

Hugo Wolf's song 'Das verlassene Mägdlein'

sean feit, feb 2011

Hugo Wolf composed the *Mörike Lieder* in 1888, while staying at the vacation home of family friends, the Werners, outside of Vienna. Wolf had not had much success as a composer before this point, but was supported by sufficient patronage to allow him to work on music. He had been known as a music critic and was known as “wild Wolf” for the ferocity of his opinions. He was devoted to Wagner, championed Liszt, Chopin, and Schubert, and denigrated Brahms. He suffered from depression and mood swings his whole life. The *Mörike Lieder* are the first set of songs Wolf completes during his visit to the Werner's home, and they mark the beginning of his most prolific mature period—the few years between 1888 and 1892 when most of his *lieder*, for which he is best known, were written. He was 28 years old, in an adulterous affair with Melanie Köchert, the wife of one of his patrons, and would die at 43, after a final unproductive decade spent partly in an asylum suffering from syphilitic insanity. Melanie, his lover since 1884, visited him in the asylum until his death in 1903, and killed herself three years later.

Eduard Mörike was a German romantic poet whose poems, though not set hardly as often as Goethe or Heine, were considered very musical and taken up by several composers, most notably Schumann and Wolf. *Das verlassene Mägdlein* in particular was set over 50 times, with Wolf's being perhaps the most widely known. Wolf admired Schumann's version, and used Schumann's *lieder* for the text, rather than Mörike's published version.<sup>1</sup> Wolf considered not setting the poem because he believed in not setting poems that other composers had set well, but decided that a different treatment was relevant and justified.<sup>2</sup> Here is the text of the poem as used by both Schumann and Wolf.<sup>3</sup>

<i>Das verlassene Mägdlein</i>	The Abandoned Maid		
<i>Früh, wann die Hähne krähn, Eh' die Sternlein schwinden, Muß ich am Herde stehn, Muß Feuer zünden.</i>	Early, when the rooster crows, Ere the stars expire, I must stand by the hearth, Must light the fire.	<i>Plötzlich, da kommt es mir, Treuloser Knabe, Daß ich die Nacht von dir Geträumet habe.</i>	Suddenly it comes to me, Unfaithful boy, That all night I Dreamed of you.
<i>Schön ist der Flammen Schein, Es springen die Funken; Ich schaue so darein, In Leid versunken.</i>	Pretty is the fire light, Where sparks are flying; I look at them, Sunk deep in grief.	<i>Träne auf Träne dann Stürzt hernieder; So kommt der Tag heran - O ging'er wieder!</i>	Tear after tear then Pours down; So began the day - Oh let it end!

The poem imagines a farm girl at her pre-dawn task of lighting the fire. As she looks into the flames she remembers her dream of a young man whom she calls unfaithful (*treuloser*, lit. “perfidious”), seemingly an ex-lover or unfaithful partner. The poem is in first person and addresses the young man directly, ending with the speaker's tears falling and her wish that the day be over. Is she wishing for death, or just the end of this sorrowful day?

The poem is in ABAB rhymed quatrains, and the two couplets in each quatrain have different metric characters. The first word of each quatrain is a single accented beat creating a natural pause before the rest of the couplet, which flows in trochaic (strong-weak) feet, in two four-beat lines. The second couplet in each quatrain is a line of iambic pentameter. This off-balance metric structure gives each quatrain an accented opening followed by a softer, but accelerating, close. Wolf reproduces this rhythm nearly verbatim in the song, with an interesting twist: starting the third line of each quatrain on the downbeat, Wolf maintains the regular rhythmic structure he establishes at the outset, even though the spoken rhythm begins with a weak beat and therefore implies a pickup. Even with this slight departure, the text is set idiomatically, Wolf always attentive to the rhythm of dramatic speech.

Analysts of late romantic harmony often takes pains to justify the perambulations of Wagnerian harmony by explaining even the strangest chords' functions inside the classical tonal model of dissonance and its resolution. Wolf's harmony lives right on a line where that approach may become less useful. Is the tonality most fruitfully analyzed as one might the prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*—like this song ostensibly in a mournful A minor that stretches far from traditional function, yet never leaves tonal function altogether? Or is an approach that one might use with Debussy or even Stravinsky—identifying key *areas* and roving tonal implications without trying to fit the patterns into a traditional structure of departure and return—more appropriate? Or even a fully twentieth century model, discarding traditional chord name and tonal function in favor of pitch class sets? A cursory look at published analyses of Wolf *lieder* shows all the above approaches being practiced. But Wolf saw himself in the lineage of Wagner, and said, regarding his “unresolved dissonances”, that he was “in a position to demonstrate how each of my boldest discords can be justified by the strictest rule of the theory of harmony”.<sup>4</sup> Timothy McKinney uses that quote to begin an article that applies pitch class set theory to Wolf's songs, stating that Wolf's augmented chord sequences are “not adequately explained by traditional theories of harmony”.<sup>5</sup> While McKinney's pitch class method does explore the augmented triad sequences in an interesting way, I believe he is too quick to discard Wolf's assertion. The analyst is fortunate in this case to have rare evidence of the composer's theoretical intent, and thus is obliged to take it at face value: how can Wolf's harmonies, especially his use of augmented triad sequences, be justified “by the strictest rule of the theory of harmony”? It is in light of Wolf's assertion that I will endeavor a tonal analysis of the song.

(stemless noteheads = implied roots)

in a: ii<sup>2</sup> V i VI ii V<sup>2</sup> i iv V<sup>3</sup>/V V in A: I G<sup>6</sup>/vi

(mixture to A,  
German 6/vi (of a),  
to vi (rootless f),  
reinterpreted as A<sup>b</sup>.)

in a: vi in a: V<sup>+</sup> V<sup>7</sup>/v v V<sup>3</sup>

in A<sup>b</sup>: I V<sup>+</sup> in B<sup>b</sup>: I<sup>+</sup> V<sup>+</sup> I V<sup>+</sup>  
(A<sup>b</sup> acts as lower neighbor to tonic a, B<sup>b</sup> as upper neighbor,  
so key areas imply double neighbor figuration.)

i VI ii V<sup>2</sup> i iv<sup>7</sup> V<sup>3</sup>/V V<sup>4</sup> V<sup>7</sup> i ii<sup>6</sup> i ii<sup>6</sup> i  
(or IV)

The song is in A B A form. It begins with four bars of sparse dyads implying a ii V i cadence in a minor. The triads are incomplete, creating an ambiguity that Wolf will expand upon as the song progresses. The opening bar contains the dyad F A, and without more information, the tonal center is unclear. In m. 2, the dyad A B implies B as a root and A as the 7<sup>th</sup> of a B diminished chord, and when it is followed by D F, the three bars together imply a half-diminished 7<sup>th</sup> chord. Finally, the g# in m. 4 reads as a leading tone and confirms a minor, retrospectively identifying the preceding as ii. The ambiguity of the opening dyads will persist, however, as the g# is followed in m. 5 by only the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> of the a minor triad, *the tonic itself not appearing* until the next bar, and there already reinterpreted as the 3<sup>rd</sup> of a VI chord. Delayed resolution will become a primary device used in the coming augmented sequences, and hearing *implied* notes—in rootless triads and suspensions—is what allows his slippery harmonies to be justifiable as tonal.

The first quatrain is set in a traditional progression, with a steady harmonic rhythm of the chord changing on the downbeat of each bar. The piano plays mostly open position block chords in a repeating rhythm, moving through two phrases:  $i VI ii V i$  and  $i iv V/V V I$ , ending with mode mixture to the parallel major and a cadence on I. Two notes stand out in this first stanza:

1. There are seemingly few non-chord tones in the piece, but those that exist can be seen as suspensions. The first of these is the F in m. 8, which creates a 2-3 suspension beneath the G#, resolving on the last eighth note of the measure.
2. The F in m. 9 is a  $b6$  over an a minor triad, creating a M7 chord. I analyze the chord as  $i$  rather than VI because it *sounds* like  $i$  (and follows V), and thus hear the F as an anticipation of the chord tone in the next measure. The F in mm. 9-10 and the D# in m. 11 create a double neighbor figure around E, and resolve (via octave displacement) in m. 12. This double neighbor figure will return as a larger scale gesture in the next stanza.

The key of a minor is established in the first section and Susan Youens notes that Wolf associated this key not just with sadness, but specifically with “mourning, loss, and sexual betrayal” based on its appearance in several Schubert songs, including *Du Liebst Mich Nicht*.<sup>6</sup> Similarly programmatic, harmonic ambiguity like this symbolizes emotional intensity throughout the late romantic period. Wolf establishes a mood of anxiety and emotional instability not only with his harmonic choices, but in every parameter of the music: the thin opening sonority, the *pp* dynamics that sustain through the first half of the piece, and most subtly, the rhythm. The use of the quarter-eighth-eighth rhythm echoes perhaps the famous, somber second movement allegretto in Beethoven’s Seventh symphony, and is steady, leaning into each next bar without developing much momentum. It is almost funereal, though not somber, perhaps because of the high register and thin chords, and given the repetition of the word “muß” in the poem, which alludes to the speaker’s non-enthusiasm for her task, could even be painting her trudging steps as she goes to the hearth. Mörike sets the poem in one of his favorite times of day, pre-dawn, indicating again emotionality and reflection, and the high, thin chords may paint stars or sparks, again two of the references in the poem. Guessing at representational specificities like this feels trivial to a modern aesthetic, but such tone-painting was common, and Wolf finds much of his gestural material in such congruences with the text.

Two measures of piano begin the B section, and establish a primary pattern of the harmonic rhythm: a two-measure group that repeats. Measures 13-14 repeat twice, and each subsequent pair of measures repeats once, until m. 35. The B section is substantially different from the A section in its tonal implications, and consists of chords that much less easily fit into a functional tonal model. One of the ways we might understand Wolf’s seemingly unrelated triads in this section (like the A  $C\#7 A\flat E\flat+$  progression in mm. 13-20) is to consider a web of relationships and possible tonal identities as present

in each chord. Thus, after we hear a very clear V I cadence in A major (m. 13), the next chord we get is C#7 in 3<sup>rd</sup> inversion, the only complete dominant 7<sup>th</sup> in the song aside from the tonal dominant, E. What role does this ambiguous chord play? It is V of F#, but no F# appears. If we remember that we have just heard both a minor and A major, however, a possible role appears: a (misspelled) German sixth chord of F, which is VI of a minor. In this role, it “should” resolve to C7 and then to F. Does it? In m. 19 it is followed by a heavily doubled dyad, A $\flat$  C. At first hearing this sounds like an incomplete A $\flat$  major triad (and it will *also* function as that), but what if—like the tonic triad in m. 5—this is a chord without its root? The missing root would then be F, forming an f minor chord. The progression then becomes (mixing between A major and a minor): I vi, the same progression that began the song in mm. 5-6, with the qualities reversed. This kind of overlapping parallelism is common in Wagner, and the use of mode mixture echoes Schubert, though Wolf’s use of both is more complex and opaque.

In Wagnerian form, this implied f minor triad immediately moves away from a close relationship with a/A, and is followed by an augmented triad, the first of many augmented chords in the song. Augmented chords, of course, are a symmetrical triad—all major thirds—so any of the notes can be interpreted as the root. In earlier historical contexts, the spelling of the triad would indicate its tonal function, but in Wolf and other late Romantics that hint is absent. The deeply unstable tonal center leads to the chords being spelled however is most practical to read, and not necessarily indicating their provenance. Reading this chord as E $\flat$ + makes it V of the preceding chord, which is heard not just as f minor coming out of the previous line’s cadence, but as A $\flat$  major. If we see the B as its enharmonic C $\flat$ , the V+ can imply a 6-5 suspension that will resolve to B $\flat$  in m. 23. This 6-5 suspension will provide a tonal explanation for the coming sequence of otherwise inexplicable augmented chords.

In m. 22, the E $\flat$ + triad, with its 6-5 suspension, resolves to a B $\flat$ + triad in m. 23. Given where we’ve just come from, we may hear B $\flat$ + as II of A $\flat$ , or IV or f (both altered), but I will suggest that it is an anticipation of the B $\flat$  major we will hear in m. 27. It also can be heard in a 6-5 suspension, with the G $\flat$  resolving to F in the following bar. If we interpret the B $\flat$ + triad as I, the following chord (F+) will be V. This time, rather than moving in a 6-5 suspension it will resolve directly to B $\flat$  major, which mirrors the incomplete voicing of the A $\flat$  triad in m. 19, and signals, with the ironic brightness of a seeming major triad, the realization of the girl’s dream at *plötzlich*. The mood shifts immediately back to instability for *da kommt es mir*, and the V+ of B $\flat$ . The song peaks in volume and vocal register at her accusative naming of her lover’s unfaithfulness, *treuloser Knabe*, subsiding again to *p*, and back into all augmented chords (again in 6-5 suspensions) for the rest of the third stanza. With the suspensions taken into account, the progression from m. 31 is (back in a minor): V V/V v V7, ending with three bars of triads in second inversion, the minor v followed by the major. The inversion undercuts the clarity of hearing the simpler (non-augmented) chords, and the mixture of e minor to E major echoes the a/A mixture in the

first phrase. The music for the second and third stanzas are similar enough to sound like a call and response, with the material in A $\flat$  from mm. 19-23 mirrored by mm. 27-30 in B $\flat$ , and the augmented sequence in mm. 23-26 mirrored at the same transposition (down a M2) in mm. 31-34. Each time the augmented sequence is used, it leads into the next suggested key through implying I and V chords with 6-5 suspensions.

The last stanza recapitulates the music of the A section, repeating it exactly until m. 45, where the rhythm finally and dramatically breaks, and the voice, which has also just broken the steady rhythm of the poem (perhaps too choked up in tears to sing), sings the last line over the open space of a held chord, the longest in the piece besides the caesura in m. 37. The last two notes of the falling vocal line enunciate a 9-8 suspension, which is echoed in the piano over the standard 4-3 to reach the true dominant in m. 47. A simple V I cadence seems to close the piece, but the a minor chord of the resolution is again incomplete, though this time missing the 3<sup>rd</sup> instead of the root. The open 5<sup>th</sup> sonority is new in the piece (though hinted at in m. 9), and again undercuts expectation and solidity. The final chord is interspersed (mirroring the back and forth harmonic rhythm through the piece) with a complex chord that could be ii (with a 7<sup>th</sup>) or IV (with a 6<sup>th</sup>), and which maintains the eerie tone of the piece to the very subdued end on a tonic open 5<sup>th</sup>.

The piece thus functions tonally, but how do we understand the implications of A $\flat$  and B $\flat$  major as the secondary key areas? They are the only chords outside of a/A to be enunciated in clear (though incomplete) form. They can be heard as a large-scale double-neighbor figure, with the fundamental line of the piece moving a half-step below, then above, the tonic A. Their incompleteness keeps them from assuming too much weight as key areas, and echoes the open dyads of the first few bars. The tenuous balance in this piece is that the harmony barely holds together in its tonal implications, but some subtle choices—like the voice singing almost no non-chord tones, which might muddy the already fragile coherence—help it to do so. The harmony lives on a fine line between Wagnerian function and Debussian colorism, but Wolf's challenge holds: it is indeed possible to justify, as he did, all of his "unresolved dissonances" through traditional harmonic rules, even if not, perhaps, "the strictest".

#### *resources*

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Parsons, James. *The Cambridge Companion to the Lied*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004.

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Sams, "Homage to Eduard Mörike," *The Musical Times* (1975). 533.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> translation by author, modified substantially from Charles Wharton Stork's, found at (<http://www.cingolani.com/2em.html>).

<sup>4</sup> *Hugo Wolf's Briefe an Emil Kauffmann*, quoted in Timothy R. McKinney, "Melodic Pitch Structures in Hugo Wolf's Augmented-Triad Series," *Indiana Theory Review* 14, no. 1. 38.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Youens, *Tradition and Innovation, the Lieder of Hugo Wolf* in James Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to the Lied* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004). 209.