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## Singing Goethe's Praises

### Goethe Songs by Women Composers

The poems of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) have inspired many composers to write song settings. Interest in women composers continues to grow, and their compositions, which may have been unpublished or overlooked for many years, are now coming to light. The songbook that I edited in the year commemorating the 250th anniversary of Goethe's birth<sup>1</sup> contains works by 14 women composers. These women's lives span three generations, yet they were all touched to some degree by their contemporary, Goethe, and set his poems to music.

It is possible to distinguish three different approaches the women took to Goethe and his poetry, which roughly correspond to the three generations to which they belonged and their personal proximity to him. This paper explores these three approaches and representative examples of each. The older generation of women composers (represented by Duchess Anna Amalia and Corona Schröter) are the collaborators. They knew Goethe well and composed settings in collaboration with him. The second generation (represented by Bettine von Arnim and Fanny Hensel) are the admirers. They stood in awe of Goethe and sought to honor him – and possibly to impress him – with their settings of his poems. The younger generation (represented by Johanna Kinkel and Clara Schumann) had little personal connection with Goethe. They used his poems as a source for lyrics but changed them for their own artistic purposes. These three ways of viewing Goethe and his texts may of course be found to some extent in the same composer or work.

The composers represent a broad spectrum of social classes and varying degrees of musical professionalism. Some were prolific and composed large-scale works with orchestra, while others were gifted amateurs. Yet even among the professional musicians, none of these women earned her living exclusively through composing. Many were also teachers or performers, or both. The songs span a period of over 75 years and represent a broad variety of styles. There are simple, strophic, folk-like songs, as well as ambitious, through-composed songs. The selection shows stylistic developments of the Lied from the late 18th to the early 19th century. We know that Goethe preferred simple, strophic settings like those produced most often by composers of the older generation. He believed such music provided an appropriate accompaniment that would not overpower his words.<sup>2</sup> Why Goethe's taste in music lagged behind the musical developments of his day is a topic for another paper.

1 *Von Goethe inspiriert: Lieder von Komponistinnen des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts / Inspired by Goethe: Songs by Women Composers of the 18th and 19th Centuries*, ed. by Ann Willison Lemke, Kassel 1999.

2 See Jack Stein, »Was Goethe Wrong About the Nineteenth-Century Lied? An Examination of the Relationship of Poem and Music« in: *PMLA* 77 (1962), p. 232–239.

## I. Women of Weimar

The women who lived in Weimar saw Goethe frequently and worked together with him. Anna Amalia, Duchess of Saxe-Weimar (1739–1807) was by far the most influential of the women. She not only had a significant influence on shaping the musical and cultural life of Weimar during the age of Goethe, but also influenced the poet's writings. The destruction of large portions of her library and music collection in the fire of 2 September 2004 represents a great cultural loss. At her invitation, Goethe moved to her »court of muses« in 1775, the year her eldest son, Duke Carl August, came of age. She then focused her efforts on musical and theatrical endeavors, founding the Private Theater in which nobility and artists collaborated in performances of plays and Singspiele. For court performances, Anna Amalia composed settings of Goethe's Singspiele *Erwin und Elmire* in 1776 and the lesser-known *Das Jahrmarktsfest zu Plundersweilern* in 1778. Goethe rewrote *Erwin und Elmire* for the Duchess, adding five new songs for her to compose. Corona Schröter (1751–1802), the only professional actress in the company, sang the title role of Elmire. *Das Veilchen* became the most popular song from this Singspiel and was set many times by various composers, including Mozart and Clara Schumann. In the song »Sieh mich Heilger, wie ich bin«, Elmire confesses her love to Erwin. Goethe altered the second stanza of this song for Anna Amalia's setting, thus becoming her artistic collaborator. Not only did his words give rise to her composition, but her composition spurred him on to further poetic work. A short excerpt gives an impression of the simple, strophic setting with its four-bar phrases, diatonic harmonies and regular cadences.<sup>3</sup>

Sieh mich Heilger, wie ich bin,  
 Eine arme Sünderin.  
 Angst und Kummer, Reu und Schmerz  
 Quälen dieses arme Herz.  
 Sieh mich vor dir unverstellt,  
 Herr, die schuldigste der Welt.

Corona Schröter was not only an actress, singer and composer, but also a gifted writer and artist. Goethe arranged her appointment in Weimar and was her close friend and artistic collaborator in the court theater. They worked and acted together in his play *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, seeing each other on an almost daily basis. Goethe created the role of Dortchen in his Singspiel *Die Fischerin* especially for Schröter. She not only sang the lead role, and was the first to compose music to the work, but also collaborated with Goethe on the aria texts.<sup>4</sup> The musical play was first performed in an idyllic outdoor setting in the park at Tiefurt Palace, the ducal summer residence on the banks of the Ilm river. Imagine an orchestra playing on the riverbank, while boats lit by torches carry singing actors down the

3 Songs chosen for the examples are available in the songbook *Von Goethe inspiriert*, ed. by Ann Willison Lemke, and were recorded on the CD of the same name by Elisabeth Scholl, soprano and Burkhard Schaeffer, piano (Salto Records International, SAL 7007 1999).

4 Goethe noted in his diary (5 August 1781): »Zu Cronen. die Arien zu der *Fischerinn* berichtet.« See Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, WA III, vol. 1, p. 129.

river. Schröter's setting of *Erlkönig* from the Singspiel (composed before July 1782) was the very first of many settings of this popular ballad. Unlike Schubert's famous dramatic setting, Schröter's is a simple, strophic folk-song, which undoubtedly pleased Goethe. It fit well into the context of the play, in which Dortchen sings the folksong absentmindedly while she works.

Unlike most of the Singspiel's numbers, the setting of »Für Männer uns zu plagen« from *Die Fischerin* is through-composed:<sup>5</sup>

Für Männer uns zu plagen  
Sind leider wir bestimmt.  
Wir lassen sie gewähren,  
Wir folgen ihrem Willen:  
Und wären sie nur dankbar,  
So wär' noch alles gut.

The contrasting loud, fast section at the end of the song with its repetitive, short scale passages expresses Dortchen's impatience and her emphatic resolution regarding men: »Aber ich will auch nicht länger/Allen ihren Grillen folgen,/Alles mir gefallen lassen;/Will nach meinen Kopfe tun!«

## II. Passionate Admirers

The second group of women, represented by Bettine von Arnim and Fanny Hensel, stand out as exceptional in their musical devotion to Goethe. Both composed his texts during their entire creative lives. They strove to give musical expression to his words and to pay him homage with their songs. They sent him their songs to his texts or performed them for him on their visits to Weimar. Clearly, these young women wished to please him and sought his approval.

Bettine von Arnim (1785–1859), known primarily as the author of *Goethe's Briefwechsel mit einem Kinde*<sup>6</sup>, based on her early correspondence with the poet, also sang, played guitar and piano and composed. Her settings of Goethe's poems were an important aspect of her dialogue with the poet and similar in this way to her letters.<sup>7</sup> In the earliest stage of her actual correspondence with Goethe, Bettine wrote: »Meine Sehnsucht mein Gefühl waren Melodien die sich ein Lied suchten dem sie sich anschmiegen[;] darf ich mich anschmiegen? dann sollen diese Melodien so hoch steigen, daß sie Ihre Lieder begleiten können.«<sup>8</sup> She

5 The song was edited and published by Annie Randall in: *Women Composers: Music Through the Ages*, vol. 4: *Composers Born 1700–1799*, ed. by Sylvia Glickman and Martha Furman Schleifer, New York 1998, p. 198–201, and recorded by Elisabeth Scholl, soprano and Burkhard Schaeffer, piano on the CD *Von Goethe inspiriert*.

6 Bettine von Arnim, *Goethe's Briefwechsel mit einem Kinde*, Berlin 1835.

7 See Ann Willison Lemke, *Bettine's Song: The Musical Voice of Bettine von Arnim, née Brentano (1785 to 1859)*, PhD Diss. Indiana University, Ann Arbor 1998.

8 Letter of September 1807, Frankfurt a.M., in: Bettine von Arnim, *Werke und Briefe*, ed. by Walter Schmitz and Sibylle von Steinsdorff, Frankfurt a.M. 1992–2004, vol. 2, p. 578.

composed about 25 songs with texts by Goethe, although only one was published during her lifetime, and some are lost.<sup>9</sup> She selected poems that moved her emotionally and allowed them to inspire her improvised melodies. In the years 1808–1810 she set passages from *Faust I*, but only two songs remain. The song »Ach neige, du Schmerzenreiche« is Gretchen's prayer to the image of the Holy Mother. The setting has the character of an Italian operatic aria like those Bettine had learned as a music student. The melodic shape and large interval leaps in the opening section seem to depict musically the young girl's prayer straining heavenward and the downward-turning gaze of the Holy Mother.

Ach neige,  
 Du Schmerzenreiche,  
 Dein Antlitz gnädig meiner Not!  
 Das Schwert im Herzen,  
 Mit tausend Schmerzen  
 Blickst auf zu deines Sohnes Tod.

The speaker's distress and agitation is expressed in the next sections with triplets in the accompaniment building to a vocal climax on the words »das Herz zerbricht in mir!« sung in an operatic recitative.

Fanny Hensel, née Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1805–1847), composed more texts by Goethe than any other woman composer of her time. She set 33 poems as solo songs, more as duets and trios and wrote a cantata based on passages of *Faust II*. Fanny's fascination with Goethe began before she met him, when both she and her younger brother Felix studied composition with Zelter in Berlin. In 1821 Zelter took 12-year-old Felix to Weimar to meet Goethe, but Fanny, as a girl, had to stay home. She commanded Felix to tell her every detail of Goethe's appearance, personality, home and musical instrument.<sup>10</sup> When she finally met and performed for Goethe, her mother wrote, »war er sehr gütig und herablassend, sie mußte ihm viel Bach spielen und seine von ihr komponirten Lieder gefielen ihm außerordentlich.«<sup>11</sup> After hearing that Fanny complained about the lack of good lyrics to set to music, Goethe wrote for her the poem »Wenn ich mir in stiller Seele« (13 October 1827).<sup>12</sup> Fanny felt honored by Goethe's gift and longed to be a worthy recipient. She wrote: »Wenn es mir gelänge, die richtigen Töne zu Ihren Worten zu finden, würde ich mich vielleicht als eine weniger unwürdige Besitzerinn solches Schatzes betrachten dürfen, in welchem Sie mir, mit der Aufgabe zugleich einen Lohn verliehen haben, den nicht einmal die glücklichste Lösung erwarten durfte.«<sup>13</sup> The song, dated 28 August 1843, begins quietly in *mezza voce* and in d minor as the poem's speaker reflects on his loss:

9 See »A Catalog of Bettine's Compositions«, in: Lemke, *Bettine's Song*, p. 204–240; see also Renate Moering's discussion in: Bettine von Arnim, *Ach neige, du Schmerzenreiche: Goethe-Vertonungen für Singstimme und Klavier*, ed. by Renate Moering and Reinhard Schmiedel, Kassel 1999, p. 3–5.

10 See *The Letters of Fanny Hensel to Felix Mendelssohn*, ed. by Marcia J. Citron, New York 1987, p. 369f., p. 373.

11 Quoted in: Karl Mendelssohn Bartholdy, *Goethe und Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy*, Leipzig 1871, p. 21.

12 The manuscript is pictured in Lemke, *Von Goethe inspiriert*, p. 11, where the song was first published.

Wenn ich mir in stiller Seele  
 Singe leise Lieder vor:  
 Wie ich fühle, daß sie fehle,  
 Die ich einzig mir erkor –  
 Möcht ich hoffen, daß sie sänge,  
 Was ich ihr so gern vertraut

The mood changes dramatically for the final two lines of the poem, »Ach! aus dieser Brust und Enge/Drängen frohe Lieder laut«, expressed with *forte* arpeggiated chords in D major, as if providing an excerpt of such a joyful song.

### III. The Younger Generation

The younger generation of women composed songs that Goethe never heard, so they were clearly not trying to please him. They composed songs with more emphasis on the piano, more adventurous, virtuosic writing and increased chromaticism. Composers who did not meet Goethe personally or collaborate with him were also more likely to take liberties with his texts. His words served their artistic purposes.

The first of these younger women is Johanna Kinkel (1810–1858), the composer, pianist, music teacher, writer and wife of the 1848 revolutionary Gottfried Kinkel. She never met Goethe, but associated with many people who knew him. Growing up in the university town of Bonn, she knew professors who admired Goethe and was a guest at celebrations in honor of his birthday.<sup>14</sup> She lived for several months in Bettine von Arnim's home in Berlin and taught music to her daughters. She enjoyed the support of the Mendelssohn family and performed at Fanny Hensel's »Sonntagsmusiken«. Her setting of *An den Mond* was one of her own favorite compositions. It appeared in her first songbook publication (January 1838), dedicated to Bettine von Arnim.<sup>15</sup> The pianissimo, descending chords in the piano and chromatic harmonies create the impression of shimmering moonlight. Goethe's famous poem has nine stanzas. Kinkel, however, omitted the poem's second stanza and combined the remaining eight stanzas to form four verses. The first verse follows:

Füllest wieder Busch und Tal  
 Still mit Nebelglanz,  
 Lösest endlich auch einmal  
 Meine Seele ganz. [...]
   
 Jeden Nachklang fühlt mein Herz

13 Letter of 25 October 1827, quoted in: Max Friedlaender, »Musikerbriefe«, in: *Goethe-Jahrbuch* 12 (1891), p. 116.

14 See Ann Willison Lemke, »Briefe einer Bettina-Verehrerin: Ein Beitrag zur frühen Rezeption von Goethe's Briefwechsel mit einem Kinde«, in: *Internationales Jahrbuch der Bettina-von-Arnim-Gesellschaft* 10 (1998) p. 23–46.

15 See Ann Willison Lemke, »Alles Schaffen ist wohl eine Wechselwirkung von Inspiration und Willen«: Johanna Kinkel als Komponistin«, in: *Annäherung IX – an sieben Komponistinnen*, ed. by Clara Mayer, Kassel 1998, p. 53–70.

Froh- und trüber Zeit,  
Wandle zwischen Freud und Schmerz  
In der Einsamkeit.

Clara Schumann (1819–1896) played for Goethe in Weimar when she was 12 and he was 82. While her career was just beginning, it was the end of his long and illustrious career. Weimar was the first stop on her first concert tour arranged by her father, Friedrich Wieck. Impressed by her performance, Goethe remarked »das Mädchen hat mehr Kraft als sechs Knaben zusammen«. <sup>16</sup> He gave her a bronze portrait medallion with a note that read: »Der kunstreichen Clara Wieck / Zu freundlichem Erinnern des 9. October 1831.« <sup>17</sup>

In light of her early, memorable meeting with Goethe, it is surprising that only one song setting of his poetry remains. We know from the transcriptions she and Robert Schumann made that she considered setting more of Goethe's poems to music. Clara transcribed twelve Goethe poems, including *Das Veilchen*, the only one she set to music. <sup>18</sup> In this example, you may hear the echoes of Mozart's setting, which Clara knew and admired. She portrays the light steps of the young shepherdess with light, staccato eighth notes and paints the word »sang« with a long held note in the voice over arpeggios in the accompaniment. The first stanza follows:

Ein Veilchen auf der Wiese stand  
Gebückt in sich und unbekannt;  
Es war ein herzigs Veilchen.  
Da kam eine junge Schäferin,  
Mit leichtem Schritt und munterm Sinn,  
Daher, daher,  
Die Wiese her, und sang.

## Conclusion

In closing, I wish to emphasize that there are many more Goethe songs by women composers than have until recently been recognized. Women composers were attracted to Goethe's poetry for a variety of reasons. The first women worked together with Goethe to create a harmonious collaboration of words and music. Some women composed songs to his texts as a form of paying homage and seeking his recognition and approval. The youngest generation was not composing for his ears or in a style he appreciated. Women from many following generations and many other countries have continued to find inspiration for musical compositions in Goethe's poetry. In listening to their songs, we discover fresh, new ways of reading and interpreting Goethe.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in: *Clara Schumann. Ein Künstlerleben. Nach Tagebüchern und Briefen* (1902–1908), vol. 1, Leipzig 1920, ed. by Berthold Litzmann, p. 29.

<sup>17</sup> Lemke, *Von Goethe inspiriert*, p. 58f.

<sup>18</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 59.