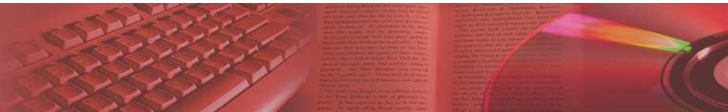

Susan Youens. *Heinrich Heine and the Lied.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xxx + 378 pp. $99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-82374-6.

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Heine: Synonymous with Song

Germanists of the nineteenth century might not be aware of the work of musicologist Susan Youens, the most prolific and important scholar of the *Lied* today. Most of her books are about the poetry set to music by the great *Lieder* composer, Franz Schubert. She has examined Wilhelm Müller's poetry extensively in *Retracing a Winter's Journey: Schubert's Winterreise* (1991), and *Schubert, Müller, and Die schöne Müllerin* (1997). In *Schubert's Poets and the Making of Lieder* (1996) she examines settings of verses by Gabriele von Baumberg, Theodor Körner, Johann Mayrhofer, and Ernst Schulze. One more Schubert book, *Schubert's Late Lieder: Beyond the Song-cycles* (2002), also takes a look at some of the more obscure poets Schubert set during his last, death-haunted years. In addition, Youens is an authority on the late-nineteenth-century *Lied* composer Hugo Wolf, having published two further books on his settings. In the work under review, she turns her attention to the poetry of Heinrich Heine and the tendency of *Lieder* composers to exploit it in their compositions. The result is an energetic, eclectic discussion of one of the most familiar nineteenth-century German poets as seen through the prism of the art song tradition. "I believe strongly in 'thick' musicology, in the kind of scholarship that locates musical works in the midst of activity on all fronts, literary, political, personal, religious, philosophical, national, sociological, and more", Youens declares in her preface (p. xxiv); she is interested in anything that will help her understand her object of study. The result of an enormous amount of research is a very thick slab of new, interesting, and important information. Working with equal ease in the domain of Germanists as of musicologists, she analyzes a poem with as much insight as the music that accompanies it, adding depth to her interpretation with various kinds of historical context.

Although most musicologists understand that words and music must be taken together in interpreting a song, their expertise lies primarily in music. As is evident from the titles of Youens's books, she treats the poets with equal seriousness as the composers. In this, her eighth book, she goes further and makes the poet, not the composer, the focal point–because, as she says, she realized that Heine's poetry is almost synonymous with song. Over eight thousand musical settings of his verses survive, more than of any other poet. Her aim in this book is to try to account for this musical affinity. Of course, a survey would be out of the question. Furthermore, some of these settings fall into the "Top 40" of all *Lieder*; they have been analyzed and interpreted repeatedly in the musicological literature. This is especially true of Robert Schumann's cycle *Dichterliebe* (1840) and the six songs that Schubert set as part of his final collection, *Schwanengesang* (1828). The challenge is, then, to give a sense of how Heine was set by composers other than Schubert and Schumann, while still giving these geniuses their due.

Youens approaches this task by proceeding historically through the nineteenth century. Schubert was one of the first to set Heine in the 1820s, and he treated the just-published poetry as an opportunity for radical musical innovation. However, the settings at the end of the century show that Heine's verses eventually became the occasion for syrupy-sweet, sentimental musical clichés. In between, we learn about two lesser-known composers in detail, Franz Lachner and Johann Vesque von Püttlingen. These two, who knew and admired Schubert and his music, were inspired by his settings but had to resist being too powerfully influenced. Some of their work is strikingly original. The story of Vesque, a Viennese lawyer,

diplomat, and member of high society, who accomplished the feat of setting all eighty-eight poems of *Die Heimkehr* (1823/4) is interesting in itself. For the chapter on Schumann, Youens gives us, rather than the famous *Dichterliebe*, a close examination of three ballads: "Die Beiden Grenadieren" (1840); "Belsatzar" (1840); and "Die Loreley" (1843), the last by Clara, not Robert, Schumann. The last chapter centers not on a composer but a poem and looks at different settings of "Du bist wie eine Blume" (a poem from *Die Heimkehr*), which was especially popular around the end of the century.

Schubert's settings are the most challenging to explicate in that they have already been analyzed so many times. Youens's new theory is that Schubert, after only six songs, rejected Heine's ironic nihilism and would not have set more had he lived longer.[1] After some background on the reception of Heine's poetry when it first starting appearing in the 1820s, and some speculation as to how Schubert came upon the poet, Youens goes through the six songs. First there is "Der Atlas" (from *Schwanengesang*), "packing so much sound-and-fury into a small song" of only two minutes in duration (p. 22). One of Youens's important general insights comes here: "It is a feature of certain Schubert songs that their personae say something, realize in mid-stream what the words really mean, and then react, the shock registered in the music. It is the composer, not the poet, who pinpoints the exact place where something massive happens in the mind, and the subsequent challenge is to plot these lightning bolts of realization in the song's architecture" (p. 17).

Youens's original interpretation of "Ihr Bild," the second song, is centered on the mythical figure Echo. She not only calls upon Ovid, but also poetry by W. S. Merwin and Andrew Marvell, the portrait of Madame Moitessier (1856) by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, John Webster's play *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614), and more to convey the profundity of this little song. "Ihr Bild" ends with one of Heine's famous *Stimmungsbrechungen*: in this case, a cry of anguish that destroys the illusion of calm. Yet, Schubert sets this ending with the inexpressive music of the first stanza, seemingly ignoring the structure and meaning of the poem. This decision has perplexed listeners over the years, including Youens. However, she assures us that Schubert, "one of the most acute readers of poetry in the history of music, could not have failed to notice the swerve from narration to outcry or what that horrified exclamation means" (p. 33).

The third song, "Das Fischermädchen," presents a different problem: there does not seem to be anything to interpret. Most commentators treat it simply as a light, cheerful song. However, Youens wonders if a more complex, mocking commentary underlies the song's innocent surface. The next song is anything but light: she compares "Die Stadt" to a horror movie, made all the more complex and ambiguous by Schubert's eerie setting. Youens describes the fifth song, "Am Meer," as a kind of hymn alternating with "consciousness reeling under the sway of strong emotion" (p. 68) or, more specifically, sexual arousal and consummation. The way Schubert structures the song appears to move against Heine's purposes, which is again a puzzle; Youens argues in this case for a conscious rejection of Heine's meaning. Finally, there is the most famous and terrifying of them all, "Der Doppelgänger." Besides considering the meaning of this poem, Youens examines its complex verbal rhythms and shows how they are made even more complicated by Schubert. Of the extraordinary music, she observes that the singer's quasi-declamatory part is "like nothing else in Schubert, like nothing else in all of lieder" (p. 75). She calls the "scarifying" piano postlude "one of the most thought-provoking ends in all of song" (p. 78).

The chapter on the three ballads by the Schumanns discusses the origin of each ballad in historical fact, then examines other poems and songs on the same topic, as well as illustrations from the time, such as title page engravings. In order to understand Robert Schumann's "Die beiden Grenadiere," Youens delves into what Heine thought of Napoleon Bonaparte, what Schumann recorded in his diary about Napoleon, what the Schumanns learned on their Russian trip about Napoleon, and more. She explains what "grenadiers" actually were–the grenade throwers of the infantry. All of this material contributes to the context for the composition of the poem and the song. Furthermore, Youens shows it can help provide solutions for problems in performance. For instance, Schumann incorporates the tune of the "Marseillaise" (1792) at the end of his setting, making for a rousing conclusion, which is then suddenly deflated by a piano postlude of "funereal mournfulness" (p. 204). If Schumann viewed the grenadier's patriotism as deluded and fanatical, then the "Marseillaise" section should sound extreme, overwrought, with the sudden change in the postlude serving as "queasy" (p. 205) commentary. Alternatively, the ending could be

played as a straightforward expression of loyalty to the end, with the postlude conveying sorrowful sympathy for the soldier.

The other ballad setting by Robert Schumann that Youens considers is "Belsatzar," the story of Belshazzar, the blasphemous King of Babylon, recounted in the book of Daniel in the Bible and by Byron as "The Vision of Belshazzar" (1815). Heine's secret intent in retelling this old story, Youens believes, was to portray "enslaved Jews, assimilated subjects who do what they must until given the signal to rise up in revolt and kill their oppressor" (p. 220). Schumann also had a political purpose in taking up this ballad, Youens argues. After some dramatic hints about the connection of "Belsatzar" to the revolutions of 1848, she concludes more cautiously that this song could be understood as possibly "a subterranean act of participation in the build-up to revolution" (p. 239).

Clara Schumann's setting of Heine's famous story of the Lorelei, "Ich weiß nicht, was es soll bedeuten," was composed in 1843 as a birthday present for her husband. It was only first published 150 years later in 1993, which is a shame, because Youens judges it to be "one of the century's best songs" (p. 176). Youens points out the unusual relationship between voice and piano in the piece, which is completely different than Robert's style. She also admires the original interpretation of the poem. This section includes a very useful summary of the history of the Lorelei in literature, especially as portrayed by Clemens Brentano and Joseph Freiherr von Eichendorff.

After counting 415 settings of "Du bist wie eine Blume," Youens wonders, "Was there anyone in the Western world at the turn-of-century who did not know this poem?" (p. xvi). She shows in detail how this poem simultaneously expresses worshipful love and satirizes this kind of sentimental poetry. The built-in critique was overlooked by most composers, who only wanted to write a straightforward love song. This issue has been a central problem in evaluating settings of Heine, Youens notes. She even refers to it as the "Heine problem": his mixture of sentimentality and anti-sentimentality in the same poem. A prime example of this problem is Robert Schumann's setting, which has been criticized as naive. But Youens claims that Schumann not only understood the irony but deliberately made the music override it: "Ignoring the cynicism in the words was not his strategy; rather, he both alludes to Heine's unlovely imputations and contradicts them harmonically, tonally, rhythmically, and melodically" (p. 277). Although she presents a closely argued case, it is an exceedingly difficult one to prove using musical evidence alone.

Subsequent settings, many of which are directly derivative of Schumann's, are not so difficult to evaluate. Her overview, which she calls a "Whitman's sampler," is a chocolate box of sickly sweet, "gooey chromatic"(p. 294) settings, (mis)translated mostly into English by American and British writers, who change and add to the poem to transform it into a semi-sacred Victorian parlor song, ennobling of both lover and beloved. Besides providing some laughs, this overview serves as a study of Heine reception beyond the masterpieces, taking the lid off the chocolate box of kitschy versions and settings of his poetry that appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century in particular profusion.

Overall, this book could be used as a source for information on and analysis of individual poems and songs, but it also contributes a long-needed account of the musical reception of Heine from the nineteenth into the twentieth century. Youens obviously loves words and vivid writing, tossing off "epithalamium" and "gelignite" along with more colloquial expressions such as "flip the bird." She acknowledges her interpretations can go too far for some–"If this sounds a trifle ridiculous, and I will cheerfully concede that it does" (p. 231)–but doesn't let allow her audience to dampen her enthusiasm. Youens welcomes all readers and invites them to sit down with her at the piano, go through stacks of music and books, and play, compare, analyze, and speculate. Even in book form, her passion comes across as she shares her work in the infinitely rich world of the *Lied.*

Note

[1]. Youens explains in the preface that she was not allowed to have music examples from these songs because she has so many examples of the more obscure works. I would like to mention that the music to all of Schubert's lieder is available online at the Public Domain Music Score Library (http://imslp.org/wiki).

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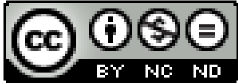

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