COMPOSITIONAL DEVICES IN THE ART SONGS OF HUGO WOLF

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The art song genre reached its zenith with the works of the Romantic composer Hugo Wolf (1860-1903). He, like most art song composers, was interested in the relationship between text and music. His focus became creating art songs in which the text and music were of equal significance, and it is for this equality that his art songs are so highly praised. His dedication to poetry combined with his self-taught style created a new way of composing.

As a student of Music History and Literature I became interested in the new style of composition brought to the art song by Hugo Wolf. My investigation began with an interest in understanding the compositional devices used by Wolf that set his music apart from other composers of the genre. The Wolf scholarship available addresses some of the devices he used, but I was interested in knowing more. I set out to determine which compositional devices Wolf used, and found more than I had expected.

There are many devices which Wolf used occasionally and a few he used routinely. Due to the small scope of this paper I will discuss only some of his regular compositional devices. These devices can be divided into the following four groups: tonal, harmonic, melodic and rhythmic. Wolf’s key devices in tonality were modulations by thirds and tonal ambiguity. A text suggesting indecisiveness would justify avoiding the tonal center until the final bars of the piece. Harmonic devices he often used were chord alterations and irregular resolutions. Irregular resolutions would be used where there was an unexpected change in the mood of the text. Melodically Wolf used the common device of word-pointing along with associating intervals with specific emotions. In both melody and rhythm he used motives, where a specific melodic or rhythmic pattern is consistently used throughout his works to represent a certain object or emotion.

Identifying these devices helps us to better understand Wolf’s art songs and his overall compositional style. This understanding is also helpful in facilitating a more emotive presentation of his songs. This experience allowed me to gain a better understanding of the significance of Hugo Wolf’s style and accomplishments, as well as a better understanding of the work involved with musicological research.