

Felix Wolfes



About The Songs Of Felix Wolfes

by ROBERT W. DUMM

The publication of a selection from the songs of Felix Wolfes marks both the continuity and the renewal of the German *Lied*. It also marks the possibly unique occasion of a new composer making his debut with an extensive life-work. What further distinguishes this output is the appearance of a composer whose self-chosen ancestors are Brahms, Strauss, Mussorgsky, Wolf and Pfitzner in the latter half of the Twentieth Century.

Wolfes' legacy is not large, as composers' "complete works" go. He has written over 140 songs so far, of which 43 appear in these five volumes published by Mercury Music Corporation. They have not been thrust prematurely before the public but have been quietly withheld till now.

Part of the explanation lies in Wolfes' way of working. He begins with a poem of the highest quality, to which he may return for years before it eventuates in a song. He is convinced of the primary importance of the poem to a song and will derive whole melodies from a line of poetry, sensitively rendering the rising and falling inflections of the words with a faithfulness often lacking in eminent *Lieder* composers. The poets he has set range the breadth of German literature from past to present. Taken by themselves, the poems alone would make an anthology unique for variety of style and depth of vision. The names Ernst Bertram, Hermann Hesse, Josef Weinheber, and Eichendorff frequently appear in his indexes, with poems that probe the immense mystery of human life. Wolfes can even make room for a Christian Wagner, the German cross-number to Grandma Moses, in "Bluehender Kirschbaum" (Vol. II, 42; V, 47), which spills with the simple fun of living.

In poem after poem Wolfes has set, one reads the themes of Romanticism like an index: youth, lost illusions, the love of nature and love of persons, homesickness, autumn sundowns and leavetaking, and like the sea welcoming the lifestream—death itself. All the index themes are there, but Wolfes has treated each with a penetration that reestablishes their universality, a perspective which the Romantics, in their skinbound subjectivity, often missed. "The very act of *singing* is "Romantic". One cannot sing without expression, and expression must spring from the words." No objections can sway Wolfes on this point; he just turns smilingly silent and his eyes begin to twinkle.

The songs have the tang of an explorer's imagination and do not easily fit under a single label. They hold as much for the future as the present as they track the limits of human questions. "I am not looking for new combinations," Wolfes declares, "but for the approach to a subject, and its essential *distinction* of feeling."

Some would have us believe that the German *Lied*, as an art form, is finished, or that song in any form disinterests them. They insist that this is the age of instruments—musical tools—computers and amplifiers with dials and efficient compactness. Wolfes warms to the suggestion, and comes as near to protest as his philosophical temperament will let him. "Song will go on—as long as the impulse to sing and—the more or less excusable vanity of singers, go on." Then, with his Santa Claus wink, "I know my singers!"

And know them he does indeed. After his early study with Max Reger, to whom he credits his sense of technical neatness and accuracy, and with Hans Pfitzner, to whom he owes his sense of inspiration and inner refinement, Wolfes passed the years 1915-1933 first in apprenticeship, then at top-ranking conductorships in German opera houses.

Then, after the involuntary termination of that versatile and fruitful phase of his musical life, Wolfes conducted at the Monte Carlo opera house. He came to New York in 1937, where he served as assistant conductor at the Metropolitan Opera from 1938 through 1947. Since then he has divided his coaching between New York and Boston, where he teaches at the New England Conservatory. "Songs must be written for the voice," he declares. "They must be inspired by the words, but nevertheless remain singable." On modern composers' frequent indifference to their texts, he offers a speechless "no comment".

Wolfes' lasting impression of what a composer is lies in the great model of Hans Pfitzner, of whom he once wrote: "No one who has ever been touched by the peculiar beauty of Pfitzner's music in its unique blending of an austere but deeply passionate tenderness with the most fanciful and exuberant imagination has ever turned away." Wolfes gained his loyalty to Pfitzner and his pure image of song early in his boyhood, and the teeming world of persons, places, scores and books which he houses in an astonishing memory is lit by youthfulness. Wolfes seems to exist in an endless Present, a burning moment where all he has lived comes into focus. He is curious about everything, and exercises the kind of mind that can create and sternly impose its own editing in the same operation. On his bedside table a German biography of Haydn may jostle the latest appraisal of the Kennedys. He embodies the thought of his own song "Alter Mann" (V, 40): —"hab viel verlernt; muss neues lernen" ("much I've unlearned, and have new things to learn"). Like every man who has keenly lived his years, Wolfes is past and future both, both channeled through that luminous Present of his, and the songs are the man.

"They are my children, now more than 140 of them, — which beats Priam and Hecuba," laughs the old bachelor. And he has given them a parent's careful attention. The datelist may show a year or blank years from song

to song, then a bumper crop in a single year. The gaps do not mean intermittent inspiration, but rather describe Wolfes' way of working. "I don't believe in a fast tempo for art. You cannot accelerate the growth of a plant. The material was sometimes written over and over, and sometimes I carried it around with me for years. The beginning is crucial; sometimes I would do the theme over a hundred times or more. From that point, everything has to grow."

Once the poem has yielded its sap, the notes are made into a seamless fabric. In Wolfes' own words, "It's like a web of steel threads or nylon, ever so fine, but held together in a tension, so that a touch at any point will vibrate the whole structure." In this textural ideal of sound-space sparsely tracked by notes, Wolfes' music has a Twentieth-Century feeling, to be sure. It avoids thickness or color for its own sake, unless a powerful theme requires them.

Wolfes' originality is as unmistakable as it is elusive. He uses chromaticism, both in melodic sequences and harmonic turns, yet his music is never densely chromatic. One will find fourths more often than half steps, or fourths piled into sevenths and ninths, and the openness of modal scales; indeed, a well-defined language of intervals. The songs flicker with the onomatopoeia of sense in sound, and show expressive dynamics that favor the voice in its best ranges. They rely on direct lines for clear communication. We have said that the songs are the man. They work like personal transfusions from an inner world, the world inside Wolfes' benign smile and gracious accessibility, where lies a deep layer of compassion and lonely love for human beings in their lonely state.

One gets to know each song as a friend with a separate and recognizable character. But their likeness runs in their unruffled movement (frequent tempo indications are "ruhig", "zart", "leicht", "bewegt", "fliessend", "langsam"), their intricately flowing lines, and their even dynamic keel. They characteristically explore a world of inner tremors, and their attraction lies in their sustained and trancelike moods. They show humor, yes, but of the still kind that converts sadness to sweet resignation.

They are not songs for superficial effects. Those that come closest to easy appeal might be: "Bluehender Kirschbaum" (II, 42; V, 47), "Immer wieder" (III, 4), "Der Feind" (III, 14), "Auf dem See" (I, 15; III, 8), "Gefunden" (IV, 47), "Erdgewalt" (II, 36; IV, 34), and "Zigeunerlied" (IV, 24), an uncanny Goethean vision complete with eery wolves and chilly howling. "Singers go like moths to the flame for short songs and quick sensations. It is the longer and more difficult things they should also give attention to." There are several of those in these volumes, songs "from other shores, that touch a mood we never had before."

Among Wolfes' many songs of long-range transport are "Moewenflug" (I, 42) with its gyrating illusoriness, the symbolism of "Blume, Baum, Vogel" (II, 1), the relentless passacaglia of "Ballade des aeusseren Lebens" (V, 21), the prescience of "In einer Daemmerstunde" (IV, 1), the oriental love-vision of "Oase El Djem" (IV, 11), the mystery of growth and decay in "Gelbe Rose"

(IV, 40), the lunar dream world of "Vergiss, vergiss" (IV, 17), the Chinese transparency of "Verschneiter Fluss" (IV, 21), the wafting fragrance of "Vorfruehling" (I, 31), the tearless weeping of "Stimme der Mutter" (III, 26) — to mention only a few.

How quick Wolfes' harmonies can be to catch the shades of words or an image like "reicht seine Aeste" (reaches its branches) or "in unermuedlich gleichen Gleisen" (in untiringly even circling). "These are the 'split harmonies' that Strauss would sometimes use," Wolfes explained. Even the dissonances are seen from tonality, the center. Tonality has been compared with the solar system. "There are in the universe billions of variant currents, but the planets are held to an orderly movement. There must always be in music, for me, the coming back to a center."

Wolfes' melodies derive directly from the opening words of the poem ("Fluegle, Zarte, hinaus" (II, 22), "Du schlank und rein wie eine Flamme" (I, 25). They curve yearningly upward and settle gently, never passing the limits of favorable vocal quality. They neither strain nor growl, but move in looping folds that give the singer full advantage. One may remember a strain here and there, but more haunting is the central mood of each song, woven by interlocking melodies.

No single aspect explains the richness and variety of Wolfes' songs. They are as diverse as they are inspired, and they invite the adventuresome singer to follow the art of the *Lied* from a ripe past into a long future.

Volume I — High Voice

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