Grasping Toward the Light: A Reassessment of Wolf’s Michelangelo-Lieder

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Abstract

The Michelangelo-Lieder are Hugo Wolf’s only songs that the composer himself considered as a song cycle. The relative lack of popular and critical attention paid these works is undue: they are challenging to listeners, and music is first an aural art. The concept of “late work” as explored by Theodor Adorno, and by Edward Said after him, is a useful one that allows us to better contextualize these late songs. The present analysis offers a way of listening to these works within a more familiar aural framework: identifying elements of unity within the cycle and situating the Michelangelo-Lieder within Wolf’s substantial oeuvre creates familiarity and thereby breeds appreciation and personal understanding. Following a brief analysis of musical characteristics of late style as Said identifies them in his book, On Late Style, the essay turns to the genesis of the Michelangelo-Lieder. Each of the three songs is addressed in turn, with an aim to address the text, the music, and their intersections. Although considered outdated in some circles, the catalogue of musical motives throughout Wolf’s vocal oeuvre is employed judiciously to help to reintegrate the Michelangelo-Lieder within the composer’s total output. In addition to textual and musical ties among the three songs, “lateness” is shown to provide unity to the set and to give modern analytical weight to Wolf’s assertion that the Michelangelo-Lieder be considered a cycle.

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