

Richard Wagner's "Wesendonck Lieder"

The perfect synthesis between the Master and his Muse

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Heather J Baldwin

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Chair: Dr. Julia Broxholm

Co-Chair: Professor Joyce Castle

Dr. Genaro Mendez

Dr. Roberta Schwartz

Dr. Jerel Hilding

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The dissertation committee for Heather J Baldwin certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

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Abstract

Richard Wagner published his *Fünf Gedichte für eine Frauenstimme* in 1862. The texts for this work are the poems of Mathilde Wesendonck, the wife of his benefactor Otto Wesendonck. Wagner's romantic feelings for Mathilde are discussed at length by scholars concerning the creation of his opera *Tristan und Isolde*, but less attention has been given to these songs, which were written simultaneously. This document gives detailed insight into the lives of both Wagner and Mathilde during the time these songs were written and how they are intertwined with the music and text of *Tristan und Isolde*. A thorough analysis of Mathilde's poetry reveals her mutual feelings for Wagner. The poetry of the songs was directly influenced by the libretto for the opera, which in turn was influenced by the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, particularly his idea of the renunciation of the will. The synthesis of Wagner's music and Mathilde's poetry is the masterpiece produced from their unconsummated affair.

In 1862 Richard Wagner published five songs for voice and piano, entitled *Fünf Gedichte für eine Frauenstimme* (Five poems for woman's voice). The poetry for the songs came from Mathilde Wesendonck, his friend and the wife of his benefactor, Otto Wesendonck. While Wagner is known primarily for his composition of opera, he also wrote a few instrumental works and a handful of songs. Most of them are incidental pieces that were commissions or for special occasions; however, the composer gave these Lieder very specific attention compared to his other songs. In a letter to Franz Liszt, Wagner mentions the poetry and the task of setting it to music. "Certain pretty verses, which were sent to me, I have set to music, which I never happened to."¹ It is clear that he was inspired in some way to pause his work he was doing on his opera *Siegfried* and suddenly write Lieder on someone else's text, something he almost never did. He considered the work to be a masterpiece and took great pride in it at the time, designating two of the pieces as a "study for Tristan and Isolde" on the score. In one of his letters on October 9, 1858 he writes, "Better than these songs, I have never done, and only very few of my works can be put aside".²

Wagner's true inspiration to write these pieces was his love for Mathilde Wesendonck. Evidence shows that both Richard and Mathilde had very strong feelings for each other, but never crossed the line of decorum and the relationship was never consummated. In fact, it is the lack thereof that gives these songs, as well as his opera *Tristan und Isolde*, their emotional power. Richard had introduced Mathilde to the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer through his book *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*. It was through this philosophy that Wagner became obsessed with the idea of the renunciation of the will. The basic idea is that nature, and man, through the will to live, experience suffering, and to relieve it must deny the will. In addition to these basic tenants, he also declared the arts, particularly music, as an expression of the will. Apryl Heath discusses Schopenhauer's view of music creation in relation to the other arts:

1 Martha Schad, *Meine erste und einzige Liebe: Richard Wagner und Mathilde Wesendonck*, translation by the author (München: Langen Müller, 2002), 43.

2 Ibid.

Schopenhauer asserts that music, the supreme art, does not observe and reproduce a Platonic Idea. Instead, it *is* a Platonic Idea. Music is transcendent just as the artistic genius is transcendent when he “contemplates.” Schopenhauer does not emphasize the composer's relationship to music as he does the artists' relationship to the inferior arts because music exists itself on a transcendent level.³

It is not difficult to understand Wagner's interest in this philosophy, given his circumstances at the time: constant depression, exile from Germany, an unhappy marriage, and Schopenhauer's emphasis on the art of music. In chapter seven of his essay *Oper und Drama*, Wagner describes music as a woman, and man the poet. His analogy is very vivid, with descriptions of French, Italian and German melody as the Coquette, Harlot and Prude, respectively. He states, “...what kind of woman should true music be? ...one who truly loves, whose virtue is in her pride, whose pride is in her sacrifice, and whose sacrifice is one to which, not a part, but the whole, of her being in the richest fullness of its capacity, is devoted – in conception.”⁴ He goes on to add, “We stop, however, purposely at this place, in order to put the fundamental inquiry, as to who the man ought to be, whom the woman must so unconditionally love?...We shall therefore closely consider – the Poet.”⁵ Wagner's idea of the perfect union of Poet and Music, male and female, combined with the ideas of Schopenhauer's theme of renunciation, is the foundation on which the *Fünf Gedichte* and *Tristan und Isolde* are created.

Both of these compositions were written at the same time, influencing each other both textually and musically. The works themselves are autobiographical accounts of a renounced love that achieves its union only in the music. If indeed Wagner believed that the union of poetry and music were akin to the sexual love of a man and a woman, then these pieces are the product of that belief. While the two lovers could not be together in this life, they will forever be connected in these beautiful songs. In the following pages I will reveal the individuals involved and a chronological look at the genesis and completion of the songs, in addition to his opera *Tristan und Isolde*, since the two pieces are so

3 Apryl Lea Denny Heath, “Phelps, Browning, Schopenhauer and Music,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 22, no. 2 (1985), 211.

4 Richard Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, translated by Edwin Evans (London, New Temple Press, 1913), 191.

5 Ibid.

inseparable.

Agnes Mathilde Wesendonck was born in Elberfeld on December 23, 1828 to Carl and Johanna Luckemeyer. Her father was a businessman who ran a freight forwarding company. He founded the steam shipping company that supported the Middle and Lower Rhine, giving him status and respect in his community. He was politically active and given the title of Councilor of Commerce. Her mother, the daughter of the founder of the banking house Johann Heinrich Stein in Cologne, was from a respected family. Mathilde was one of four children and grew up privileged and highly educated, attending a girls' boarding school in Dunkirk with her sister, Marie. While attending the wedding of her cousin, Emilie Schnitzler, in late 1847 she met Otto Wesendonck, born on March 16, 1815 to Karl and Sophia Wesendonck in Elberfeld, and thirteen years her elder. He was a very successful businessman, representing the import silk firm Loeschigk, Wesendonck & Company until the mid-1860's.

Prior to her marriage to Otto she went by Agnes; however, Otto asked her to change it after their engagement. It seems that his first wife, Mathilde Eckhard from Krefeld, tragically died of typhoid fever on their honeymoon in Italy in 1844. Six weeks after they met they announced their engagement in January the following year, and their wedding in May of 1849. It was only six months later, on November 27, that their first child, Paul was born; unfortunately he didn't live to see his first birthday. The couple had four more children over the course of the next several years; Myrrha, their only daughter was born in 1851, followed by three sons, Guido (1855), Karl (1857) and Hans (1862).

The Wesendoncks are often referred to as “very agreeable” and were respected in social circles in Germany, New York and Zurich. Mathilde was remembered by a friend as “a woman of refined and poetic beauty; slender and graceful and with a lovely winning smile, the kind of woman who exercises a charm over every circle she enters.”⁶ The couple was much loved by their friends, and they held gatherings that included very distinguished attendees. They were both interested in politics and the arts,

⁶ Gustav Kobbé, *Wagner and his Isolde* (New York, NY: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1905), 8.

and their abundant wealth allowed them to support various artists and causes. Due to their political efforts and support of the German speaking people in Zurich during the Franco-German war of 1870, they were forced to move from their famed Villa Wesendonck in Zurich, also called “the Green Hill.” A group of angry people threatened to burn the family home, and under the protection of -the Swiss military they escaped in the middle of the night with their children to the Hotel Baur au Lac.⁷ The estate was sold and they moved to Dresden; the Wesendoncks spent the rest of their lives in various areas of Germany.

Mathilde lived a charmed life; however, it was not without tragedy. She endured the death of all but one of her children. The first child was lost in infancy, then Guido died of sickness just before his third birthday. Years later the news came to her that her son, Hans, had died of pneumonia in February of 1882 at only 20 years of age. Unfortunately, Mathilde, Otto and their daughter were in Egypt at the time to allow Myrrha a climate in which to improve her health, and they were unable to return in time for the funeral. The family's devastation was so great that they could not bear to live in their house in Dresden and decided to move to Berlin. Then, in 1888, Otto and Mathilde lost their only daughter, Myrrha, to illness on a trip to Munich. Only Karl was left of their five children, and he looked after his parents in their aging years. Otto lived to be 81 years old and passed away in 1896. He remained a supporter of Wagner for many years, attending performances throughout his life as well as aiding him financially, including his patronage of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus. Mathilde outlived her husband, Richard, four of her children, and some of her dearest friends: Eliza Wille, who died on Mathilde's birthday in 1894, and Mary Burrell, in 1898. Mathilde herself died peacefully on August 31st, 1902 at the age of 73, and she is buried with her family in Bonn. Hans von Wolzogen wrote a touching obituary in the *Bayreuth Blättern*, “A noble woman – a noble soul.” Another obituary written by Marie von Bunsen states, “Wagner's friend and benefactress, Mathilde Wesendonck, no longer lives. What

⁷ Shad, *Meine erste und einzige Liebe*, 79.

Mathilde Wesendonck means in Richard Wagner's life has always given her a golden background in my eyes, but this one moment by no means exhausts its value.”⁸

In addition to the legacy of being Wagner's muse, she was a writer and poet in her own right. She published two books of the same name titled, *Gedichte, Volkslieder, Legenden, Sagen*; one in 1862 the second in 1874. She also wrote some children stories and plays, *Märchen und Märchenspiele*, along with various other works, such as *Der Baldur-Mythos, Genovefa, Gudrun, Friedrich der Grosse, Alkestis*, and *Naturmythen*. Today she is known only for her song texts and correspondence, and many have downplayed her abilities; however, she worked hard to establish herself as an intellectual woman in a world where a female's role was as a caretaker and hobbyist. Her fascination with Wagner was likely propelled by the fact that he took her seriously and spoke to her as a person of intelligence, discussing many ideas with her and teaching her various aspects of poetry and writing, philosophy and music.

Richard Wagner was born in Leipzig, Germany on May 22, 1813. His mother was Johanna Rosine and his father was believed to be Carl Friedrich Wagner, who died shortly after his birth of a fever. He was raised by his “step-father,” Ludwig Geyer, who was a friend of Carl Wagner; however, it is unclear if Ludwig and Johanna ever officially married. Wagner's love of the theater was likely cultivated by his step-father, an actor and painter, and his musical education started with piano lessons in his youth. Upon his step-father's death he was sent to boarding school, where he was introduced to the works of Shakespeare and Goethe, and became familiar with opera through Weber's *Der Freischütz*. He began to take harmony lessons from Christian Gottlieb Müller in 1828; during his theoretical studies he became very interested in Beethoven, and would remain so for the rest of his life. In 1831 he began study at Leipzig University, taking composition lessons with Theodor Weinlig and beginning work on his first opera, *Die Hochzeit*, which was left unfinished.

8 Ibid., 95.

Scholars have extensively discussed his personality and beliefs. He is often described as an egotistic, narcissistic, arrogant, anti-Semitic, difficult man with extreme mood swings. He craved being the center of attention in all situations. However, his contemporaries spoke very highly of him, and many individuals seemed to essentially worship him. Apparently, he had a very polarizing personality; he was either loved or despised by those that met him. In Stewart Spencer's collection of memories of the composer, there are a few of note. Robert Schumann said, "he possesses a tremendous gift of the gab and is full of oppressive ideas; it's impossible to listen to him for any length of time."⁹ Conversely, Eduard Hanslick recalls a conversation with Wagner about his acquaintance with Schumann,

On a superficial level we're on excellent terms; but you can't converse with Schumann: he's an impossible person, he never says anything. I called on him soon after my arrival from Paris and told him all manner of interesting things about the Paris Opera, about concerns and composers – but Schumann just looked at me without moving a muscle or stared straight ahead and said nothing. So I got up and left. An impossible person.¹⁰

It seems likely that Wagner was not a solid judge of social cues and in his passion for any given subject would dominate conversations. Some have considered various psychological disorders in an attempt to diagnose his unusual behaviors, such as bipolar disorder, borderline personality disorder, and even ADHD.¹¹

It is clear that his zeal for music, text and drama was all consuming. He was not financially stable and wished nothing more than to compose for a living. Wagner asked for money from many of his friends, making himself a burden on others throughout most of his life. He was exiled from Germany for his involvement in the May uprising in Dresden in 1849. He first escaped to Paris and then later settled in Zurich where he would spend the next decade of his life. Although unable to stage operas in his homeland, he was able to pressure friends to continue doing so during his exile. He had already written and staged *Rienzi*, *Der fliegende Holländer*, and *Tannhäuser*. He finished *Lohengrin*

9 Stewart Spencer, *Wagner Remembered* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 45.

10 Ibid, 46.

11 Daniel John Carroll, "The Psychopathology of Richard Wagner" *The Wagnerian*. <http://www.the-wagnerian.com/2012/08/the-psychopathology-of-richard-wagner.html>

prior to the political dissent and was forced to leave before staging the work; he asked his friend, Franz Liszt, to do so for him. Wagner conducted concerts in various cities, often with sections from his own operas on the program, in order to ensure that his music was heard. He also wrote essays such as *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (*The Artwork of the Future*) in 1849 and *Oper und Drama* (*Opera and Drama*) in 1850. This is also around the time that the idea of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* began to take shape.

Zurich was a haven for many people looking to avoid the conflicts and political unrest occurring in Germany and the surrounding areas. It was a beautiful location that bloomed with life, and it became a social center of Europe during this time. Wagner met the young Wesendonck couple when he conducted a series of concerts at the Music Society, since his young friend Karl Ritter was not sufficiently able to do so. In Judith Cabaud's biography of Mathilde she relates the young woman's impressions of hearing the overture to *Tannhäuser*, "Never shall I forget my first impressions of *Tannhäuser* under his direction in the darkened concert hall of Zurich's Kunsthau. My heart was filled with joy and happiness. It was like a revelation. We were all galvanized by the master's charm."¹² In the same recollections she describes poet Charles Baudelaire's memories of the same performance,

What particularly struck me, was its greatness. It represents what is great and leads to what is great. Everywhere in your works I found the solemnity of great sounds, the grand aspects of Nature and the solemnity of the great passions of man. One is immediately enraptured and enthralled...I felt...the joy of understanding, to feel myself penetrated, imbued by a true sensual voluptuousness, like flying in the air or sailing on the sea.¹³

It is clear that people connected with Wagner's music on a visceral level, and he garnered a fervent group of followers. Those who recognized the genius in Wagner's music were able to look past any shortcomings in his personality; among those were Otto and Mathilde Wesendonck.

Their friendship began in 1852, and for the first few years they spent time visiting at dinner and various excursions. Most of the letters from this time are invitations to dinner, or evening visits where

¹² Judith Cabaud, *Mathilde Wesendonck: Isolde's Dream* (Milwaukee: Amadeus Press, 2017), 40.

¹³ Ibid.

Wagner would read aloud verse that he had written, play music that he was working on, or just talk about whatever happened to be on his mind. During the early years of their friendship Wagner became a teacher of sorts to Mathilde, introducing her to new ideas or elaborating on subjects with which she was already familiar. Common topics were the works of Beethoven, the classical poetry of Goethe, the philosophy of Schopenhauer, and always, his new ideas and creation of works.

In 1853 Wagner presented Mathilde with a piano sonata that he had written for her. Though not a masterpiece, it does contain some beautiful melodies; however, it was for Mathilde to play and as she was not an advanced pianist, it is not a piece of great complexity. He presented it to Otto with the message, “For the album of Frau Mathilde Wesendonck. To inaugurate with dignity my new debt and be worthy of your trust, I am going to pay off a former one. Give the enclosed sonata to your wife, my first composition since *Lohengrin* (six years ago).”¹⁴ Mathilde sent a letter to Wagner's wife, Minna, to thank him for his composition, and she inquired about a short bit of music and text written at the top of the page. It was a fragment that later appears in the first scene of the Norns in *Götterdämmerung*. “Wisst Ihr, wie das wird?”, (Do you know what will happen?). In this scene the Norns are pulling on the thread of destiny, and as they continue to tug, it breaks. Since Wagner seems to put such specific significance on events, dates and musical phrases such as this, it can be inferred that this means something specific to him; however, at the time Mathilde was unsure what the clue meant.

The sonata is in A-flat Major, a key that will become quite important in the study of *Tristan und Isolde* and the *Wesendonck Lieder*. In addition to the key, suspended harmonic movement in measure 39 (See Example 1) is associated with the “Invocation of the Night” motive used in song five of the *Lieder*, “Träume” and the Act II “Love Duet” from *Tristan und Isolde*. This cadence seemingly comes out of nowhere before the key change for the next section. Prior to this cadence an A-flat pedal tone, also common in “Träume”, continues for 15 measures before an arpeggiation on an A-flat chord leads

14 Cabaud, *Mathilde Wesendonck*, 58.

to measure 29.



Example 1: Richard Wagner, *Eine Sonate für das Album von Frau MW*, WWV 85, mm.29-39 ¹⁵

Over time the families became close friends, and at some point the friendship between Mathilde, the young aspiring poet, and Richard, the genius composer, blossomed. More and more, Wagner left little clues and secret connections in his work on *Die Walküre* with initials such as “W.d.n.w.G.!!” discovered to mean “Wenn du nicht wärst, Geliebte!!” (if it were not for you, my Beloved!!). In another scene are the initials “I.l.d.gr.” meaning “Ich liebe dich grenzenlos” (I love you infinitely). When Siegmund and Sieglinde look at each other, he writes “L.d.m.M.?? i.e., “Liebst du mich, Mathilde??” (do you love me, Mathilde??), and when Sieglinde and Siegmund are left alone he notates, “G.w.h.d.m.verl.??” “Geliebte, warum hast du mich verlassen??” (my love, why have you forsaken me??).¹⁶ These little notes, like those of a young lover writing in the margin of their textbook, show that he was constantly thinking of the young wife of his benefactor. Something about her presence inspired him to creative fervor.

Between 1853 and 1854 the Wesendonck family purchased an estate that would later be called “The Green Hill”. An adjoining house was provided for Wagner and Minna, which became known as “Asyl”; they took up residence in April 1857. The Wesendonck's moved into their newly built villa a

¹⁵ Richard Wagner, *Eine Sonate für das Album von Frau M.W.*, WWV 85 (Mainz: Schott, 1878).

¹⁶ Cabaud, *Mathilde Wesendonck*, 64.

few months later, in August. Cabaud mentions that this is where “neighborly relations took an intimate turn. Wagner would write little notes to Mathilde to tell her whether he had slept well or if he was running a fever, or even simply to ask what the weather would be that day. She would send him little gifts, presents that could also be accepted by Minna, but that Richard would interpret as he wished.”¹⁷

Wagner had started working on the libretto for *Tristan und Isolde*, inspired by his infatuation with Mathilde and his obsession with the idea of renunciation and the ultimate expression of love. He began the prose sketch of the libretto on August 20 and finished it in less than a month, on September 18, and read it aloud to Mathilde. This date is of great importance, as is seen in his Venice Diary entry on September 18, 1858, after he had left the “Asyl”

A year gone by today I finished the poem of Tristan and brought thee its last act, thou led'st me to the chair before the sofa, placedst thy arm around me and saidst: “I no more have a wish!”- On this day, at this hour, was I born anew. -To then was my before-life: from then began my after-life: in that wondrous instant alone did I live...A gracious woman, shy and diffident, had taken heart to cast herself into a sea of griefs and sorrows, to shape for me that precious instant when she said: I love thee! - thus didst thou vow thyself to death, to give me life; thus did I receive thy life, thence forward from the world to part with thee, to suffer with thee, die with thee. - At once the spell of longing was dissolved!...thank to thee thou gracious, loving angel!-¹⁸

In this letter Wagner give us tremendous insight into the conversation and events that occurred at this private reading. From his perspective she was overcome with emotion and literally confessed her love for him in that moment. Unfortunately there is not much written documentation of her side of things. Few of Mathilde's letters to him survive, and none give a tremendous amount of insight into her true feelings; however, a deeper look into her poetry and stories reveals a deep consistent pattern of longing and unattainable love in the years following her interactions with Wagner. The first poems of this type are the ones set by Wagner in 1857 and 1858, immediately after finishing the prose for *Tristan und Isolde*.

The first poem presented to Wagner was given to him in November of 1857, approximately two

17 Cabaud, *Mathilde Wesendonck*, 95.

18 Richard Wagner, *Richard Wagner to Mathilde Wesendonck*, translated by William Ashton Ellis (London: H. Grevel, 1905), 42-43.

months after the emotional reading of *Tristan und Isolde*. The text is as follows:

In der Kindheit frühen Tagen
Hört ich oft von Engeln sagen,
Die des Himmels hehre Wonne
Tauschen mit der Erdensonne,

In childhood's early days,
I often heard them speak of angels
Who would exchange Heaven's sublime bliss
For the Earth's sun

Dass, wo bang ein Herz in Sorgen
Schmachtet vor der Welt verborgen,
Dass, wo still es will verbluten,
Und vergehn in Tränenfluten,

So that, when an anxious heart in dread
Is full of longing, hidden from the world;
So that, when it wishes silently to bleed
And melt away in a trickle of tears;

Dass, wo brünstig sein Gebet
Einzig um Erlösung fleht,
Da der Engel niederschwebt,
Und es sanft gen Himmel hebt.

So that, when its prayer ardently
Pleads only for release,
Then the angel floats down
And gently lifts it to Heaven.

Ja, es stieg auch mir ein Engel nieder,
Und auf leuchtendem Gefieder
Führt er, ferne jedem Schmerz,
Meinen Geist nun himmelwärts!

Yes, an angel has come down to me,
And on glittering wings
It leads, far away from every pain,
My soul now heavenward!¹⁹

This poem is in a consistent trochaic meter, meaning a duple pattern of stressed syllables, followed by a non-stressed syllable. It is four stanzas of two pairs of couplets with the rhyme scheme aabb, ccdd, eeff, gghh. Most of the couplets contain feminine endings, meaning they end on a weak syllable; however, the third stanza, as well as the last couplet, have masculine endings. Poetically there seems to be no particular reason for this, since it is not consistent throughout the second two stanzas. The footing is four feet per line throughout, something that will remain consistent through other four poems.

In discovering the poetic elements within the work, it is important to understand a few things about German Romantic poetry, the style in which Richard and Mathilde were familiar. The common themes and imagery consist of “the Evocative World of Nature,” “the Seductiveness of Mystery,” “Heightened Individuality,” and “Spiritual Salvation.”²⁰ Deborah Stein discusses some specific metaphors associated with these themes: “the theme of Heightened Individuality is dramatized by the

19 Richard Wagner, *Wesendonck Lieder*, translated by Emily Ezust, *The LiederNet Archive*, last modified June 2014, accessed November 9, 2017. http://www.lieder.net/lieder/assemble_texts.html?LanguageId=7&SongCycleId=287.

20 Deborah Stein and Robert Spillman, *Poetry into Song* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), vii.

figure of the Wanderer; the Evocative World of Nature is typified by the Lonely Forest; the Seductiveness of Mystery is represented by the Night; and Spiritual Salvation is projected by Yearning for Peaceful Death.”²¹ Another important concept is the “fundamental features of the Romantic soul, the insatiable quest to go beyond what is known and the embrace of the contradictory.”²² This poem's primary theme is that of spiritual salvation and the longing for peaceful death. The first stanza is written in first person, how as a child she would hear stories of angels that would give up the bliss of Heaven to come to Earth. The second stanza then focuses on the pain of humanity, the anxious heart hidden from the world, and its silent wish to bleed and melt in a flood of tears. The third stanza continues with the heart's fervent prayer for release and then the angel will float down to take it to Heaven. It is in the fourth stanza that the melancholy tone suddenly changes: “Yes, an angel on shining wings has come to me and leads me free from every pain, my spirit Heavenwards!” It is clear that this refers to Wagner, or at the very least he believed it to be about him. This last line in particular fits the theme of “yearning for peaceful death.”

Wagner wrote the music at the end of November, shortly after receiving the poem from Mathilde. The piece begins with arpeggiated chords in G major, evoking the sound of a harp. The score is marked '*Sehr ruhig bewegt*,' meaning “very quiet with movement” and in the piano accompaniment the marking is '*sehr zart und weich*,' meaning “soft and smooth.” The vocal line seems to float above the piano in a beautiful legato melody for the first stanza. On the word '*Engel*,' which occurs three times in the piece there is a leap of a fourth. The second instance has an additional fourth leap up to a G, the highest note in the piece, on the phrase “*da der Engel nieder schwebt*” (there an angel floats down), which adds text painting to the phrase as the voice gently descends at the end of the line. The accompaniment becomes more active in the second stanza, with repeated eighth notes entering as the lyrics depict the anxious heart and pain. This section modulates to g minor before making its way

21 Ibid, 6.

22 Ibid, 5.

through d minor and winding through a few more tonal shifts before returning to G major. It is interesting to note that he brings the music back to the opening section, with the same accompaniment and tonality, before the final stanza begins. Robert Cart mentions in his analysis of the work that the opening of “Der Engel” is similar to the beginning of the prelude to *Das Rheingold*.²³ There are certainly some similarities between the two, such as the marking '*ruhig heitere Bewegung*,' (“calm, cheerful movement”), and the gradual arpeggiation of the chords from the bass to the treble register, as seen in Example 2. The harp-like texture of this piece is meant to evoke a heavenly presence to match the text of the poetry. The same arpeggiation returns in the third section of the piece giving it a rounded overall form. This section returns to G major, but moves through different harmonic areas compared to the first section.



Example 2: Richard Wagner, *Das Rheingold*, mm. 1-22.²⁴

The final melodic phrase of the Lied is directly linked to the ending and postlude of Wolfram's aria in *Tannhäuser*, “O du mein holder Abendstern.” The final phrase in “Der Engel,” as seen in Example 3, is a typical cadential melody; however, the link can be found in the rhythm, the key and the meaning of the text (See Example 4 below). As night falls and Wolfram is left alone, darkness sets in and the stars come out. He fears that Elizabeth will die and prays to the Evening Star to greet her on her way to the Heavens.

23 Robert Cart, “Dreams: Richard Wagner's Five Poems by Mathilde Wesendonck an Analysis by Robert Cart,” *Artsong Update*, accessed October 28, 2017. <http://www.artsongupdate.org/Articles/WesendonkLiederRobertCart.htm>.

24 Richard Wagner, *Das Rheingold* (Mainz: B. Schott's Söhne, 1861).

O du, mein holder Abendstern,
wohl grüsst'ich immer dich so gern:
vom Herzen, das sie nie verriet,
grüsse sie, wenn sie vorbei dir zieht,
wenn sie entschwebt dem Tal der Erden,
ein sel'ger Engel dort zu werden

O you, my fair evening star,
Gladly have I always greeted you:
Greet her, from the depths of this heart,
Which has never betrayed her,
Greet her, when she passes,
When she soars above this mortal vale
to become a holy Angel there!²⁵



Example 3: Richard Wagner, “Der Engel,” mm. 38-40.²⁶

Example 4: “Tannhäuser” Act 3, scene II, mm. 67-77.²⁷

Wolfram is asking the heavens- in this case, the evening star- to carry his love to her as she ascends to become an angel. This is similar to Mathilde's “Der Engel,” where her spirit is carried heavenward lead by an angel; in this case, Wagner. We can see that musically Wagner ties Mathilde to the character of Elizabeth, something he was known to do with other heroines in his operas, such as Brünnhilde, Isolde, and Eva.

Wesendonck presented the second poem, “Träume,” to the master at the beginning of December

25 Richard Wagner, “O du, mein holder Abendstern” *Tannhäuser*, translated by Richard Stokes (Oxford Lieder Online 2017, accessed November 9, 2017), <https://www.oxfordlieder.co.uk/song/1393>.

26 Richard Wagner, “Der Engel” *Fünf Gedichte für eine Frauenstimme*, (Braunschweig: Litolf, 1914), mm.38-40.

27 Richard Wagner, *Tannhäuser*, (Leipzig, C.F. Peters, 1920) Act 3, Scene II, mm. 67-77.

1857. Wagner had set the poem to music by the fifth. The text is as follows:

Sag, Welch wunderbare Träume
Halten meinen Sinn umfangen,
Dass sie nicht wie leere Schäume
Sind in ödes Nichts vergangen?

Tell me, what kind of wondrous dreams
are embracing my senses,
that have not, like sea-foam,
vanished into desolate Nothingness?

Träume, die in jeder Stunde,
Jedem Tage schöner blühen,
Und mit ihrer Himmelskunde
Selig durchs Gemüte ziehn!

Dreams, that with each passing hour,
each passing day, bloom fairer,
and with their heavenly tidings
roam blissfully through my heart!

Träume, die wie hehre Strahlen
In die Seele sich versenken,
Dort ein ewig Bild zu malen:
Allvergessen, Eingedenken!

Dreams which, like holy rays of light
sink into the soul,
there to paint an eternal image:
forgiving all, thinking of only One!

Träume, wie wenn Frühlingssonne
Aus dem Schnee die Blüten küsst,
Dass zu nie geahnter Wonne
Sie der neue Tag begrüsst,

Dreams which, when the Spring sun
kisses the blossoms from the snow,
so that into unsuspected blissfully
they greet the new day,

Dass sie wachsen, dass sie blühen,
Träumend spenden ihren Duft,
Sanft an diener Brust verglühn,
Und dann sinken in die Gruft.

so that they grow, so that they bloom,
and dreaming, bestow their fragrance,
these dreams gently glow and fade on your breast,
and then sink into the grave.²⁸

The structure of the poem is similar to “Der Engel.” There are four feet to a line throughout.

There are five stanzas with an abab structure to each quatrain. Many of the words display double rhyme, where the last two syllables match, such as “umfangen” and “vergangen.” The first three stanzas all have feminine endings to each line, but stanzas four and five show an alternation of feminine and masculine endings. The main theme of this poem is that of the “Seductiveness of Mystery,” that of the Night, and dreams. The theme of Nature pervades this text, with reference to rays of sunlight, blooms from the snow, and kisses like spring sun. References to “Spiritual Salvation” can be found here as well in the lines “with their heavenly tidings” and “paint with their eternal image.” Peaceful death is referenced at the end: “then sinking down into the grave.”

28 Mathilde Wesendonck, “Traume”, translated by Emily Ezust (The LiederNet Archive, accessed November 9, 2017) http://www.lieder.net/lieder/assemble_texts.html?LanguageId=7&SongCycleId=287

The influence of Schopenhauer's philosophy, and the many discussions they must have had concerning the plot of the opera where the lovers could only be together in death, obviously influenced this text. There is an interesting link to the letter of September 18, 1858, where Wagner states, "On this day, at this hour, I was born anew," in the text of the second stanza: "Dreams, that with each hour, each day fairer bloom." This choice of words cannot be coincidence, as Wagner also speaks of the very themes found in the opera *Tristan und Isolde*: "thus didst thou vow thyself to death, to give me life; thus did I receive thy life, thence forward from the world to part with thee, to suffer with thee, die with thee." The ending to this poem quite deliberately contains a double meaning, as is the final ending of the opera.

The musical themes in "Traume" are placed at specific pivotal moments in the opera. The sixteen measure introduction of the Lied contains the "Evocation of the Night" motive, as seen in the first six measures of Example 5. The rising line of the diminished 7th chord on F concludes with a characteristic suspension from E-flat to D-flat. This cadential gesture was also used in the piano sonata that Wagner composed for Mathilde in 1853 (See Example 1 above). Here the suspension is linked to the word "träume" throughout the piece. Each time the word is sung it is at a higher pitch level, until it reaches an F5 descending to an E-flat. This moment is the textual and musical climax of the work. The text just before this moment is "Allvergessen, Eingedenken!" (forgetting all, remembering only one). This eludes to the sweet oblivion of the night, the mystery that allows the lovers to be together against the "insolent day."

Throughout this piece there are also references to another motive found in *Tristan und Isolde*. Two motives that are associated with "day" will be discussed here. The first is a dotted rhythmic figure (see Example 6). A similar pattern is used throughout the piece, particularly in places that make mention of the day, sun, or spring. However, the piece begins and ends in A-flat Major, the key of night, which is also the key of the Piano Sonata WWV 85. Wagner ascribed to the idea of affective key

associations, as did many composers before him. According to Christian Schubart's *Ideen zu einer Aesthetik der Tonkunst* of 1806, A-flat Major is the key of the grave.²⁹ While Schubart likely meant the key of mortal death, Wagner clearly glorifies death both in the Lied and the opera. Wagner wrote on the sketch of this piece before publication that it was a “sketch for *Tristan und Isolde*,” along with the poem “Im Treibhaus.” He uses the “Invocation of Night” motive in the melody for the Act II Love Duet “O sink' hernieder” (Example 7).



Example 5: Wagner, “Traume,” mm. 1-9.



Example 6: Wagner “*Tristan und Isolde*”, mm. 816-829.³⁰



Example 7: Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*, Act II, mm. 1122-1127³¹

29 Christian Schubart, *Ideen zu einer Aesthetik der Tonkunst* (1806), translated by Rita Steblin, UMI Research Press, 1983.

Accessed online Jan. 24, 2018, <http://www.wmich.edu/mus-theo/courses/keys.html>.

30 Richard Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*, (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1860), Act II mm. 826-829.

31 Richard Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*, (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1860).

The key used in this scene is A-flat, again evoking a dream-like state to depict the realm of night. The orchestration in Example 8 employs the rising diminished 7th chord in a manner similar to the introduction of “Traume.” In this scene the two lovers have secretly met under cover of darkness, leaving Brangäne as a lookout to warn them anyone approaches. In the duet, they sing of how only the realm of night will allow them to be together and that the day holds nothing real for them: it is a deceiver and false. This dichotomy is one of the tenants of German Romanticism: the struggle between opposites or contrary elements.



Example 8: Heisterman and Weinstock, “Motives by convention,” *Tristan und Isolde*, motive 26³²

The melody for the text “*sanft an deiner Brust verglühen*” of the Lieder in Example 9 is duplicated exactly, including the enharmonic change on the text “*nie wieder erwachens wahnlos hold bewusster Wunsch*” in Act II, (See Example 10).



Example 9: Wagner, “Träume”, mm. 60-67

³² Matthew Heisterman and John Weinstock, “Motives by numbered convention,” *Tristan und Isolde*, (accessed November 1, 2017, <http://www.laits.utexas.edu/tristan/index.html>), motive 26.

I. *rallent. dim.* *a tempo*
 Le - - - ben, Nie - wie - der - er - wa - - - chens
 liv - - - ing: Our ne'er - re - a - wak - - - ning,
 T. *rallent. dim.* *a tempo*
 Le - - - ben, Nie - wie - der - er - wa - - - chens
 liv - - - ing: Our ne'er - re - a - wak - - - ning,
p *piu p* *pp*
 (ersterbend) (morendo)
 I. wahn - los hold be - wuss - ter Wunsch. (Completely carried away. Tristan
 dream - less, long - a - wait - ed wish. and Isolde sink down and remain
 (ersterbend) (morendo) lying on the flowery bank, their
 T. wahn - los hold be - wuss - ter Wunsch. heads side by side)
 dream - less, long - a - wait - ed wish.
piu p *pp*

Example 10: Wagner, “Tristan und Isolde”, Act II, mm. 1202-1210

Wagner orchestrated this piece of the set for Mathilde's birthday for orchestra and violin, and had it performed in the house for her as she woke in the morning. Otto was on his way back from New York and was not very pleased that Wagner had made himself so at home in his domicile while he was away. This was a precursor to events to come in the spring, forcing Wagner from his beloved “Asyl.”

The next poem that Mathilde presented to Wagner was “Schmerzen,” in mid-December of the same year. This poem, set in four stanzas, describes the sun setting every day and returning like the glorious hero. Why should she then despair when the sun itself must also despair, then die and each day and continue yet again? The text is as follows:

Sonne, weinest jeden Abend
 Dir die schönen Augen rot,
 Wenn im Meeresspiegel badend
 Dich erreicht der frühe Tod;

Sun, each evening you weep
 Your pretty eyes red,
 When, bathing in the mirror of the sea
 You are seized by early death.

Doch erstehst in alter Pracht,
Glorie der düstren Welt,
Du am Morgen neu erwacht,
Wie ein stolzer Siegesheld!

Yet you rise in all your splendor,
Glory of the gloomy world,
Newly awakening in the morning
Like a proud, victorious hero!

Ach, wie sollte ich da klagen,
Wie, mein Herz, so schwer dich sehn,
Muss die Sonne selbst verzagen,
Muss die Sonne untergehn?

Ah, why should I then lament,
Why, my heart, are you so heavy,
If the sun itself must despair,
If the sun must set?

Und gebietet Tod nur Leben,
Geben Schmerzen Wonne nur:
O wie dank ich, dass gegeben
Solche Schmerzen mir Natur!

And if Death gives rise only to Life,
And pain gives way only to bliss,
O how thankful I am, that
Nature gives me such anguish!

The stanzas are set in abab patterned quatrains. Again, she uses the same four feet per line, but with much less consistency in the pattern of feminine and masculine endings. It adheres to the trochaic meter seen in the previous poems, but does not use double rhyme, as in “Träume.” The primary theme in this piece is the “Evocative World of Nature,” but rather than the lonely forest metaphor, this poem focuses on the suffering, dying sun. The setting sun is described as crying its eyes red, the color of the sunset, and the bathing sun as it sets behind the water of the horizon. The second stanza references the sun rising each day into a sad and gloomy world, like a “proud victorious hero.” The third and fourth stanzas are in first person: if the sun must suffer every day and be renewed through death and pain bringing bliss, then she will be grateful for the lesson Nature has given.

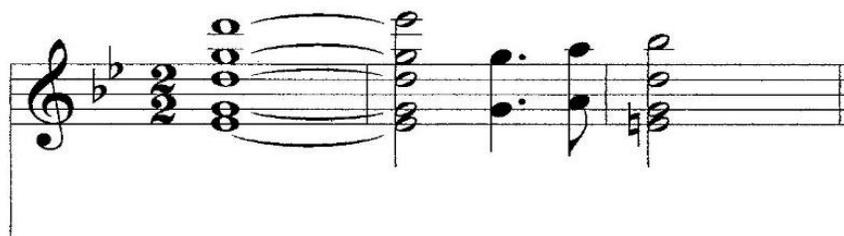
Musically, this is the shortest of the pieces, at only 32 measures in length. The most dramatic moment in the piece is at a fortissimo in the top of the range on the words “proud victorious hero,” followed by the sword motif from *Die Walküre*, (Example 11).



Example 11: Wagner, *Die Walküre*, Act I, mm.817-818

The dotted rhythmic motive shown in Example 6 is used here as well, and for the same reasons.

The dotted figure associated with “Day” in *Tristan und Isolde* makes perfect sense, given the subject matter. It is important to remember that this Lied was written before the music for the opera. Wagner uses the figure in a constant ascending and descending line, mimicking the setting and rising sun. The first chord of the piece is the motivic harmony used to depict “Insolent Day” in *Tristan und Isolde* (Example 12). This particular harmony is striking at the beginning of this piece, as it sets the first word “Sonne” (Sun) perfectly. The end of the vocal line is harmonized with an A-flat Major cadence; however, the postlude, which Wagner rewrote three times before he was satisfied, ultimately ends in C major, the key the composer seems to associate with nature, as the sword motive sounds as a final echo.



Example 12: Insolent Day motive ³³

Before the fourth poem was written, the composer finished the compositional sketch for the first Act of *Tristan und Isolde*. He presented it to Mathilde on New Year's Eve of 1857 with a very special dedication: “Blessed, Torn away from torment, Free and pure, yours forever---The laments and renouncements of Tristan and Isolde in the chaste, golden language of sound, their tears and their kisses, I lay all that at your feet So that they should celebrate the angel who carried me so high!”³⁴

Such a personal dedication caused some uncomfortable friction, especially since it was only seven days after the December 23 concert that had already upset Otto. Wagner was becoming increasingly over-friendly with Mathilde publicly, which was causing tension. Wagner took this time to suddenly travel to Paris under the guise of straightening out some copyright issues. He returned on February 6, and Mathilde presented him with the next poem in the set, “Stehe Still.” The text is heavily

³³ Heisterman and Weinstock, “Motives by numbered convention”, motive 18.

³⁴ Cabaud, *Mathilde Wesendonck*, 108.

influenced by Schopenhauer:

Sausendes, brausendes Rad der Zeit,
Messer du der Ewigkeit;
Leuchtende Sphären im weiten All,
Die ihr umringt den Weltenball;
Urewige Schöpfung, halte doch ein,
Genug des Werdens, lass mich sein!
Halte an dich, zeugende Kraft,
Urgedanke, der ewig schafft!
Hemmet den Atem, stillt den Drang,
Schweiget nur eine Sekunde lang!
Schwellende Pulse, fesselt den Schlag;
Ende, des Wollens ew'ger Tag!

Dass in selig süßem Vergessen
Ich mög alle Wonnen ermessen!
Wenn Aug' in Auge wonnig trinken,
Seele ganz in Seele versinken;
Wesen in Wesen sich wiederfindet,
Und alles Hoffens Ende sich kündigt;
Die Lippe verstummt in staunendem Schweigen,
Keinen Wunsch mehr will das Inn're zeugen:
Erkennt der Mensch des Ew'gen Spur,
Und lös't dein Rätsel, heil'ge Natur!

Roaring thundering wheel of time,
measure of Eternity;
Shining spheres in the wide universe,
You who surround the world globe,
Eternal creation, halt!
Enough of becoming, let me be!
Cease, creating powers,
primal thought drives to eternally create!
slow the breath, still the urge
Be silent just a second long!
Swelling pulses, restrain your beat,
End the day of eternal willing!

That in blessed, sweet oblivion,
I may all bliss measure!
When an eye drinks bliss from another,
a soul completely sinks into another;
a being finds itself again in another being,
and the hoped for goal is neared,
the lips are mute in astounded silence,
the soul no longer feels the urge to produce:
man perceives eternity's path,
And solves your riddle, holy Nature!³⁵

The poem is set in eleven rhyming couplets. There is only one instance of a double rhyme and one of a triple rhyme. The footing is consistently four per line throughout. The first half of the poem is written with masculine endings, then switches to feminine endings for the second half, except for the last couplet. This seems significant, due to the meaning of the text. The first half of the poem is focused on the turning of the world, time, and the inability to stop or slow down and focus on the moment. At the end of this section the poet begs for time to slow down, and then stop. The second half focuses on that delicate moment when two beings find each other, very reminiscent of the moment in *Tristan und Isolde* when the couple's eyes meet after drinking the love potion. The final couplet states, “man perceives eternity's path, and solves your riddle holy Nature!” “Holy nature” comes directly from Mathilde's study of Goethe and classical German Romanticist ideals. In addition to his significance as a

35 Richard Wagner, “Stehe Still” *Wesendonck Lieder*, translated by Bard Suverkrop, (IPA Source, LCC, 2008)
<https://www.ipasource.com/catalog/product/view/id/8137/category/1362/>.

poet, Goethe was also a scientist who wrote a treatise called *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, and had started work on another, *The Metamorphosis of Animals*, in which the “reader, addressed in the second person, was to be led to a 'summit' from which it would be possible to survey the terrain traversed...As in the completed elegy he was proposing to reveal to his pupil the solution to a riddle, 'the key to all formation'.”³⁶ Daniel Wahl translated some of Goethe's theories and discusses the scholar’s concept of “the riddle.” Poetry points at the riddles of nature and tries to solve them through pictures. Philosophy points at the secrets of understanding and tries to solve them through words. Mysticism points at the riddles of nature and at understanding, seeking to solve them through words and pictures.”³⁷ The line just before this ending, “the soul no longer feels the urge to produce” contains the believed answer to the riddle, the completion of two souls. This mystical belief is that two beings, upon finding each other, need nothing more, time stops, and they perceive eternity.

There is no doubt that Wagner and his muse were caught up in an emotional whirlwind that was becoming perilous. The end was near; Otto was becoming more and more aware of Mathilde's feelings for Richard. Cabaud discusses a letter that Otto sent to his friend François Wille, asking him for advice: “Wille would have advised his friend Wesendonck to tell his wife that she should not hesitate to jump from the balcony, if she threatened to do so, with an “*Allez hop, Mathilde!*”³⁸ This indicates that Otto had discussed the situation with Mathilde, and that her reaction was quite dramatic.

The music for “*Stehe Still*” was no less dramatic. The first half contains sweeping sixteenth note figures ascending on each beat with steady chords in the bass. The flourishes in the right hand provide a constant feeling of forward momentum and drive. The voice enters in m. 3 with an interesting circular ascending motion, as seen in example 13. While the contour of the phrase is moving

36 Nicholas Boyle, *Goethe, The Poet and the Age, Volume II Revolution and Renunciation 1790-1803*, (NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), 677.

37 D.C. Wahl, “The tip of the Iceberg' Goethe's Aphorisms on the theory of Nature and Science” *Medium*, November 10, 2001, accessed November 7, 2017, <https://medium.com/@designforsustainability/the-tip-of-the-iceberg-goethe-s-aphorisms-on-the-theory-of-nature-and-science-ba6e12ebd5f1>.

38 Cabaud, *Mathilde Wesendonck*, 109.

downward, each beat of the vocal line begins on a higher pitch, creating a circular movement that matches the text, “wheel of time.” This accompaniment and melodic contour continue throughout the first half of the piece. The harmonic movement of this section also follows the same ascending pattern. Wagner starts in c minor and moves steadily through several harmonies: d-diminished, e minor, and f minor, ultimately arriving on a G dominant (seventh) that leads to a cadence in C major on the text “lass mich sein!” (let me be). He then continues with the same pattern as the first half of the poem. The second half of the Lied begins with descending sixteenth-note flourishes from the treble down into the bass register. Suddenly the accompaniment changes and the harmonic motion slows by more than half. The vocal line becomes very legato and dream-like. Wagner uses the performance direction, “*Allmählich immer etwas zurückhaltend*” meaning “gradually, always some restraint.” Each phrase is a rising melodic line that provides elongation and extension. The phrases become longer and longer in an attempt to slow time over the text “When eye in eye drinks bliss, a soul completely sinks into another.” The vocal line becomes a bit more active, still with the arpeggiation in the accompaniment, as it moves into a new tonal center that will eventually become C major. The last few phrases of the vocal line emphasize the last couplet in a glorious, dramatic legato ascending line. The harmony moves through several dominant harmonies before a IV, V7, I progression; emphasizing C major, again referencing nature, with a dramatic arpeggio. He repeats the same progression in the postlude, again emphasizing the key of C major.

The image shows a musical score for Wagner's "Stehe Still" (mm. 3-5). It consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in c minor and features a rising melodic line. The piano accompaniment features descending sixteenth-note flourishes. The score includes the lyrics: "Sau - sendes, brau - sendes Rad der Zeit, Mes - ser du der". The piano part includes performance directions "p" and "cresc.".

Example 13: Wagner, “Stehe Still,” mm. 3-5.

There are no apparent, direct ties in this piece to *Tristan und Isolde*, but the harmonic movement is very characteristic of the style he uses to emphasize dramatic moments in the opera. The accompaniment is a soundscape, as is the voice, for the drama of the text. This piece tells a genuine story as it progresses.

In an effort to sooth feelings and retain his good graces with Otto, Wagner scheduled a concert for his patron's birthday. The original date was set for March 16 but needed to be postponed to March 31 to accommodate the instrumentalists needed. He conducted several detached movements of symphonies by Beethoven, Otto's favorite composer. It seemed that all was well in the Wesendonck household, but only temporarily. Mathilde was taking Italian lessons with a politically transplanted professor by the name of de Sanctis. Wagner was increasingly jealous of him for a variety of reasons, and while Mathilde had made an attempt for the two gentlemen to get to know each other it turned into disaster. De Sanctis not only held Mathilde's attention, but he was an expert in many subjects in which Wagner considered himself quite adept. Their discussions on the night of April 6, 1858 became quite heated and Wagner, as he was known to do, flew into a rage and stormed out. The next morning, April 7, he wrote a long letter, dubbed the “morning confession,” to make amends and apologize for his behavior. Cabaud quotes this letter: “Ah no! It is not de Sanctis that I abhor, but myself for being surprised that my poor heart was in such a state of weakness! Then, in the morning, I became reasonable again, and I could express a prayer to my angel in the deepest part of my heart; and that prayer is love! Love! The deepest joy of the soul in that love, source of my well-being!”³⁹ While the rest of the letter is innocent enough, this section was all that was needed to make Minna furious when she intercepted the letter. Minna had suspicions that her husband was having an affair, and when she got her chance to expose him she did not hesitate. In her fury she threatened to immediately confront Mathilde and tell her husband. Minna did go to Mathilde, and this is where things turned for the

³⁹ Cabaud, *Mathilde Wesendonck*, 113.

Wagner family. The rumor mill in Zurich was already was whispering about the unusual relationship between Richard and Mathilde, but when Minna left for a “cure” at Brestenberg, and then later openly posted a newspaper advertisement to sell her belongings, it reinforced their suspicions.

At the end of April, Mathilde presented Wagner with the final poem, “Im Treibhaus.” By this time things had come to a head; Minna was angry, Otto was resolute, Wagner was frustrated and nervous concerning his future at “Asyl,” and Mathilde was embarrassed and, if the poem is any indication, melancholy. Wagner finished the setting shortly thereafter, on May 1, 1858. The text is as follows:

Hochgewölbte Blätterkronen,
Baldachine von Smaragd,
Kinder ihr aus fernen Zonen,
Saget mir warum ihr klagt?

High-vaulted leafy-crowns,
canopies of emerald,
you children of distant lands,
Tell me, why you grieve?

Schweigend neiget ihr die Zweige,
Malet Zeichen in die Luft,
Und der Leiden stummer Zeuge
Steiget aufwärts, süsster Duft,

You silently bend your branches,
and paint signs in the air,
and, as a mute witness to your suffering,
a sweet fragrance rises upward.

Weit in sehndem Verlangen
Breitet ihr die Arme aus,
Und umschlinget wahnbefangen
Öder Leere nicht'gen Graus.

With desirous longing,
you spread your arms out wide,
and in your delusion you embrace
The empty horror of the desolate void.

Wohl, ich weiss es, arme Pflanze;
Ein Geschicke teilen wir,
Ob umstrahlt von Licht und Glanze,
Unsre Heimat ist nicht hier!

Well, I know it, poor plants,
for we share the same fate,
although bathed in light and radiance,
Our homeland is not here!

Und wie froh die Sonne scheidet
Von des Tages leerem Schein,
Hüllet der, der wahrhaft leidet,
Sich in Schweigens Dunkel ein.

And how gladly the sun departs
from the day's empty shine/pretense,
he who truly suffers, wraps
Himself in silent darkness.

Stille wird's, ein säuselnd Weben
Füllet bang den dunklen Raum:
Schwere Tropfen seh' ich schweben
An der Blätter grünem Saum.

It grows quiet, a whispered stirring
fills the dark room with anxiety:
I see heavy drops suspended
On the leaves' green edge.

It is obvious from the text that Mathilde is suffering and grieving. She is using the trees,

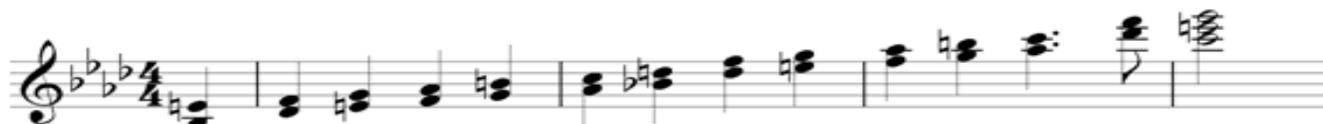
canopies of emerald, their arms stretched wide, as a metaphor for her realization that her connection with Wagner must come to an end. The structure is very much the same in regard to scansion and meter compared to the other poems: a consistent four feet per line in trochaic meter. One thing that sets this poem's structure apart is the consistent alternation of feminine and masculine endings throughout. Each stanza contains a rhyme scheme of abab, cdcd, efef, etc. The first and third line of each is feminine, while the second and fourth are masculine. The previous poems did not have such a consistent structure; it is curious that Mathilde is so structured here. It is possible that, given practice with the other poems, she has become more adept, but on the other hand, there may be a more emotional reason. Could it be that she is purposefully, evenly integrating these in a way to unite her and Richard together in the form of the poetry?

The metaphors cannot be ignored here. Referring to the trees as “children of distant lands” is interesting, since while building the house and gardens for the estate Otto and Mathilde had rare trees brought and transplanted to the property. Mathilde had a special place in her heart for her gardens, and loved the beautiful trees on the estate. The mention of the trees' mute suffering, and arms (branches) wide with desirous longing that embrace the desolate void describes the loneliness and emptiness that she is feeling. The fourth stanza is in the first person, empathizing with the trees herself; she knows their suffering, as her homeland, Wagner, is not here. She is glad when the sun departs, leaving her who suffers, in silent darkness. The last stanza describes the hanging heaviness of waiting, because things are still unsure. Manitt believes there is “an implicit reference to the Moires, divinities of destiny in Greek mythology, weaving the web of the life of all, including the gods.”⁴⁰ He goes on to point out that the German words “Weben” and “Saum” can be translated differently, giving this last stanza a new meaning. “Weben” can be translated as “weaving,” and “Saum” is often translated to “hem”. This change, while subtle, suddenly adds a new interpretation to the stanza, which reads as: “Silence comes,

40 R. Manitt, “Exploration Morphologique et Sémantique des Leitmotifs communs à Tristan und Isolde et aux Wesendonck-Lieder de Richard Wagner”, *Intersections*, 27(1), 16-53, 133 (2006), 45.

a whispered weaving fills the dark room, I see heavy drops on the leaf’s green hem.” This interpretation makes sense, considering the reference to the Norns on the Piano Sonata: “Do you know what will happen?” The sense of anticipation, of waiting to see how the events would unfold, was on both of their minds. Wagner at this point had not left “Asyl;” maybe she was holding on to hope that things would work themselves out and return to the way they once were.

This piece is one of the two that Wagner designated as a study for *Tristan und Isolde*. The two themes from the opera that are associated with this song are called “Pain of Death” (Example 14) and “Desolation” (Example 15). These motives are used in the Act III Prelude, scenes 1 and 2. The prelude connects the end of Act II, where Tristan has sustained a mortal wound, to the beginning of Act III, where he is unconscious in his castle at Kareol with his faithful friend Kurwenal. The mood of the prelude is devastatingly somber, full of anguish and desperation. A new motive begins in m. 26 of the Prelude, as seen in Example 16, known as “Anguish.” The motive starts just after the “desolation” motive finishes its rise on the upper whole note. It consists of a winding motion, with frequent chromatic groups of notes and short skips of thirds.



Example 14: Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*, Pain of Death motive⁴¹



Example 15: Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*, Desolation motive⁴²

41 Heisterman and Weinstock, “Motives by convention”, motive 36.

42 Ibid., motive 37.

Example 16: Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*, Act III, mm. 21-33

In “Im Treibhaus” these motives evoke the same feelings of sorrow and isolation. The introduction to the song is five measures, where two of the motives, “Desolation” and “Pain of death,” are introduced, shown in Example 17. The introduction repeats, and this time the voice enters, floating over the top for the first few phrases. The next two phrases, which finish the first stanza, introduce the “Anguish” motive. This motive, which contains the same contour as in Example 16, with adjusted rhythms and a different tonality, produces a countermelody to the voice, shown in Example 18. The piece begins and ends in d minor but moves through several tonalities, as is characteristic of Wagner's style. The fourth stanza, where the text is in first person, “poor plants, I know your suffering well, for we share one fate,” is written in the style of a recitative, and the vocal line is exposed, over held chords. This evokes a very intimate connection as she expresses her personal sorrow through the voice of nature. Wagner uses this same exposed texture at the beginning of the final stanza, “It grows quiet, a whispered stirring.” The bass, in octaves, interjects an ominous rising line. As the melody ascends to the word “Raum” (room) the harmony suddenly blooms into B-flat Major and the “Anguish” motive returns for the last couplet of the poem, but this time instead of sorrow, it has a sense of longing. The postlude frames the piece by returning to d minor, with the return of the “desolation” and “pain of death” motives. Cabaud states that the manuscript of this song, once presented to Mathilde, has written at the end in the lady's handwriting, “Chosen for me, lost for me, Heart beloved

for eternity.”⁴³ This phrase, inspired by the words of Isolde, holds profound meaning, a rare look into Mathilde's heart.



Example 17: Wagner, “Im Treibhaus,” mm. 1-4



Example 18: Wagner, “Im Treibhaus,” mm. 9-12

A few days later, on May 4, the composer started the musical draft of Act II of *Tristan und Isolde*. He finished by July 1, and the orchestration was completed by September 15, 1858. The entire opera was sent to the publisher on March 9, 1859. In between the completion of the musical sketch of Act II and the orchestration Wagner left his home at “Asyl” permanently and departed for Venice in August of 1858. While some speculate that Otto removed Wagner, the evidence indicates that he left of his own accord. He had realized that there was nothing left there for him but emotional discomfort. On August 21 he writes his first entry in his *Venice Diary*,

The last night in the Asyl I went to bed at 11 o'clock: I was to start at 5 next morning. Before I closed my eyes, it flashed through my soul how I had always sent myself to sleep here by the thought that on this very spot I once should die: thus should I lie when

43 Cabaud, *Mathilde Wesendonck*, 116.

thou approachedst me for the last, last time, clasp'dst my head in thine arms, in open view of all, and with one final kiss receiv'dst my spirit! That death was my fondest conception, and it had framed itself entirely to the locality of my sleeping-room: the door toward the staircase was closed, thou enter'dst through the curtains of the study; thus didst thou wind thine arm around me; thus, gazing up to thee, I passed away. - and now? Even that possibility of dying had been snatched from me! Cold, as if hunted, I was quitting this house, in which I had been shut with a daemon I no longer could ban save by flight. - where- where shall I die, then? – Thus I fell asleep.⁴⁴

His depression continued while he grieved his loss of love and home. The diary was a way to collect his thoughts and communicate with Mathilde while he was unable to send letters. His attempts at writing her through their mutual friend, Eliza Wille, failed, his letters returned unopened. He set up temporary housing at the Palazzo Giustinian while Minna was sent to Germany. In October his beloved Érard piano arrived and was set up. Wagner's diary entry for October 6 is full of remembrances of when his piano arrived at "Asyl." He describes how the instrument was "full of meaning," and recalls how she unexpectedly came silently into the room and sat in a chair to look at him. He called the instrument his "Swan," a reference to *Lohengrin*, but in this entry he goes on to say, "I had to wait, but here it is at last, that cunning tool with its lovely timbre, which I won in those weeks when I knew that I should lose thy presence. How symbolically plain my genie here speaks to me, my daemon! How unconsciously I erst happend on the piano, yet my sly vital spark knew what it wanted! - the piano! - Ay, a wing, - were it the wing of the angel of death!-" In the next entry he talks about the songs written from Mathilde's words, "Of our songs I had only the penciled jottings, often entirely unworked up, and so faint that I was afraid of clean forgetting them some day. So I first set to work playing them over to myself again, and calling every detail back to memory; then I wrote them carefully out." These were the versions, written from memory of the originals, which he later sent for publication in a moment of financial necessity.

A few years later, when Wagner was again in need of money, he tried to persuade the publisher Schott to buy the not yet completed score of *Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg*. The publisher was not

44 Wagner, *Richard Wagner to Mathilde Wesendonck*, 31.

interested in an unfinished work, so instead Wagner offered him the *Fünf Gedichte*, which were engraved in 1862. The pieces were arranged in the following order: “Der Engel”, “Stehe Still”, “Im Treibhaus”, “Schmerzen,” and “Träume.” The first performance of the work was on July 30, 1862, by Emilie Genast, with Hans von Bülow at the piano. Cabaud recalls the audience's reaction to the performance: “The effect was fascinating. Everyone was seized with emotion, and Cosima von Bülow broke into tears. Franz Schott rubbed his hands with satisfaction and carefully locked the manuscript up in a drawer.”⁴⁵

The full orchestral version of the work was arranged by Felix Mottl, considered an expert in Wagner's music, who has conducted several of his operas at Bayreuth, Karlsruhe, opera houses in London, and the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

In the years after Wagner left Zurich and his beloved Mathilde he continued to write the final two operas to complete *Des Ring der Nibelungen*. He married Cosima von Bülow after quite a scandal, as she was married to Hans von Bülow, one of his friends and a staunch supporter of his works. She and Wagner had three children, Isolde, Eva, and Siegfried. Cosima essentially worshiped him and assisted him in all endeavors, to the end of his life and beyond. Cosima was forever jealous of Mathilde, and the composer seemed to downplay his attraction and feelings for Mathilde in his recollections, likely in an effort to keep Cosima from becoming upset. Wagner finally found a financial supporter in the young King Ludwig II, who was a fervent fan of the composer. After several delays he was able to build his Festspielhaus in Bayreuth, a permanent opera house made to his specifications in which to present his works. His health declined and one year after finishing his last opera, *Parsifal*, he died of a heart attack in Venice at the age of 69 on February 13, 1883. He was then taken to Germany to be buried at Bayreuth.

Most of the surviving documentation that details the affair between the two are Wagner's letters

⁴⁵ Cabaud, *Mathilde Wesendonck*, 164.

and diary entries; however, some can be found in Mathilde's literary works. While the text of these five Lieder are revealing enough, there are also many very personal poems and stories that contain the same themes: sorrow, longing, and lovers that are fated to be apart. This is not to say that she did not love her husband, Otto. She was a loyal and loving wife and mother, and she and Otto were supporters of Wagner's music to the end of their lives. She seems, however to have held a special place in her heart for the composer. Is it not possible for the heart to hold room for more than one person? Could it be that the romantic ideals they espoused were something they were living?

The connection between Wagner and his muse, Mathilde came to an end, but their story would survive through the music of these five Lieder and the tale of *Tristan und Isolde*. A letter of Wagner's from July 2, 1858 says, "What a wondrous birth of our child of sorrow! Had we to live, then, after all? From whom could it be asked, that he should forsake his children? God stand by us, poor creatures! Or are we too rich? Must we help ourselves unaided?"⁴⁶ He refers to the opera *Tristan und Isolde*, as a child of their suffering, meaning that the music itself was the consummation of their love. Surely the *Wesendonck Lieder* can be considered similarly. The love between Richard and Mathilde was not consummated in the traditional sense, but in these five songs, woven into the music of *Tristan und Isolde*, and has become the unblemished union of the lovers in poetry and music.

⁴⁶ Wagner, *Richard Wagner to Mathilde Wesendonck*, 24.

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