

Complete-Edition-CD: "Wilhelm Furtwängler - Die Lieder"

English Booklet

Ute Neumerkel

Introduction – Editorial Notes

I am glad to offer you probably the first recording of the entire songs of Wilhelm Furtwängler. As a longstanding Furtwängler-admirer, I hope that many other connoisseurs of Furtwängler will enjoy these hitherto underrated works: compositions by the young Furtwängler, showing outstanding expression, warmth, depth and originality.

About half of the songs I deciphered myself from the manuscripts housed in the Zentralbibliothek Zürich. As an appendix, I recorded Furtwängler's very first attempts with voice and piano, interspersed with two early piano pieces (see the title list below). Probably 13 titles are issued for the first time.

As Furtwängler's lieder are - according to the chosen lyrical subjects - nearly all composed in an adagio or andante tempo, I decided to perform them singing and accompanying myself (except tracks 5 and 13). This is also how I prefer to perform songs in public. According to Furtwängler's ideas about organic development in music, all titles are performed as a whole, without any cutting.

I used a Bechstein-B-piano, built in 1928 which is very similar in shape, colour and - most importantly - sound to the one Wilhelm Furtwängler had played in Berlin and finally in Clarens. (The instrument can be seen at the "Welcome"-photo on my website www.uteneumerkel.de)

Several music lovers and Furtwängler-admirers are already enthusiastic about these recordings, above all some, who often had the opportunity to hear Furtwängler's concerts: These include his widow Elisabeth Furtwängler, his daughter Friederike Kunz and Prof. Werner Thärichen, solo-timpanist of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra since 1948. Prof. Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, who still sang under the direction of Furtwängler, also welcomes this publication.

„What I want to reach is the „soul“ of modern man.
To the soul you can only speak with the language of nature,
with a „natural“ one, not an artificial language.“

Wilhelm Furtwängler (Aufzeichnung 1953)

The Young Composer (abridged version in English)

Furtwängler's mother Adelheid being a painter, his father Adolf Furtwängler a famous archaeologist, Wilhelm grew up in an atmosphere of art and nature. His first home in Berlin, at the Nollendorfplatz, was at that time still surrounded by meadows and fields. The estate in München-Schwabing, where the family lived from 1894, lay in the middle of a wide meadow and had a splendid fountain. Here Wilhelm held a collection of various animals. Adolf Furtwängler undertook excursions and walking tours with his children, and Wilhelm liked to spend endless time in nature, especially during their stays at the Furtwängler's country house near the Tegernsee. Not only was Wilhelm in intense touch with the beauty of nature, but he was also surrounded by an exquisite choice of art, mainly: Greek Antiquity, Gothic style, Renaissance, paintings, classical literature, above all Goethe, romantic music (also played at the piano very intensely and spontaneously by his father) and Beethoven.

Little Wilhelm at the age of three is told to sing pure and convincing self-invented melodies, but his very first passion was drawing and painting, which he did all day long (Sadly, according to Elisabeth Furtwängler, not a single painting has been saved.). Until the age of seven, when he asked his mother to explain to him, how to write down notes. Wilhelm understood immediately, as if he had already known. From then on he began to compose little piano pieces, to improvise, to take piano lessons and was sure to become a composer.

After having consulted the reputed musicians Max von Schillings, Hermann Levi, Adolf Sandberger and Anton Beer-Walbrunn, Adolf Furtwängler withdrew him from school, and Wilhelm got private lessons from Walter Riezler, later from Ludwig Curtius. So Wilhelm had all the freedom to develop his talents individually. Moreover he got lessons in music theory and composition, and in violin. He finally was able to play violin sonatas of Mozart and the viola part in string quartets.

In June 1899 Wilhelm traveled to Berlin for an audition: Joseph Joachim and Max Bruch listened to his latest piano quartet and his violin sonata, but were the most impressed of Wilhelm's piano playing. Afterwards Wilhelm was for a short time the private pupil of Joseph Rheinberger, but he did not like to write dry fugues. 1902 Furtwängler came to Max von Schillings as his last teacher, who gave him more convenient "open" lessons. Furtwängler himself saw his teachers in the great composers: Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, Bruckner. Besides piano works he studied with ardour the scores of symphonies and string quartets. He also attended many concerts in Munich, among them much chamber music.

In the house of the sculpture artist Adolf von Hildebrand, Wilhelm made the acquaintance of his daughter Bertel, who was of the same age and composed lieder and song-plays. She was a congenial partner of conversation and his first love.

Bertel describes Wilhelm at the age of fifteen: "He was... very slim and tall; blond, wildly curled hair; very strong eye brows over his fiery, beautiful, expressive eyes; very flexible, he was an excellent skater. He made a very adult impression, was exceptionally intelligent and precocious, impressed with his extremely gifted personality. He had a triumphant side and impressed me enormously from the beginning." (Bertel, p.25) "His character was earnest, yet serene, though not joyous; very closed and lonesome and full of spiritual impressions... He had much humour, although not essentially. His eminent kindness stroke, it came from a pure heart which was able to extraordinary love... difficult to believe considering his self-willed nature, for from young age on he was very obstinate..." (Bertel p.36)

In September 1901 Wilhelm accompanies his father to his excavations in Aegina. Wilhelm enjoys the wonderful nature and stays alone with Beethoven's quartets and Goethe's poems.

In his diaries Adolf Furtwängler reports about Wilhelm's development from autumn 1900 to September 1901: Reflection and analysis hinder the flow of his compositional production which thus diminishes. Wilhelm distances from the formerly highly honoured romantics, from Brahms and Schubert, from all mere "sentimental", and Beethoven becomes his most admired composer. He is searching for the synthesis between sentiment and form, like Beethoven has found so ideally in his works.

In spring and summer 1902, Wilhelm resides in Florence where he continues to deal with his questions on form, nourished by the perfectly formed works of Michelangelo and by Adolf von Hildebrand who wrote a book about "The problem of form". His veneration for Beethoven increases: he admires the perfection of organic development as the result of a passionate fight, as found in the works of Beethoven as well as in those of Michelangelo. As a consequence Wilhelm can scarcely esteem his own works. He improvises very convincing, even polyphonic music, but does not write down much, and says that his own music is only an imitation of Beethoven, that "nothing new could be done after Beethoven".

As the famous conductor, the composer Wilhelm Furtwängler will always struggle to find time for composing and to accomplish his meanwhile huge and complex works.

Furtwängler's Lieder

It seems to be part of his developing musical maturity and outlook that Furtwängler stops composing lieder. From 1901 he composed only one lied and he does not complete the two sketches of "Wandrer's Nachtlied" written in 1900. In comparison to his later works, the lieder are written with naivety, probably out of his sincere and spontaneous feelings. This direct and simple translation of the text into music only adds to the charm and fascination of the lieder.

Furtwängler's lieder do not include the whole spectrum of expression of the young composer. His spirited and stormy side does not appear much. Most of the lieder are quiet or in moderate motion. In nine lieder Furtwängler indicates a slow tempo, in two of them „andante“, and in only two „allegro“. This relatively slow tempo average corresponds fully to the mostly contemplative lyrics about nature and life - which is indeed an astonishing choice of a man at this young age.

The lieder show the extraordinary talent of Furtwängler as a composer. Although he only makes use of the usual classical-romantic musical means and uses few playing patterns for the chords and has obviously very little knowledge of the singing voice (otherwise he would not so often write extremely uncomfortable passages for the voice), Furtwängler, nevertheless, creates amazingly convincing, expressive and original miniatures.

Several typical elements of Furtwängler's mature compositions can be found already in the lieder: The preference for a full bass and the low up to very low piano register, the tragic and religious character of some songs, passages of timeless vastness.

Perhaps the very directly touching effect of the lieder also comes from the young Furtwängler's „spiritual purity“ in experiencing music that Bertel von Hildebrand has observed: „One single chord or the mere diminishing of a fortissimo into pianissimo made him so devout. He was the most respectful musician I ever heard or knew...“

1 Falling Leaves

Composed as a duet for soprano and alto, who alternate most of the time or sing in thirds or sixths. So, substantially, it can be sung by one voice alone. At „Fallet sacht!“ („Fall gently!“) he imagines a „crescendo“ and thus probably an expression of deep sigh.

2 When Angels Play the Harp

Probably Furtwängler's first version of this text, where he obviously experiments with surprising changes in harmony and chromatic melody.

3 On the Lake

Furtwängler's fresh and dynamic composition also persuades by unexpected harmony changes. The middle part („slowly“) paints the sinking into dreams by a three halves measure, full sound in the lower register of the piano and the deep register for the voice as well.

4 Longing

A four-measure piano prelude was deleted in the final version. So it begins immediately with urging eighth-notes, while the soprano sings melancholic cantilenas. The painful longing develops into a more delightful one, which Furtwängler also expresses by a change of meter into lighter three quavers and by the major key in the very final part.

5 Reminiscence

The many variations of expression are mostly set into music by a corresponding chain of developing harmonies. To make these very concentrated sequences understandable and to find again enough momentum and flow, an abundant rubato is needed, which Furtwängler actually suggests (ritardando, pause sign).

6 Mist

Furtwängler paints the foggy, melancholic mood by very simple means: deep register and monotonous quavers in the piano part, convenient harmonies, a series of diminished third chords in pre- and postlude. A special effect can be heard at the beginning: the first bass octave in the piano prelude sounds still mistily after the first chords in the right hand.

7 Flying Sea-gulls

A contemplation of nature: at first the circling gulls, corresponding to floating eighth-notes of the voice above wave movements in triplets at the piano; then the reflections in the ocean. In the last part, the piano chords appear for a long time as syncopes above long bass notes, so that the rhythmic feeling for the meter is reduced and thus the impression of vastness and timelessness occurs .

8 Autumn Feeling

Furtwängler's last lied. In comparison to his earlier lieder he uses here more line in the piano part instead of the otherwise dominating homophonic chords. Furtwängler's delicate and transparent composition in 12 eighths cradle motion corresponds amazingly to the slightly melancholic idyll of Goethe's poem. The bass and discant voice of the piano part are exceptionnally distant and frame the tenor voice in the middle. To preserve this special sound arrangement, I transposed the lied for alto voice thus also lying in between the piano lines.

9 Wanderer's Nightsong I

I play the uncompleted composition like it has been noted, thus the singing voice sometimes stays without accompaniment. Of course, as a female singer I have to transpose an octave higher the original male voice noted in the bass key. Nevertheless, even this incomplete version affects deeply.

10 The Soldier

Dedicated to his mother at Christmas 1899. - More a dramatic scene than a lied, it highly challenges the singer already by using the range of two complete octaves. Due to ingenious harmonies and several effective climaxes Furtwängler found a thrilling musical performance of the tragic situation, not less exciting than the very different version of Robert Schumann, using more elaborate pianistic means.

11 The Sad Hunter

One more time we can admire the art of Furtwängler to obtain a rich expression by simplest means. He combines simple waltz accompaniment with melodic octaves in the discant, and we hear a kind of funeral march in three quavers with bells ringing far away. At the end, the same kind of piano accompaniment, only in major, evokes an impression of both uncanny and comforting tranquillity.

12 Reminder

It is the first time that Furtwängler composes a piano pre- and postlude, that paints the mood of the text in advance respectively heightens it at the end (at the highest note he marked *ff* – fortissimo).

13 The Fatherland

Dedicated to “dear Mammi” at Christmas 1896. – At times of Furtwängler’s youth, patriotism was quite normal. At Furtwängler’s home it was fortified by the veneration for the German giants Goethe, Schiller and Beethoven. The love for his native country, that Furtwängler felt his whole life, finds here a youthful, exuberant expression.

14 The Digger for Treasure

Furtwängler succeeded in a very impressive composition of the text, again by simplest means: one constant chord playing pattern and some ingenious harmony changes are the simple base for high intensity and culmination. The Schumann composition of the same text is in detail more poetical and rich, but Furtwängler’s dramatic climax is far more persuading.

As the piano sound has to be powerful, it is nearly impossible for the singer to mobilize enough volume in the low or even very low register, Furtwängler unfortunately chose. At the culminating point (*ff!*) the notes for the voice are still not in its most powerful register area. So to be able to mobilize some more sound, I decided to take a slower tempo. “It depends on how it sounds!”, this was Furtwängler’s answer to the question of Sergiu Celibidache “Which is the tempo here?”. Indeed, with a slower tempo both the singing voice and the piano chords get more dramatic weight and time to increase their power.

15 When Angels Play the Harp

This seems to be Furtwängler’s second version, because of its more skillful composition of the text. The unusual harmony changes also fit in organically. This time the angel music rises to winged serenity.

16 Patience

By using only harmony and register changes and one short tremolo interruption Furtwängler follows the changing aspects of the texts – modest means corresponding to the message of the poem. The long piano postlude continues to develop soulfully the mood of the last lines and thus reminds of Schumann’s postludes.

17 You, dear Friend, Send me Lieder

Furtwängler’s first lied with several surprising harmony changes, skillfully differentiated chord patterns and as a whole amazingly organic.

18 Ganymed

The uncompleted version of Furtwängler is performed without adding any notes. The singer voice (with the Goethe-text) is identical to the upper voice of the piano. The second verse (from “Ach, an deinem Busen”) has not been noted, Furtwängler only indicates: “Second verse”. So here the text syllables had to be coordinated with the melody notes. The time intervals at the transitions are not clear. It also stays an interesting question, how compact Furtwängler’s completed piano part would have been, especially in the beginning part, now of one single voice, with the indication “very free, recit(ativo)”. Several times Furtwängler uses gliding harmonies which are expressive, but need to be accustomed to: the short piano prelude begins in E flat and ends in D, the voice begins again in E flat. In the verse there are abrupt changes from B flat to B and from E flat to E.

19 Wanderers Nightsong II

Furtwängler's sketch contains the complete singing voice in violin key including the text and the bass notes with general bass numbers. Two times also the right hand has been noted, and finally the last piano chords. Moreover Furtwängler indicated "introduction" in front of the beginning and "Arpeggien" in the first measure. I decided to play only all notes indicated by Furtwängler and the numbered bass notes in octaves, to get some chord sound without adding notes. This pure essence of the piece has touched me so much that I find it worth publishing.

Appendix: Earliest Lieder and Piano Pieces

20 Adagio

An early piano piece, as I find, already similar to the later Furtwängler, in spite of its simplicity. It only consists in brokenly played chords with some transition notes. The indicated tempo (eighths = 44) is extremely slow, but actually gives melodic expression to those simple chord notes, and at the fortissimo culminating points, they get quasi tragical weight. Thus a minimalistic soul drama develops.

21 Exhausted Tears

An astonishing topic for a nine year old boy! The lyrics of an unknown poet begin: "I want to weep once more like a child." Further on there is regret about the mute suffering, but the last line says that it is merely the eye that can no more weep, and at that moment the music brings a little cry. Composed in the simplest possible way, though effective, by bass octaves and the pure melody notes, conserving the rhythm of the text.

22 A little Piece about Animals

According to his mother, Furtwängler wrote this piece immediately after her first introduction into notes and notation. He dedicated it to his father on the occasion of his birthday. At that time the meaning of note duration, pauses, measure and word accentuation was obviously not clear. Anyway, he finds a lively musical version of this children verse, figuring singing, laughing and dancing mice and snails, then drinking tables, and finally slippers under the bed.

23 The Violet

"Beautiful violet, I get accustomed to you; and when you are the most beautiful, mama will not forget you and take care of you, so that you become more beautiful." This is the text of an unknown poet (Furtwängler?). The warm and naïve love of a child is well set into music, by simple thirds and dominant-tonic changes.

24 Waltz

Furtwängler's teacher Max von Schillings was embarrassed about the fact that in Furtwängler's world only the most precious and holiest existed. Thus he occasionally sighed: "If he just once composed a waltz!" – Here it is! The quavers of the left hand in the first part are noted with staccato points. The lonely quaver at the end of the first part is quite strange.

For further information or any comments please mail to fu-cd@uteneumerkel.de

Translation: Ute Neumerkel

Only for private use! Any reproduction, publication or commercial use of the texts is prohibited.

Copyright for all the texts: Ute Neumerkel