Goethe and Music:
"Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt"*

Meredith McClain

Abstract

As part of the commemorative act of rethinking Goethe's life, it is meaningful to recall aspects of his history which illuminate and help reveal the musical dimension of his existence. Although Goethe was not a musician in the strict sense of the word, he dwelt musically on this earth and it is in honor of this mode of being that this presentation focuses on the inspiration which radiated from Goethe to some of the greatest musicians of his day. Seven different settings of one small poem by Goethe, "Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt" from Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre, will be discussed in order to illuminate the vitality of Goethe's poetry as well as to review the important evolution of the German lied which took place during Goethe's lifetime. (MMc)

In 1822 at the age of 73 Goethe wrote in a letter the following: "Wer Musik nicht liebt, verdient nicht Mensch zu heißen; wer sie liebt, ist erst ein halber Mensch. Wer sie treibt, der ist ein ganzer" ('He who does not love music, does not deserve to be called human; he who loves it is only half a person. He who produces it, he is whole')¹. One hundred and fifty years after Goethe's death it is still important to investigate his pronouncements concerning music, but the investigator of 1982 may draw on vast scholarly materials which have been accumulating on the topic of "Goethe and Music" and he may heed a recurrent warning not to define music in only the limited, technical sense. A too narrow and too technical translation of Goethe's quotation, "Only a musician is a whole person," may thus be avoided. In general, the extreme viewpoints of the past—criticism of Goethe's limited musicianship, on the one hand, and praise of Goethe, the musician, on the other—may be carefully resolved if one follows the advice of Hans Joachim Moser.² At the
In order to review and renew the topic "Goethe and Music," we shall look at one very small poem, "Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt," and then trace the musical life of this work as it evolved through the settings of six musicians. Goethe's own preferences concerning the musical setting of his lieder are well known and can be clearly exemplified on this music tour through history. It will also be clear that the great poet's personal preferences had little to do with the new direction which was ultimately followed by the greatest German song writers.9

Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt,
Weiß, was ich leide!
Allein und abgetrennt
Von aller Freude,
Seh' ich ans Firmament
Nach jener Seite.
Ach! der mich liebt und kennt,
Ist in der Weite.
Es schwindelt mir, es brennt
Mein Eingeweide.
Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt,
Weiß, was ich leide!

Only one who knows longing
Understands what I suffer!
Alone and separated
From all joy,
I look at the firmament
Toward that other side.
Ah, he who loves and understands me
Is far away.
I am fainting, fire burns
within me.
Only one who knows longing
Understands what I suffer!10

This poem is one of the four well known Mignon songs which appear in Goethe's major work Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre. Goethe worked on Wilhelm Meister for a very long time, just as he did on Faust and the two are often compared as containing the wisdom of the poet in his mature stage.11 It is fortunate for any reader who wishes to understand the exact context of the Mignon songs that the episode of Mignon and the harper form a distinct entity within the larger work. It is interesting to note in this regard that a school edition of the Mignon story was issued separately in Germany in 1909.12 In the preface to that edition the reader is told that one consideration in publishing such a work was to acquaint as many readers as possible with the context which had inspired the wonderful Mignon compositions by Schubert and others, as well as to warn the opera goers of the inferiority of the banal French opera by Thomas on the Mignon theme.

Other pertinent facts concerning the context of the Mignon songs and their first appearance have been gathered by Jack M. Stein, whom I quote at length here:

When Goethe's celebrated Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre first appeared in 1795, it contained melodies by Reichardt to eight of the lyrics embedded in the work. These were printed on special oversized paper, which was folded into the edition at the appropriate place in the text. Reichardt was thus the first of many
ich       Es schwindelt mir, es brennt       A    u / u / u / 
Mein Engeweihe.                                      B    u / u / u
wer       Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt,       A    / u u / u /
Weiß, was ich leide!                                  B    / u u / u

The basic rhythmic structure indicates two stanzas based on the same pattern of alternating three beat and two beat lines ending without exception with alternating masculine and feminine cadences. One way to describe the pattern of metric feet is to assume that the basic foot is iambic (u /), but that the rhythm is suspended or counterbalanced by word stress in the first foot of lines, 1, 2, and 5 in stanza one and of lines 1, 5, and 6 in stanza two, causing trochaic feet (/ u).

Rhyme, like rhythm, is not a pure pattern here, but is a mix of regularity and irregularity: AB, A(B), AC, AC, AB, AB. The most outstanding feature of regularity in this poem is the exact repetition of the first two lines to form the closing lines. Through the rhyme scheme the center four lines are joined together so that the whole poem can be viewed as one strophe of 12 lines. The meaning of the words also supports this particular division since the center four lines express a direction away from the speaker—the distance, the other side—and a person away from the speaker—the beloved, the other one. The identical lines 1 and 2, 11 and 12 form the frame, the lament, while lines 3-4 and corresponding 9-10 described the inner state of the speaker.

Syntactically analyzed, yet another division of the poem is revealed. Lines 1-2 and 11-12 are syntactically identical: a lament ending with an exclamation point. Enjambement, a comma, and enjambement again tie lines 3, 4, 5, and 6 together in a sentence of four lines. Lines 7-8 have the same basic structure as the lament: a two line sentence broken by a comma, but without an exclamation point. The remaining two lines, 9-10, also form a sentence, but one broken inside the first line by a comma and having enjambment tying the two lines closely together.

It should now be clear from Fig. 1 that there are several ways to divide the structure of “Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt” and that no one division has more credit than the others. Basic structural divisions of the various musical settings are indicated in graphic forms. Just as the German quotes in this paper have been written into the text in English for interested music students who might not be able to read the original German, now the musical indications have been reduced to the most apparent and readily understandable sketches for students of German not familiar with musical notation.
It is extremely fortunate for our musical journey that Goethe commissioned the setting of the poem by Johann Friedrich Reichardt, his musical advisor from 1789 to 1800. We know that Goethe approved of this setting and it is to be lamented that almost all other editions since the 1795 original did not include the music. It is important to note that Reichardt was a founder of the Second Berlin Song School, a group of composers who believed strongly that musical accompaniment should be simple and should follow strictly the words of the poem. Only repetitions given in the original poem were allowed in the music. Given this philosophy it is easy to understand how Reichardt composed his setting. It is the only one on the chart which is entirely strophic; that is to say, the music for the first half of the poem is repeated exactly for the second. The entire text of two stanzas is printed on the one repeated stanza of music like a hymn. In order that the last two lines of the poem will have exactly the same melody as the identical first two, Reichardt simply repeated the first line of music again as the third line on the score with the single addition of one closing measure consisting of one single note: the unison tonic for both voices (c minor). This means that there are in reality only two different lines of music: line 1 and line 2. Within such a simple and repetitious structure it seems unlikely that Goethe’s direction of “irregular” can be fulfilled by the slight rhythmic independence of the two voices at the beginning of the second line. Otherwise the singers move together rhythmically with each syllable receiving one note. Reichardt’s absolute devotion to the correct expression of the meaning of the text through his settings is made clear in the following:

I have noticed that, no matter how attractively my songs were performed, the singer almost never quite sang them correctly. When I investigated I found that all those who failed to do so had first played the notes as a melodious instrumental piece and only later coupled the words to them. This is the exact reverse of the way I composed them! My melodies take shape automatically in every case from repeated reading of the poem without my having to search for them. And the only thing else that I do is this: I repeat them with slight changes, and do not write them down until I feel that the grammatical, logical, emotional, and musical accents are so closely interwoven that the melody speaks properly and sings pleasantly, and not just for one stanza, but for all of them. If the singer is to feel this when he performs them, he must first read the words in their entirety and keep reading them until he feels that he can read them with the correct expression. Only then should he sing them.

In 1796 a composer named Carl Friedrich Zelter sent a setting of one of the harper’s songs, “Wer sich der Einsamkeit ergiebt” to a lady friend and requested that she send one of the two copies to the
On another afternoon Bettina and Beethoven went for a walk in the garden of Schönbrunn and her memory of his conversation brings up such interesting points that I quote it at some length here:

Standing in the full glare of the burning sun, Beethoven said, "Goethe's poems have great power over me, not only by their matter, but by their rhythm; I am moved to composition by their language, and by the lofty spirit of harmony pervading them. Melodies radiate from the forms of inspiration, I pursue them, and passionately bring them back: I see them disappear in the varied mass of emotions, then I seize them in renewed ardor, and cannot let them go; hurriedly and with delight I develop them in all their modulations, and in the end I triumph in the production of a musical thought—a symphony; yes, music is the medium between the spiritual and sensuous life. I might say with Goethe, if he would understand me, melody is the sensuous life of poetry. Is not the intellectual meaning of a poem represented in sensuous feeling by melody—is not the sensuous element in the song of Mignon realized through the melody? and does not such emotion call forth new creations?"

In September of 1810 Beethoven's setting of "Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt" was published, the last and most successful of three attempted versions. It is clear from the outline chart that some innovations have appeared here since Zelter: the composer has maintained an identical beginning and ending, as we found in Reichardt's setting, but the center sections have their own character and the C section shows different rhythmic character for each of the two sentences contained there. Twice the piano punctuates the division in the text and once the voice is heard to carry over alone and it is stressing the rather "difficult" word "Eingeweide." One critic has said that in this setting we have what, for Beethoven, must be called one of his most singable, arching melodies. Note that Beethoven takes a liberty at the last A section by adding the word "ja" and then repeating "weiß, was ich leide" as closing material.

Although we do not know Goethe's reaction to this piece, he did state his opinion of Beethoven's setting of "Kennst du das Land." The statement, made to another composer, J. W. Tomaschek in 1822, is very revealing of Goethe's main criteria of lieder settings. He said:

You have understood the poem well. I cannot understand how Beethoven and Spohr could have so misunderstood the song when they wrote their music for it. Surely the punctuation and the stops coming at the same time in each stanza should be sufficient indication for the musician that all I expected him to do was to write a simple song. It is not in conformity with Mignon's temperament that she should intone a formal aria.

Although there was at various times interest from both sides, there never came a collaboration between Goethe and Beethoven.
In the same year that Schubert composed his setting (1827), Zelter created a second setting of “Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt.” The fact that Zelter composed in all four different settings of this text is especially interesting in view of his principle of composition which he explained to Eckermann thus: “If I am to compose music for a poem, I first try to bring before me a living picture of the situation. I then read it aloud till I know it by heart; and thus, when I again recite it, the melody comes of its own accord.” We can be sure that Goethe approved of this approach, but it raises a question about multiple settings. It is apparent from the sketch that Zelter in 1827 was certainly more cautious and conservative in his design than Schubert. But there are real points of interest in this second Zelter setting. Notice that Zelter has adopted the practice of constructing a piano frame around the whole which gives to the music the power to set the beginning mood and to close. For the first time we find in this Zelter setting a composition which offers entirely new material in the music where the opening lines of text are repeated exactly at the close (section B). As in all the other settings on the chart thus far, Zelter finds the minor key to evoke the proper lamenting mood. However, he uses the relative major (V) very effectively to punctuate the half way point between the two stanzas.

From this point on there is not much remaining to narrate. The changes underway in these settings all aim in the same direction of increasing expression in the musical accompaniment to the point where the music threatens to supplant the text. There are so many musical details and so much variety in the score that it is too difficult to make a meaningful simple graphic reduction. Independence of the composer from the poet is well exemplified by this Schumann setting. Robert Schumann, born in 1810 (the year Bettina visited Beethoven), has been called the founder of the Romantic Movement in music. The new direction in composition which he represents is clearly audible in the first two notes of this setting. On the chart a piano frame is indicated, but one must look at the score and hear the music to know what a departure from the other settings this really is. There are only two notes played by the piano before the voice begins, but which notes! The arrows on the chart indicate that the musical form is through-composed and that the music evolves without attention to syntactic breaks in the text. The musician expands the poet’s text, almost repeating the entire poem twice. But no, a section is missing in the repetition, and another section is sung twice in a row. Individual words (“brennt,”

1 The original German was quoted in Edgar Istel, "Goethe and Music," Musical Quarterly, XIV (1928), 216-254. The translation is mine.

2 See, for example, Hans John, Goethe und die Musik (Langenauza: Beyer und Söhne, 1928), which is discussed by Frederick Sternfeld in Goethe and Music: A List of References (New York: Da Capa Press, 1979), p. 133. See also Romain Rolland, "Goethe the Musician," in Goethe Symposium, ed. Dagobert D. Runes (New York: Roerich Museum Press, 1932) pp. 3-17.


5 See Rolland, "Goethe the Musician," pp. 3-17.

6 See note 3.


15 The musical settings referred to in this article appear in order of their presentation in the attached appendix.

16 Stein, Poem and Music, p. 35, n. 8.

17 Ibid., pp. 34-35.


20 Ibid., pp. 146-147.


26 Istel, "Goethe and Music," p. 221.

II. Zelter, 1796.

Sehnsucht

C. F. Zelter, 1796

Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt weiß, was ich lei - de!
Al - len und abgetrennt von al - ler Freu - de, seh ich ans Firmament nach je - ner Sei -
III. Beethoven, 1810.

**Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt**

Assai Adagio  
Ludwig van Beethoven, um 1800

Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt, weiß, was ich leide!
Allein und abgetrennt von aller Freude, seh ich ans Firmament, nach jener Steppe.
Ach! der, der mich liebt und kennt, ist in der Weite. Einsamkeiten starren die Augen.
Nur, es brennt mein Eingeweide. Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt, weiß, was ich leide, ja weiß, was ich leide!
IV. Schubert, 1827, continued.
Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt

Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt, weiss was ich leide! Al-

lein und ab gereiht von aller Freude, seh' ich ans

Firmament nach jener Seele. Ach! der mich liebt und

kennt, ist in der Weite, es schwindelt mir, es brennt mein Einge-

Robt. Schumann, 1849
VI. Schumann, 1849, continued.
VII. Tchaikovsky, 1869, continued.

Seh' ich ans Firmament	noch jener Seite.

Ach! der mich liebt und kennt,
ist in der Weite.

Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt,
weiss, was ich
VII. Tschaikovsky, 1869, continued.