlighted in pink below), there are growing dynamics (highlighted in yellow), and while the left hand sustains notes, the right hand in the piano accompaniment has fast, syncopated, rising chords (highlighted in green) to add to the feeling of tension. Finally, after the vocalist sings “Schreie Gellen” (“cries
ring out”), the pianist has dissonant, stacked chords (highlighted at the end in green) that eventually resolve back into the sustained, peaceful melody played in the beginning of the song.

Sechs einfache Lieder

In general, Korngold uses text painting throughout the entire song cycle, frequent dynamic and tempo markings to direct the performance, and a sharp contrast between the different sections in each of the songs. These elements provide the foundation on which the performers can build a presentation of the Sechs einfache Lieder.

Korngold brings life to these poems, brilliantly reflecting the characters of each of the poems. His talent is remarkable, and his intent is exact. The simplicity and beauty of the Sechs
*einfache Lieder* is portrayed through his juxtaposition of heightened, intense fear or passion with subdued peace and tranquility. A good understanding of who Korngold was and what he and the poets intended helps a performer to approach these songs and present them to others.
Works Cited


