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Franz Grasberger, ed. *Hugo Wolf: Letters to Melanie Koechert.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003. xxxix + 293 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-299-19444-4.

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Composing Letters

The composer Hugo Wolf once told a friend that he wrote his music for epicures, not amateurs. Now, a century after he died in an insane asylum at age forty-three, the consequence of syphilis he contracted in 1878 at a Viennese brothel, his own judgment of his work has proven sound. He may have deepened the expressive capacity of the *Lied* beyond even what Schubert and Schumann had achieved; he may have transformed the song into a "complete theater of the mind, a *Gesamtkunstwerk* for voice and piano" by fully exploiting Wagnerian techniques of motivic development with wholly un-Wagnerian brevity; and he may have exercised "dazzling ingenuity" and "breathtaking audacity" in his intertwining of word and music.[1] But Wolf's *Lieder*, are known, performed, and intensely admired mainly by musical cognoscenti and virtually unknown to everyone else, including those with a decent general knowledge of serious music. Like some alternative rock artist whose original fans take flight at any hint of media success or a writer of literary fiction who loses all aura if chosen for Oprah's list, Wolf seems destined to endure as esoterica, a composer accessible only to the few who have the advanced musical training, sophisticated knowledge of German poetry, and exquisitely refined taste enough to appreciate him. The decision of the University of Wisconsin Press to reprint in paperback a 1991 English translation of his letters to a close female friend thus seems quixotic, even by university press standards. Most Wolf admirers read German, and these letters have long been available in the original. No new revelations or new interpretations come along with this volume; no recent Wolf biography has stimulated a major reconsideration of his place in history, in light of which one might read these letters with fresh insight. To be sure the one-hundredth anniversary of his death represents an occasion of sorts, but there too, the relationship of these letters to his sad ending remains obscure and largely unarticulated.

Nevertheless, the letters are most welcome, especially if they will inspire a few more people to seek out Wolf recordings and think further on music's place in the history of culture and society. The letters to Melanie Koechert illuminate Wolf's career from 1887, just before his artistic *Wunderjahr* of 1888, up to his mental breakdown in 1897. There is one final letter to Melanie written from the asylum, in which Wolf (unlike Nietzsche, to

whom he invites comparison) seems entirely lucid, asking for a flannel suit and "a couple of white starched shirts with collars and cuffs" and ending with a plea to rescue him, for "how am I ever to get out of here without help from my friends" (p. 241). Wolf's friends had in fact long been the mainstay of his practical, if not his artistic, existence. Born in the town of Windischgraz (now part of Slovenia), Wolf was of mixed German, Slovene, and Italian ancestry in which the consciousness of being German dominated. His father had a small business and practiced music as an amateur. But he was never rich, and beyond paying for Hugo's musical training at the Vienna Conservatory (where Wolf studied from 1875 to 1877, when he was booted out for "breach of discipline"), neither father nor family more generally were able to rescue Wolf from the inevitable financial insecurity of his compositional career. Instead, throughout his life Wolf, like many musicians, pieced together an income from the generosity of friends and wealthy patrons (among them Josef Breuer, Freud's early collaborator), private teaching, music reviewing, and payments from publishers and concert promoters.

All this comes through in his letters to Melanie Koechert, far more so indeed than the "love story" which the book's jacket trumpets as the letters' essence. One has to be an imaginative between-the-lines reader to find the evidence of their sexual passion. His need for her deliveries of liver dumplings and starched collars, on the other hand, comes out clearly from start to finish. Liver dumplings and starched collars, moreover, probably tell us more about Wolf's world and his relationship to it than would explicit declarations of undying love, which would in any case have been out of character for this secretive, intensely private composer. Whether or not Koechert was his muse remains an open question after reading these letters. I am inclined to believe that the sources of Wolf's creativity are not so easily identifiable, and certainly the letters do less work in illuminating his creative process than a biographer might have wished. Still, social historians of the wealthy and their hangers-on will find plenty of evidence in these letters concerning the hidden injuries of class and the difficulties of finding good help. More important, perhaps, the letters illuminate the difficulties Wolf faced in making a living as a musician in the late-nineteenth century and, by extension, the fading away of the cultural context for the art form at which he most excelled, the *Lied*. Because of his profession and his poverty, Wolf lived a life of constant travel. After his great outburst of creativity in 1888, achieved in the quiet of Perchtoldsdorf outside of Vienna, he increasingly took to the road, to meet potential publishers, to oversee performances of his works, and to introduce himself to performers, composers, and concert organizers. All this travel took place within the spaces of German-speaking Europe, more specifically, Austria and Germany. His itineraries as well as his circles of friendship over the years reveal the cultural space defined by the *Lied* itself, an art form more German even than the symphony, both because of its close relationship to German art poetry and because of its long historical intertwining with popular verse and folk song.

Wolf may have brought the *Lied* to a state of perfection defined by extreme sophistication, but he also marked a kind of ending to it: his own were too difficult for domestic music-making, too small-scale and refined for profitability in the concert hall. Wolf (more Nietzschean overtones) often felt himself to be an epigone, filled with fin-de-siecle anxiety, comfortable in no time. He scorned Brahms as a lifeless pedant, yet he doubted his own capacity to appeal to modern audiences and rejected compositional innovation simply for the sake of being different. Referring to Richard Strauss, a composer in larger, more prestigious genres than his own, Wolf described a "dreary sterility of invention" and "affected harmonic spasms," the "sort of thing considered to be original and daring here in Germany"–"I'd rather be an untalented poltroon than a 'revolutionary' like that" (p. 43). For traditional musicology, committed to following the red thread that leads from one musical innovation to the next, Wolf leads nowhere; his main significance lies in following–following Schubert and Schumann, Brahms and Wagner, to each of which he owed something and from each of which he departed with brilliant originality, but heading for a dead end not a breakthrough. One wonders, though, how Wolf might look in a different conceptual setting, one focused more on musical context than musical development.

But for such questions of context, this volume offers few answers. The introductory essay by the German editor, Franz Grasberger, has limited usefulness today, except as an artifact of an earlier era of musical biography, a happy time in which one could fling around phrases like "the genius' tragic turn of fate," the "exceptionally sensitive spiritual temperament," or the "women [who provided] impulse and inspiration, especially to artists" without fear of rolled eyes. Grasberger's introduction does point to a number of important aspects of Wolf's life that the letters illuminate–his concern for his career, his relationship to the public, his dependence on friends for practical aid and moral support. The annotations, bib-

liography, chronology, and glossary of frequently mentioned names are also useful and welcome. But the volume as a whole has an antiquated air to it that in this case especially indicates a missed opportunity. Wolf's music is far less inaccessible than that of many who followed him and are yet better known to the music-listening public. His life, though short, was not lived in isolation. A richer contextualization of these letters would have made them more useful to teachers and more stimulating to music-lovers and scholars alike.

Note

[1]. Eric Sams and Graham Johnson, "The Romantic Lied," and Suzanne Youens, "Hugo Wolf: the Mature Songs," *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy `http://www.grovemusic.com`. (Accessed 2 November 2004).