

NOTES for NOVEMBER 8, 2018

What's in a name, Great expectations or the Why of a Magelone-Liederkreis

Tieck, Eichendorff, Schumann and Brahms

In the rich world of German art-song or *Lied* a special challenge for composers in this form has been - since Beethoven's *An die ferne Geliebte* - to write a song-cycle. Famous results of course are Schubert's magnificent *Winterreise* and *Die schöne Müllerin* (*Schwanengesang* is a different story), Mahler's *Fahrenden Gesellen* and *Rückert-Lieder* and Schumann's *Dichterliebe*.

Young Johannes Brahms also set out to write a cycle and (apart from, in a way, the *Four Serious Songs*) the only real cycle has become the one he himself entitled *Romanzen aus L. Tieck's Magelone*, or "Romances taken from L. Tieck's *Magelone*." Pretty soon people began referring to the cycle as Brahms' *Die schöne Magelone*. Funnily enough, in my opinion, this slight change of title has led to some misunderstandings about the nature of the work and has even influenced reception and appreciation of it in a negative way.

Speaking about the cycle as being *Die schöne Magelone* seemingly puts it side-by-side with *Die schöne Müllerin* or *Winterreise*, both of which tell a story with a beginning, middle and (tragic) end. It also seems to suggest a one-on-one connection with the story as related in the book by Ludwig Tieck.

This way of looking at the cycle immediately poses several problems. The *Romanzen* as set by Brahms do not tell the story: they are taken from the story but offer no context whatsoever. The songs are not even sung by one principal character and therefore it becomes tricky for the listener to know who is singing, why, and to whom! Even with an actor speaking connecting texts, or elaborate explications on story-line and chronology in a program-leaflet, the whole listening experience often becomes like a frustrating, dissatisfying puzzle instead of the overwhelming musical experience which these songs have to offer.

Is the Brahms cycle therefore a failed opus?

I think it is very important to realize that Brahms himself never intended his cycle to be an anecdotal re-telling in song of Tieck's book or of the *Magelone*-saga. In a letter to his publisher he vehemently resisted the publication of connecting texts between his songs saying that: "*the songs have nothing to do with Peter's love story, I simply put the words to music!*" This would imply that Brahms used the novel as a source of inspiration for setting a big Romantic landscape of emotions and images, rather in

the same way as Schumann did with his choice of Eichendorff's poems for his *Liederkreis* op.39.

Because - as opposed to Schumann's *Dichterliebe* and his *Liederkreis*, op.24 - the *Liederkreis* op.39 from 1840 on poems by Eichendorff does not tell any connecting story either. Schumann chose the twelve poems from a poetry collection called *Intermezzo*; we as listeners and performers experience the choice as a cycle through the poetic world the poems provide us with, and through the musical connections that Schumann's composition offer us.

The poetic world of Eichendorff is the *summmum* of Romantic poetry: old forests, the Lorelei, consoling birdsong, impossible love: all very closely tied to the world of Tieck and his *Magelone*. Eichendorff must surely have known Tieck's book which had come out in 1797 when Eichendorff was only eleven years old; it had enjoyed great succes and it is therefore not difficult to trace the inspiration at least partly back to him!

Where Schumann distills these moments in songs often not longer than two printed pages, the young Brahms paints bigger canvasses with ambitious larger-scale forms and piano-writing of great virtuosity and from time to time a concerto-like feel to it.

In order to try to get away from vain searching for narrative and fairytale storytelling in the *Magelone* and to place them in a way in an unashamedly Romantic light, we decided to combine the two cycles!

Brahms' cycle was originally published in five separate volumes of three songs each; we will follow these volumes as mini - "chapters", each episode being followed by three songs from the Schumann *Liederkreis*. The bold young Brahms departing into adventurous dreams and musical forms, alternating with the often more pensive Schumann, whom one could imagine strolling through the same overgrown forest paths and mountain passes.

In this way we hope to offer you, and invite you into, the world of these two giants of musical poetry, Brahms and Schumann, conjuring up a magical world of old forests, crumbling castles, missed loved ones, brave knights, consoling birds and all this bound by love and song.

Thomas Oliemans, 7-2-2018