

11 Mendelssohn's songs

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Mendelssohn began composing songs as a child – his setting of “Raste Krieger, Krieg ist aus” of 1820 anticipates Schubert’s setting of the same text from Sir Walter Scott’s *The Lady of the Lake* by five years – and continued to engage the genre throughout his life.¹ One scholar has observed that in the span of twenty-eight years from 1819 to 1847, there was scarcely a single month in which he was not occupied with song composition.² He published fifty-four songs with opus numbers (opp. 8, 9, 19[a], 34, 47, 57, and 71) and thirteen without opus numbers during his lifetime; after his death, thirty-one additional songs have been published, with approximately thirty-five either unpublished or available only in facsimile. But the 135 or so songs³ have often received less than their due, in part because many are apt for performance by amateurs, because they reflect salon culture in *Vormärz* Berlin, and because their composer does not probe Romantic subjectivity after the fashion of Schubert or Schumann. Reappraisal of Mendelssohn’s lieder, however, reveals greater variety and depth than some have supposed. There are songs which make few concessions to an amateur musician’s limitations, such as “Andres Maienlied” (Another May Song), op. 8, no. 8, or the “Reiselied” (Journeying Song), op. 34, no. 6; there are songs which acknowledge complex poetry in complex ways; there are poetic tastes to be accounted for and an aesthetic of song composition to be defined. This repertory holds riches still to be mined.

How Mendelssohn regarded the role of words in song is a complicated issue. There can have been few composers as suspicious of language as he was, and his mistrust of words’ power to say anything definitive had consequences for his song oeuvre. If his famous grandfather believed in the power of reason elucidated in words to bring about emancipation for Germany’s Jews, his children and grandchildren were no longer so optimistic. Berlin’s Hep-hep riots in 1819, the dissolution of reforms in the wake of Napoleon’s downfall, the association of Jews with the “evils” of commerce and modernism, the particular onus placed on the assimilated Jew – all of this conspired to crush the ideals of tolerance in Lessing’s drama *Nathan der Weise*, its title character inspired by Moses Mendelssohn. Any thoughtful Jew – and Mendelssohn never denied his Jewish origins – in post-Napoleonic Europe would have known language as an instrument of anti-Semitism and hence might well be wary of words. One thinks of the dirty, villainous Jew in Ludwig Rellstab’s

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novel *1812* about Napoleon's Russian campaign, and realizes once again the virulence of the stereotype. For Mendelssohn, music was more precise in its connotations than words could ever be, as he attempted to demonstrate in his provocatively entitled *Lieder ohne Worte*. When people insisted on seeing these works as "Music Minus One" and supplied the "missing" poetry (the Hamburg tax assessor Eduard Otto⁴ and the critic Karl Christern actually asked for Mendelssohn's blessing on their poetic appliqués), Mendelssohn was displeased.⁵ In a famous letter of 1842 to a former student named Marc André Souchay, the composer responded to the matter with what is in effect a credo.

So much is spoken about music and so little is said. For my part I do not believe that words suffice for such a task, and if they did I would no longer make any music. People usually complain that music is too many-sided in its meanings; what they should think when they hear it is so ambiguous, whereas everyone understands words. For me, it is precisely the opposite, not only with entire speeches, but also with individual words. They too seem so ambiguous, so vague, so subject to misunderstanding when compared with true music, which fills the soul with a thousand better things than words. The thoughts that are expressed to me by the music I love are not too indefinite to put into words, but on the contrary, too definite. And I find every effort to express [in words] such thoughts legitimate, but altogether inadequate . . . this, however, is not your fault, but the fault of words, which cannot do better . . . because the same word never means the same thing to different people. Only melody can say the same thing, can arouse the same feelings in one person as in another, a feeling which may not be expressed by the same words . . .

Will you accept this as my answer to your question? It is, in any event, the only one I know how to give, although these too are just ambiguous words.⁶

Resignation to fate, praise of God, melancholy, and a hunting song (these are some of the subjects Souchay had found in the *Lieder ohne Worte*), he continued, could be confused for one another in words, but that is not the case with music.

Mendelssohn had clearly formulated this aesthetic early in his compositional career. He explained the differences between his approach to song composition and that of other composers in another often-quoted letter of 1831 to his aunt Henriette von Arnstein-Pereira. She had suggested that he set to music Johann Christian Zedlitz's "Die nächtliche Heerschau," a ballad famous at the time; despite being censored for its Napoleonic subject matter, it was declaimed in Metternich's own salon. Mendelssohn replied:

I like to take music very seriously, and I consider it impermissible to compose something that I do not feel through and through. That would be telling a lie, for notes have just as precise a meaning as words – perhaps they

are even more precise. Now to me, it seems completely impossible to set a descriptive poem to music. The majority of such compositions speak not against but for me in this, for I do not know a single successful one among them. One is caught midway between a dramatic interpretation or a merely narrative way of doing it; in the "Erlkönig," one [composer – clearly Schubert] has the meadows rustling, the child crying, the horse galloping, while another one envisions a bard who relates the grisly story altogether calmly, the way one tells a ghost story. The latter is still the more correct (Reichardt almost always did it this way), but it does not appeal to me – the music gets in the way. For me, it would be more imaginative to read such a poem to myself in silence and to think up the rest of these things myself than to have it painted for me or read aloud to me.

Nor will it do to compose the "Nächtliche Heerschau" in narrative fashion because there really is no specific person who speaks, and the poem has nothing of the tone of a ballad. To me, it seems more a clever idea than a poem [Schubert too, one remembers, rejected a proposal that he set this poem to music]; it is as if the poet did not believe in his misty images. Now of course, I would have enjoyed setting the poem in a descriptive manner, as [Sigismund] Neukomm and Fischhof in Vienna have done; I could have introduced a quaint drum-roll in the bass, trumpet calls in the treble, and all sorts of other ghostly apparitions. But again, I like to take my music more seriously than this. To me, such things always seem like a game, rather like the paintings in children's primers in which the roofs are painted bright red so that the children will know that they are roofs.⁷

That this is a rejection of the Schubert, Loewe, Schumann, etc. approaches to song is clear, and some critics recognized the difference. In a largely sympathetic review of Mendelssohn's op. 8 songs, Adolf Bernhard Marx (a fellow student of Zelter's and a friend to Felix) wrote that the composer "always knows how to convey the basic tone of the poem successfully – but in such a fashion that the expression of details is only partially conveyed with the same precision and success as that of the whole."⁸ Those who wanted both the nuances and the larger architecture of a song to track the words closely would not find Mendelssohn to their taste. A cautionary note: Mendelssohn's aesthetic of songwriting does not mean disregard of the text. Rather, the composer must realize in music the idea which had given rise to the poem and therefore enable performers and listeners to identify with that idea. Both words and music in song are responses to larger, universal concepts, and the listener must be allowed to participate in his or her own unique way in the conceptualization of that realm. Music that was too specific in its attachment to this or that textual nuance interfered, he believed, with the ability to perceive more important things in poetry.

In a letter to his friend Karl Klingemann, an amateur poet who supplied the words for eight of Mendelssohn's solo songs and the duet "Herbstlied"

(Autumn Song op. 63 no. 4),⁹ the composer tells Klingemann that he is a consummate creator of *poesia per musica*: “With your words, I have the singular feeling that I don’t need to create any music: it is as if I read it [the music] between the lines [of the poem], as though it already stood before me. And if with other poems, especially Goethe, the words turn away from music and want to stand alone, so your poems cry out for music.” Leon Botstein and R. Larry Todd have suggested that Mendelssohn’s imagination was visual in nature, that the composer wanted the listener’s ear to take in the whole in a manner somewhat analogous to the way in which the eye takes in a drawing or painting virtually all at once.¹⁰ Hence Mendelssohn’s preference for strophic song: not only can the ear apprehend a musical strophe as a unit but it has the opportunity to do so several times, reinforcing the sense of the whole. This preference for literal strophic repetition is owing in part to the contemporary fashion for *Volkstümlichkeit* (art song imitating folk song in an artsy way), although one notes with amusement that Mendelssohn was at times exasperated by the fad. Writing to his father from Wales in August 1829, he exclaimed, “May ten thousand devils take all folklore”:

Here I am in Wales, and, oh how lovely, a harpist sits in the lobby of every reputable inn playing so-called folk tunes at you – dreadful, vulgar, fake stuff, and simultaneously a hurdy-gurdy is tootling out melodies. It’s enough to drive one crazy; it’s even given me a toothache. Scottish bagpipes, Swiss cow’s horns, Welsh harps, all playing the Huntsmen’s Chorus with ghastly variations or improvisation, not to mention the lovely songs in the lobby – it’s the only real music they have! It’s beyond understanding. Anyone like myself who can’t abide Beethoven’s folksongs should come here and hear them howled by shrill nasal voices, accompanied by doltish, bumbling fingers, and then try to hold his tongue.¹¹

Mendelssohn asserted that choral song was better than the solo lied for setting folk poetry because “every piano accompaniment smacks both of the drawing room and of the music cabinet [*Notenschrank*].”¹² Piano music was too individual/personal, civilized/bourgeois to convey communal experience.

Mendelssohn’s best-known song, “Auf Flügeln des Gesanges” (On Wings of Song), constitutes an interesting case-study in this composer’s approach to the genre because it is so often cited as an example of Mendelssohn ignoring aspects of the text.¹³ This poem from Heinrich Heine’s *Buch der Lieder* was a magnet for composers from the start; even Adolf Bartels, the anti-Semitic literary critic who hated Heine so much that he wrote two books intended to demolish the great poet’s reputation, had to concede that this poem was splendid.¹⁴ Mendelssohn’s setting of these verses by a man

he knew personally and disliked (the antipathy was mutual)¹⁵ has impelled at least one Heine scholar to plead that we *forget* the song in order to restore the poetry to understandings unbiased by the familiar tune.¹⁶ To many, "Auf Flügeln des Gesanges" is the arch-example of the composer's songs: non-virtuosic, without tonal adventurism, warm and sweet, the strophic whole of more import than pictorial details, simpler than Heine's poem. But viewed from another angle, one can argue that the composer understood the poet fully and plays along with Heine's exercise in deception. That both men create beautiful surfaces is intrinsic to the game.

In Heine's words, one finds the notional Orient beloved of Romantic escapists in the 1820s, but the exotic items are sketchy and keep company with Germanic motifs in a patently artificial manner. The persona of this poem invites his sweetheart to fly with him to a fantasy-India, a Schlaraffenland on the Ganges, where lotus flowers are the welcoming committee and synaesthesia makes the fairy stories fragrant.

(from the *Lyrisches Intermezzo*, no. 9)

Auf Flügeln des Gesanges,
Herzliebchen, trag' ich dich fort,
Fort nach den Fluren des Ganges,
Dort weiß ich den schönsten Ort.

Dort liegt ein rotblühender Garten
Im stillen Mondenschein;
Die Lotosblumen erwarten
Ihr trautes Schwesterlein.

Die Veilchen kichern und kosen,
Und schau'n nach den Sternen empor;
Heimlich erzählen die Rosen
Sich duftende Märchen ins Ohr.

Es hüpfen herbei und lauschen
Die frommen, klugen Gazell'n;
Und in der Ferne rauschen
Des heiligen Stromes Well'n.

Dort wollen wir niedersinken
Unter dem Palmenbaum,
Und Liebe und Ruhe trinken,
Und träumen seligen Traum.¹⁷

(from the *Lyrical Intermezzo*, no. 9)

On wings of song,
beloved, I carry you off,
off to the banks of the Ganges,
there I know the loveliest spot.

There a garden of red blossoms
lies in the quiet moonlight;
the lotus flowers await
their dear sister.

The violets giggle and gossip
and look up at the stars,
and the roses tell fragrant fairy tales
secretly in each other's ears.

The pure, wise gazelles
skip by and listen,
and in the distance rustle
the waves of the holy stream.

There let us sink down
under the palm tree,
and imbibe love and peace
and dream blissful dreams.

It looks and sounds the epitome of beauty, but the gazelles, palm trees, roses, violets, lotus blossoms, and India's sacred river, cobbled together in improbable conjunction, are verbal veils for poverty: the sweetheart is

invited to a night out in the open, without food or drink. Instead, they will imbibe love – cheaper than wine – and dream unspecified dreams together to the lilting strains of melodious verse, devised free of charge. One thinks of Baudelaire’s “L’invitation au voyage” (Invitation to a Journey) from *Les fleurs du mal*, its Dutch canals as unrealistic as Heine’s India and its “luxe, calme, et volupté” the twin to Heine’s “Liebe und Ruhe.” That Heine subverts conventions of all sorts is evident in the anthropomorphized violets, no longer traditional symbols of maidenly modesty but silly coquettes of the sort Heine derides elsewhere in the *Buch der Lieder*; the beloved may be complimented as sister to the exotic lotus, but her kin are more common. If bourgeois society, with its shallow young women and poverty-stricken poets, is an object of subterranean satire in this poem, so too is poetic language. “Ein Bild! Ein Bild! Mein Pferd für’n Bild!” (An image! An image! My horse for an image!), Heine once wrote, in a Shakespearean “send-up” of those writers desperate for new ways to tweak outworn words; here, the persona hopes to create new worlds via language (the Romantic project in a nutshell) that will seduce the sweetheart/the reader. Because he can stitch the borrowed improbabilities together with such skill, perhaps the bourgeois beloved will not notice the touches of the surreal, or if she does, might find them a welcome escape from tea-table conventions. When Heine’s sarcasm is obvious, one knows to look for irony, but in poems like this, where we are beguiled by surface loveliness, one might well overlook the strangeness of it all.

Did Mendelssohn not see it? Did he choose to ignore what Heine was up to in this poem? Or is recognition of the poet’s purposes encoded somewhere in the song? Certainly the music seems to refuse all exoticism, incongruity, or oddity. The piano’s broken-chordal figuration in A \flat major is the epitome of *Hausmusik* accompaniments with its simulation of harp-playing, and the famous tune is a masterpiece of melodic symmetry, its rising-and-falling contours beautifully balanced. The intervallic leaps of a sixth, ascending to launch the first phrase, then descending in the next bar, are among the most memorable hallmarks of a memorable melody, its larger intervals interspersed with scalewise motion like graceful garlands hung between columns. It is characteristic of Mendelssohn’s strophic melodies that the singer avoids the tonic pitch in the vocal line until the end of each musical strophe, the voice hovering above rooted foundations in the piano; one notes too that this melody does not spread its wings very far. The gentle melancholy of dominant minor harmonies in mid-strophe (mm. 10–13) is apropos in a general sense for the muted passion – not eroticism in its wilder manifestations – hymned here. That a slightly more intense outbreak of chromaticism (but nothing radical) happens in the piano

interlude between the first and second musical strophes seems perfectly in accord with this composer's belief that pure music could say more than words.

Occasionally, one can point to a text-specific detail in "Auf Flügeln des Gesanges," such as the singer lingering on the verb "erwarten" (await) in mm. 19–20 or the linear descending chromaticism of the "seligen Traum," a hint that these dreams are erotic in nature; his persona even repeats the words "sel'gen Traum" to prolonged, dying-away tones, as if hypnotizing himself into a dream-state. But Mendelssohn does nothing with leaping gazelles or flirtatious violets or pseudo-Hindu melody, and the omissions are significant. Mendelssohn, I would speculate, recognized that the backdrop of this poem was actually a Biedermeier drawing room in which the persona sings to a middle-class German girl whom he wishes to seduce and does so with a parlor song of consummate loveliness, accompanied by a genteel young lady's harp transmogrified as a piano. This music is not a depiction of the persona's subjective inner world in Schubertian fashion but is instead a *performance* by a masked persona who devises bourgeois music calculated to win over the sweetheart/the public. In his words, Heine can hint to the cognoscenti that all is not as it seems, but Mendelssohn refuses to do so in his music. Scholars are right to point out that this composer was suspicious of the "lyric persona" in the songs of his day, and "Auf Flügeln des Gesanges" can be understood on one level as a repudiation of those Romantic lieder which bring subjectivity to sounding life. It is an irony worthy of Heine himself that Mendelssohn has been so often castigated for his supposed failure to "translate" this poem adequately into music (an exercise that would have horrified him) when in fact, he understood it perfectly. He even joined the poet at his own game – after all, each man in his own fashion points out the duplicity of words. One wonders if the composer took added delight in the fact that his song would surely be sung in German parlors for purposes similar to the persona's, whether or not the listeners could grasp the deeper crises of language and identity at work beneath the polished surface of the lied.

This was not the only occasion on which Heine brought out the best in Mendelssohn. Part of this poet's enterprise was to make myth modern, to bring the old gods of antiquity and the fantastic creatures of folklore into the present. For a composer who loved to trip the light fantastic, who mined musical gold from Shakespeare's mixture of supernatural and human worlds in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the text of "Neue Liebe" (New Love) was an irresistible magnet. The poem appears both in Heine's *Neue Gedichte* (New Poems) of 1844 and his treatise on *Elementargeister* (Elemental Spirits), in which Heine asks whether it is true that a mortal who sees an elfin queen

will die shortly thereafter. He then recites this poem as if such an experience had happened to him, not in the distant past but a short time ago.

In dem Mondenschein im Walde	Lately in the forest, by moonlight,
Sah ich jüngst die Elfen reiten [reiten];	I saw the elves ride by;
Ihre Hörner hört ich klingen,	I heard their horns resounding,
Ihre Glöckchen hört ich läuten;	I heard their bells ringing.
Ihre weißen Rößlein trugen	On their little white horses were
Goldnes Hirschgeweih und flogen	antlers of gold, and they flew
Rasch dahin, wie wilde Schwäne	swiftly through the air,
Kam es durch die Luft gezogen.	like wild swans.
Lächelnd nickte mir die Königin,	Smiling, the queen nodded to me
Lächelnd, im Vorüberreiten	in passing.
[Vorüberreiten].	
Galt das meiner neuen Liebe,	Does this signify my new love
Oder soll es Tod bedeuten? ¹⁸	or does it mean my death?

“Dance,” Heine continues, “is characteristic of spirits of the air,” and Mendelssohn sets Heine’s poem as a specimen of his scherzo style (also familiar from the *Rondo capriccioso* for piano, the third movement of the op. 20 String Octet, and the incidental music to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, to cite only the best-known examples). The song is in the F♯ minor Mendelssohn would have known from eighteenth-century convention as the tonality associated with death, the afterlife, and the supernatural (Schubert calls on the same tradition in his song “Schwestergruss,” or “A Sister’s Greeting” from beyond the grave). This song poses more difficulties for the performers than “Auf Flügeln des Gesanges,” whose suitability for amateurs is part of the point: the presto accompaniment is demanding, and the broken-chordal contours of the singer’s line are difficult to keep in tune. What makes the piano part more of a challenge than most of his songs is the ringing of elfin chimes in the guise of measured trill figures, appearing first in mm. 5–9. These trills sound throughout the entire first beat in 2/4 meter, and the energizing of the downbeat in this manner is delicately diabolical in effect. The fantastic-musical worlds in Mendelssohn are charged with an animistic vitality that conveys a sense of the superhuman, even (perhaps particularly) when the sounds are soft.

The introduction alone is enough to tell us that the elves’ music is located in the piano, its simulacrum of fairy horns, horses’ hooves, and bells devoid of words. The Other which can deal death does not traffic in the ratiocination of mortal speech. Consequently, the persona’s vocal line is harnessed, helplessly, to the other-worldly music throughout the song; he can only sing to the elfin company’s strains and in their rhythms. It is the verb “läuten” (to ring, to resound) in mm. 24–26 that is the catalyst for an outbreak of

Example 11.1 Op. 19[a] no. 4, "Neue Liebe" (Heine), mm. 19–38

The musical score consists of three systems. The first system shows the vocal line starting with a forte (*sf*) dynamic and the piano accompaniment with a *cresc.* marking. The second system features a series of *sf* chords in the piano part. The third system includes a *dimin.* marking in both the vocal and piano parts.

Lyrics: ih-re Hör-ner hört' ich kling-en, ih-re Glöck-lein hört' ich läu-ten, läu-ten; ih-re Hör-ner hört' ich klin-gen, ih-re Glöck-lein hört' ich läu-ten, ih-re Glöck-lein, ih-re Glöck-lein

extremity, the singer swooping, plunging, and leaping in elemental intervals while the piano punches out a series of *sforzando* chords that look on the printed page for all the world like a passage from early Beethoven (albeit in the treble register). In Mendelssohn's imagination, the persona realizes at this very instant that the sounds he hears are deathly and leaps up an octave in alarm. The realization transforms the vocal line into something extraordinary. Every downbeat is accented in a fashion counter to correct prosody; this is the collision of the supernatural with the mortal, and coercion is implicit in the singer's inability to make the speech accents accurate as mortals measure such matters (Example 11.1). Here, Mendelssohn emphasizes the poet's trochees by prolonging the initial accented syllable of each foot in order to underscore the words which tell of sound and hearing ("Hörner, hört, klingen, Glöcklein, hört, läuten"); Heine repeats words to incantatory effect, and the composer repeats them even more often. The high A in

mm. 27 and 31, difficult to execute because the singer has little time beforehand to take a breath, make of the adjective “ihre” something unforgettable: “*their horns, their little bells,*” the persona sings, his fear palpable. Harmony heightens the menace; from the light, hollow, horn-fanfare figuration in F♯ minor, Mendelssohn jumps to similar fanfare figures on D major, and from there, to G minor harmonies – the flatted supertonic of F♯ minor and, like all Neapolitan chords, an agent of darkness.

Mendelssohn was fond of the varied strophic format in which literal repetition of musical strophes is followed by a final varied strophe, and the third and last stanza of Heine’s poem is given special treatment in accord with that particular formal design. The composer’s imagination was clearly piqued by the painterly image of the elfin procession riding by, for which he conceived the felicitous juxtaposition of the fairy horses’ hoofbeats in the piano part with the words “im Vorüberreiten” set as half-notes in the vocal line, one per measure until the final two syllables, prolonged even more. The passage somehow conveys the sense of the persona watching the elves so intently that he cannot say/sing anything else, the vocal line as if hypnotized; the persona is bound to the sight, and eyes and voice alike swivel to watch the departing company. When he ponders what the vision might mean, whether Eros or Death (“Galt das meiner neuen Liebe? / Oder soll es Tod bedeuten?”), the listener is reminded of Schubert’s miller lad in “Pause,” who also asks recitative-like questions which temporarily blot out the previous music; even the unharmonized repeated dominant pitches which precede the quasi-recitative phrases are a device familiar from Schubert, who occasionally melts from one section or passage to another in this fashion. The more dreadful of the two possibilities, “Tod,” is dramatized by a loud diminished seventh harmony which makes of the tonic pitch F♯ something indeterminate; when we hear another diminished seventh “horror” chord, trilled rather than struck, in the postlude (an abbreviated *pianissimo* return of the introduction – the elves have the last “word”), we are reminded of death. The entire song is brilliantly conceived. Although the horn-call motifs and hoofbeat figures seem to contradict Mendelssohn’s stated disdain for pictorialism, the composer might well have noted and approved the persona’s inability to define what the apparition means, or in musical terms, what the sounds in the piano signify. Music and the supernatural lie beyond the scope of mere language, even of Heine’s witchery with words.

If “Neue Liebe” is a glittering specimen of scherzo-esque virtuosity, it is not as brilliant as “Andres Maienlied” op. 8 no. 8, truly a work-out for the pianist. The young composer was clearly fond both of Johann Heinrich Voss’s original poetry and Voss’s popular edition of Ludwig Höltz’s poetry, the latter being Mendelssohn’s source for the text of “Andres Maienlied” (the

title refers to the song immediately preceding it, a “Maienlied” to a poem by Jacob von der Warte). Voss took considerable liberties with Hölty's verse: the entire fifth stanza, in which the demonic is made comic (“A fiery dragon flies around the roof and brings us butter and eggs; the neighbors see the sparks flying and cross themselves by the fire . . .”), is Voss's invention.¹⁹ There is a long tradition of making the horrific comic (Schubert's setting of Friedrich von Matthisson's “Der Geistertanz” is one example), and this poem tells of a witches' coven celebrating the arrival of spring on the Brocken mountain-top, where a gallimaufry of creatures swarm to worship Beelzebub. For this lighthearted exercise in *diablerie*, Mendelssohn devises a piano part bubbling and boiling over with a succession of brilliant accompanimental patterns, all couched in the 6/8 meter of folk song. (Given the association between virtuosity and diabolism à la Paganini, one wonders whether Mendelssohn wrote this song as a humorous “send-up” of the phenomenon.) The mixture of tonic G minor with G major in the introduction and the fact that major mode comes before minor are clues that we should chuckle, not shudder, at the supernatural forces unleashed here; the final G major chord of the song, with B \sharp in the topmost voice, is as much a shout of laughter as of Satanic triumph. Clichés of musical horror are put to gleeful use – for example, the convention of ascending chromaticism that is bone-chilling, awe-inspiring, in the Schiller-Schubert song “Gruppe aus dem Tartarus” (Group from Hades) is *mock-horrific* in “Andres Maienlied” (Example 11.2). Lightning-bolt arpeggios shooting upwards and then back down in a flash, tremolos, drum-roll patterns, menacing *unisono* figures, grace-noted low bass scalar figures leading to an accented pitch, octave leaps to high pitches for the singer – “Did I leave anything out?,” one imagines Mendelssohn asking himself, tongue-in-cheek. That he could indeed be pictorial in song is evident; that he does so here as a “special event,” with humor aforethought, is also evident.

I have already asserted that there is more variety in this composer's song oeuvre than some have admitted, and the point can be demonstrated from within this same opus. The fourth of the twelve songs in op. 8 is the darkly beautiful “Erntelied” (Harvest Song) with the subtitle “Altes Kirchenlied” (Old Sacred Song) on a poem from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. For this strophic poem about Death the inexorable reaper who mows down all the lovely flowers/people, no matter what their beauty, Mendelssohn mingles modal harmonies, imitations of folksong, and chorale features to powerful effect; one need only look at its two printed pages chock-a-block with chromaticism to realize the complexity of this seemingly simple song. Each of the first five stanzas, with its catalogue of floral beauties doomed to extinction, culminates in the warning, “Hüte dich, schöns Blümelein! Hüte dich!” (Beware, lovely little flower! Beware!), and each time, it is the piano

Example 11.2 Op. 8 no. 8, "Andres Maienlied" (Hölty), mm. 16–32

sf

Tan - ze. Ein schwar - zer Bock, ein Be - sen - stock, die
 Brän - de! Und Beel - ze - bub ver - heißt dem Trupp der -

O - fen - ga - bel, der Wo - cken reißt uns ge - schwind, wie Blitz und
 Tan - zen - den Ga - ben auf Ga - - - ben: sie sol - len schön in Sei - de

Wind, durch sau - sen - de Lü - - - te zum Bro - cken,
 gehn und Töp - fe voll Gol - des sich gra - ben,

reißt uns ge - schwind, wie Blitz und Wind, durch sau - - - -
 sie sol - len schön in Sei - de gehn und Töp - - - -

sen - de Lüf - te zum Bro - - - - cken!
 fe voll Gol - des sich gra - - - - ben.

pp *sfz* *p* *cresc.* *f* *ff* *dim.* *p*

Example 11.3 Op. 8 no. 4, "Erntelied," conclusion

Freu' - dich, du schöns Blü - me - lein! Freu' - - -

dich, freu' - - - dich!

which must complete the final cadence of the musical strophe. The dread dénouement has not yet happened to us, and we steer clear of Death's tonic pitch, at least with the singer's own breath. The piano goes on to predict the future – and it is not far off. With the final stanza of the poem comes willed, defiant metamorphosis of dread into joy (“Come here, Death, I do not fear you . . . I shall be in the heavenly garden we all await. Rejoice, beautiful little flower, rejoice!”), but Mendelssohn does not convert fear-haunted modal darkness into major mode rejoicing. In his imagining, music gives the sounding lie to the assertion made in words, telling us that the fear of death is not so easily overcome (Example 11.3).

Immediately after the “Erntelied” in op. 8 is another “geistliche Lied” entitled “Pilgerspruch” (Pilgrim’s Proverb) to a poem by the Baroque poet Paul Flemming, but this is in a tamer, gentler musical manner, diatonicism adorned with a few secondary dominants of the sort that can at times make nineteenth-century church music a cloying affair. This in turn is followed by a “Frühlingslied” (Spring Song) in Swabian dialect on a poem by the beautiful, talented Friederike Robert (a friend of Mendelssohn and Heine), its vivacity complete with trilled birdsong in the piano. Variety indeed, and yet the opus clearly has an overall design, with spring songs at the beginning and end enclosing a religious core.

Mendelssohn mostly shunned song cycles of the Schubertian or Schumannian kind, except in part-songs, such as the op. 41 *Drei Volkslieder* to

Heine's three linked poems entitled *Tragödie* (Tragedy); one scholar has also proposed what he calls a "shadow cycle" (an original cyclic design which does not subsequently appear in publication) in the first three songs of op. 48, collectively entitled *Der erste Frühlingstag* (The first day of spring).²⁰ About half of this composer's choral songs were composed for social gatherings, for almanacs, for festivals, for the choral singers who took part in his Leipzig Gewandhaus concerts, and not for publication, but in those works published in Mendelssohn's lifetime or shortly thereafter, one occasionally finds quasi-organization by poetic or literary theme. For example, the op. 59 *Im Grünen* (In the Green Woods) part-songs for mixed voices, on texts by four different poets, are all Nature songs, and the four male chorus songs of op. 75 of 1848 are all wandering songs (a venerable Romantic topos). However, the six male choruses of op. 50 have no such bonds in common, and Mendelssohn evidently did not consider thematic unity necessary in all instances.

We will take leave of Mendelssohn's solo songs with a brief consideration of a prophetic late song, one which anticipates music composed half-a-century after his death. Mendelssohn is so often characterized as a conservative composer that it is useful to be reminded of his originality, his capacity on occasion to see into the future. Perhaps because he spent much of his life in the gray climate of northern Germany, Mendelssohn was particularly attracted to spring songs and composed numerous specimens of the genre to texts by poets medieval (Ulrich von Lichtenstein, Jacob von der Warte) and modern. Most of them are joyous celebrations of spring's arrival; one thinks of the exultant, fanfare-like strains of the "Frühlingslied" op. 34 no. 3 on a poem by Klingemann and the "Frühlingslied" op. 47 no. 3, irresistible in their vitality, or "Im Grünen" op. 8 no. 11, on a poem by Voss. But on 7 October 1847, only a few weeks before his death, Mendelssohn created a spring song in another vein: the "Altdeutsches Frühlingslied" (Old German Spring Song), published posthumously as op. 86 no. 6 (he considered including it in op. 71). Its text is a heavily rewritten segment from the *Trutz-Nachtigall* of Friedrich Spee (1591–1635), a Jesuit mystical poet famous in his own day for his opposition to the burning of witches. In its original form, the poem is entitled "Anders Liebesgesang der gespons JESU. Zum Anfang der Sommerzeit" and tells in twelve ten-line stanzas of mystic marriage with Christ as the only source of healing for a wounded spirit. Mendelssohn's song-text uses only verses 1 and 6 and completely alters their meaning.²¹ Here, Nature rejoices, but the persona's pain admits no alleviation because "I had to part from you, beloved." There is no mention of anything religious, and one can understand the extract in a wholly secular sense – a means for Mendelssohn to recount the loss he had suffered the previous spring when his beloved sister Fanny died.

In his setting of Spee modernized, Mendelssohn created what present-day listeners can hear as a foreshadowing of Mahler's "Der Einsame im Herbst" (The Lonely Man in Autumn), the second movement of *Das Lied von der Erde*, composed sixty years later. If the two poems hail from different seasons, they are sisters under the skin, both measuring grief against the gauge of the changing seasons – and Mendelssohn too was an "Einsamer im Herbst" that last autumn of his life.²² Mahler plunges deeply into fin-de-siècle melancholy, while the earlier composer is more reticent, and yet the two compositions are allied by their similar *Bewegung*. Ceaseless rising and falling streams of equal note values (sixteenth notes in Mendelssohn, eighth notes in Mahler) in the same middle register, neither high nor low, flow through both works. Mahler's motion is mostly scalewise in 3/2 meter, Mendelssohn's a complex alternation of scalar, broken-chordal, and intervallic motives in 4/4, but the effect is eerily the same, and it is tempting to speculate that the two songs arose from the same conceptual ground. In both songs, time flows in a gently inexorable stream of pitches, bearing the grief-stricken personae to their deaths in the wake of those lost and mourned. In both the large and the small song, the vocal line is often disposed in equal note values of twice the duration of the moving accompanimental figuration (eighth notes in Mendelssohn, quarter notes in Mahler), and this quasi-chant-like syllabic style conveys weary resignation in the face of the inevitable. In both compositions, the texture is translucent, austere in a fashion appropriate to sad knowledge on the brink of the grave, and in both, the instrumental motion seems unpredictable in its twists and turns, not the regulated accompanimental patterns in songs such as "Auf Flügeln des Gesanges" but something serpentine. Mendelssohn might have been invited to do so by the words "wie Schlänglein krumm / gehn lächelnd um / die Bächlein kühl in Wäldern," and the asymmetry is not truly random but rather is held together by the occasional internal sequences (the descending sequence between the two musical strophes is one example) and recurring motivic elements. One is tempted to find metaphysical meanings in both Mahler's and Mendelssohn's recourse to such figuration, with its artfully meandering contours and its ceaselessness: life and Nature go their way nonstop, whatever our weariness or sorrow, so says this figuration.

"Altdeutsches Frühlingslied," like so many of Mendelssohn's songs, is strophic, and it seems evident that the composer took his cue not from the first stanza but from the second, with its quiet statement of grief beyond reparation. The darker minor harmonies in mm. 11–12 accord precisely with the words "Nur ich allein, ich leide Pein" in Mendelssohn's second strophe, not with the words to which they first appear ("Laub allgemach nun schleicht an Tag"), while the tonic minor harmony in m. 15 and the sudden *pianissimo* hush go with the statement of parting ("seit du von mir

Example 11.4 Mendelssohn, “Altdeutsches Frühlingslied” [op. 86 no. 6], beginning

Allegretto tranquillo

pp *dim.*

dolce

Der trü - be Win - ter ist vor - bei, die Schwal - ben wie - der -
 Wo man nur schaut, fast al - le Welt zur Freu - den sich tut

keh - ren;
 rü - sten;

Example 11.5 Gustav Mahler, “Der Einsame im Herbst,” beginning

Etwas schleichend - ermüdet *molto espr*

pp sempre

und ich von dir . . .”) more than with the winding brooks of stanza 1 (they had their own influence on this music). The prolongation of the verb “mußte” in m. 18 (“o Liebste, *mußte* scheiden”) is perhaps the most moving detail of all. This parting, Mendelssohn tells us, was forcibly compelled.

This brief essay barely scratches the surface of Mendelssohn's song oeuvre. Were there room enough and time, one could expound on the fascinating comparison between Schubert's and Mendelssohn's settings of Ludwig Uhland's “Frühlingsglaube” (Faith in Spring); on the merry, folksong-like “Warnung vor dem Rhein” (Beware of the Rhine), with its invocation of the recently invented Loreley myth; on this composer's dabblings in the musical-exotic for his pseudo-Spanish “Romanze” op. 8 no. 10 and the “Todeslied der Bojaren” (Death Song of the Boyars) from the *Nachlaß*; and much more. If his emotional range in lied was narrower than that of Schubert, that is hardly surprising: Schubert composed many more songs than Mendelssohn across a wider spectrum, and the Viennese master announced his intent to modernize the song composition of his day when he was in his early teens. This was not Mendelssohn's mission, but if one understands his idiosyncratic approach to the lied, there is much to be gleaned from this music. There are, after all, reasons – good ones – for the fact that certain songs by Mendelssohn are “chestnuts,” beloved of both musicians and the public. Others deserve to become so.²³