Translations and Program Notes for the Brahms and Mahler songs

Texts for Johannes Brahms’ Zwei Gesänge

1 In goldenen Abendseehn getauchet, wie feirerlich die Wälder stehn!
   In leise Stimmen der Vögel bauchet des Abendwindes leises Wehn.
   Was listeln die Winde, die Vögelein? Sie listeln die Welt
   in Schlummer ein.
   
   In the golden glow of evening, how majestically the
   woods appear!
   In the quiet voices of birds rustles the gentle breeze of
   the evening.
   What do the breezes whisper, the birds? They whisper
   the world to sleep.
   
   Ihr Wünsche, die ihr stehts euch reget im Herzen sonder
   Rast und Ruh!
   Du Sehnen, das die Brust bewegt, wann ruhest du, wann
   schlummerst du?
   Beim Lispern der Winde, der Vögelein, ihr sehenden
   Wünsche, wann schlafet ihr ein?
   
   You desires that constantly arise in the heart without
   rest or peace!
   You longing, which moves the breast, when will you
   rest, when will you sleep?
   With the whispering of the winds, of the birds, you
   yearning desires, when will you go to sleep?
   
   Ach, wenn nicht mehr in goldne Fernen mein Geist auf
   Traumgeflügel eilt,
   Nicht mehr an ewig fernen Sternen mit sehndem Blick
   mein Auge weilt;
   Dann listeln die Winde, die Vögelein mit meinem Sehnen
   mein Leben ein.
   
   Ah, when no longer into the golden distance my spirit
   rushes on the wings of dreams,
   No longer on eternally faraway stars with a yearning
   gaze my eyes linger;
   Then the winds and the birds will whisper, with my
   yearning, my life to its close.
   
   -Friedrich Rückert

2 Die ihr schwebet um diese Palmen in Nacht und Wind,
   Ihr heilgen Engel, stillet die Wipfeln! Es schlummert mein
   Kind.
   
   Ihr Palmen von Bethlehem im Windesbrausen, wie mögt ihr
   heute so zornig sausen!
   O rauscht nicht also! schweigt, neiget euch leis und lind;
   Stillet die Wipfeln! Es schlummert mein Kind.
   
   You who soar around these palm trees in the night and
   wind,
   You holy angels, calm the treetops! My child is sleeping.
   
   You palm trees of Bethlehem in the uproar of the wind,
   why must you rattle so angrily today?
   Oh, don’t blow so! be quiet, bend down softly and gently;
   Calm the treetops! My child is sleeping.
   
   Der Himmelsgnade dudlet Beschwerde; ach, wie so müid er
   ward vom Leid der Erde.
   Ach, nun im Schaf ihm leise gesänftigt die Qual zerrinnnt.
   Stillet die Wipfeln! Es schlummert mein Kind!
   
   The child of heaven endured hardships; ah, how tired
   he was of the sorrow of the earth.
   Ah, only comforted by sleep does the torment melt away.
   Calm the treetops! My child is sleeping!
   
   Grimmige Kälte sauset hernieder; womit nur deck ich des
   Kindleins Gleider!
   O all ihr Engel, die ihr geflügelt wandelt im Wind,
   Stillet die Wipfeln! Es schlummert mein Kind.
   
   Terrible chills blow down on us; how can I cover the
   child’s limbs?
   Oh, all you angels who fly about in the wind,
   Calm the treetops! My child is sleeping.
   
   -Emanuel Geibel after Lope de Vega
Program Notes on Gustav Mahler’s Kindertotenlieder

By Mary Craig

In the winter of 1833-1834, the German poet Friedrich Rückert (1788-1866) and his family suffered the death of three-year-old Luise from scarlet fever. Just sixteen days later, five-year-old Ernst followed his sister in death to the same disease. Over the ensuing six months, Rückert poured his sorrow and disbelief into 461 poems he called “Kindertotenlieder.” The poems remained unpublished until after his own death.

The Austrian composer Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) selected five of Rückert’s poems to set as symphonic songs written between 1901 and 1904. He conducted the premiere performance of the work in Vienna in 1905. Mahler is said to have been inspired to write this work, in part, because he experienced the deaths of eight of his thirteen siblings, including his favorite brother, also named Ernst.

Sadly, Mahler’s own daughter, Maria, succumbed to the same disease as Rückert’s two children in 1907 at the age of five. Although Mahler said he had imagined the pain of losing a child of his own as he composed his Kindertotenlieder, he believed that, after the death of Maria, he would not have been able to write the songs.

On August 6, 2004 my son, Simon Craig Vodosek, died of a childhood cancer called neuroblastoma. He was seven years old, having lived with his illness since he was four and a half. Although he received extensive treatment, Simon’s illness proved as lethal as the scarlet fever of Rückert’s and Mahler’s time.

The very next day, a fortuitous meeting occurred. A neighbor came by to offer to run errands for the family. It turned out that she was a pianist with a strong interest in German Lieder, just like me. Within weeks, Elizabeth Ballantyne and I were enjoying sessions of reading music together. At some point, we decided to look at Mahler’s Kindertotenlieder.

The result of that curiosity is this evening’s performance of Mahler’s settings of his selections from Rückert’s poems. I have found it helpful and important to explore my grief through singing. Since my son’s death, I have relied on writing to help me comprehend my sorrow and the enormous changes in my life. I find a kindred spirit in Friedrich Rückert, who also turned to writing to help him grasp the horror of the death of one beloved child followed so closely by another.

Mahler’s music and Rückert’s words offer a means of understanding some of the terrain of parental bereavement. Nun will die Sonn’ so bell aufgeben expresses exhaustion and disbelief at the sun’s audacity to rise so soon, so relentlessly in spite of tragedy. Nun seh’ ich wohl warum so dunkle Flammen describes the sparkle in a child’s eyes, the intensity of which seemed to foretell the child’s untimely death. Wenn dein Mütterlein observes domestic life as it continues after the child’s death. The author, both charmed and distressed, finds himself expecting to see his little daughter still following her mother about the house.

Oft’ denk ich, sie sind nur ausgegangen offers insight into feelings of disbelief about a death. The author assures himself that the children have only gone for a walk and will be returning soon. As the realization sinks in, he admits that they have gone on a walk to “yonder heights,” and he will not see them again until he joins them there. In diesem Wetter evokes a storm of guilt and remorse as the author desperately clings to the illusion that the deaths could somehow have been prevented. As the storm abates, a peaceful image emerges of the children now resting as if in their own home, safe from storms, sheltered by the hand of God.
Texts for Gustav Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder* from poems by Friedrich Rückert

1. Nun will die Sonn' so hell aufgehn,
   Als sei kein Unglück die Nacht geschehn.
   Das Unglück geschah nur mir allein,
   Die Sonne, sie scheinet allgemein.
   Du mußt nicht die Nacht in dir verschären,
   Mußt sie ins ew'ge Licht versenken.
   Ein Lämplein verlosch in meinem Zelt,
   Heil sei dem Freudenlicht der Welt!

   Now the sun intends to rise so bright
   As if no tragedy occurred in the night.
   The tragedy happened to me alone,
   The sun, it shines universally.
   You need not lock up the night inside yourself,
   You must immerse it in the eternal light.
   A tiny lamp went out in my household,
   Greetings to the joyous light of the world!

2. Nun seh' ich wohl, warum so dunkle Flammen
   Ihr sprühtet mir in manchem Augenblicke,
   O Augen, gleichsam um voll in einem Blicke
   Zu drängen eure ganze Macht zusammen.
   Doch abn' ich nicht, weil Nebel mich umschwammen,
   Gewoben vom verblendenden Geschicke,
   Daß sich der Strahl bereits zur Heimkehr schicke
   Dorthin, von wannen alle Strahlen stammen.
   Ihr wolltet mir mit eurem Leuchten sagen:
   Wir möchten nah dir bleiben gerne,
   Doch ist uns das vom Schicksal abgeschlagen.
   Sieh uns nur an, denn bald sind wir dir fern!
   Was dir nur Augen sind in diesen Tagen,
   In künft'gen Nächten sind es dir nur Sterne.

   Now I see clearly why such dark flames
   Sparkled forth from you at times,
   Oh eyes, as if in one glance
   To concentrate your full power.
   Yet I had no idea, because mists surrounded me,
   Woven by deceptive fortune,
   That the ray of light was already headed back
   To the place where all rays originate.
   You wanted to tell me with your brilliance:
   We want to stay near you dearly,
   But that is denied us by fate.
   Look at us, because soon we will be far from you!
   What seem now to you to be eyes
   In future nights will appear to you only as stars.

3. Wenn dein Mütterlein
   Tritt zur Tür herein,
   Und den Kopf ich drehe,
   Ihr entgegen sehe,
   Fällt auf ihr Gesicht
   Erst der Blick mir nicht,
   Sondern auf die Stelle
   Näher nach der Schwelle,
   Dort wo würde dein
   Lieb Geschichten sein,
   Wenn du freudenthelle
   Trätest mit herein
   Wie sonst, mein Töchterlein.
   Wenn dein Mütterlein
   Tritt zur Tür herein,
   Mit der Kerze Schimmer,
   Ist es mir als immer,
   Kämen du mit herein,
   Haschtest hinterdrehen
   Als wie sonst ins Zimmer.
   O du, des Vaters Zelle
   Zu schnelle
   Erlosch'ner Freudenschein!
   Wenn dein Mütterlein
   Tritt zur Tür herein,
   Mit der Kerze Schimmer,
   Ist es mir als immer,
   Kämen du mit herein,
   Haschtest hinterdrehen
   Als wie sonst ins Zimmer.
   O du, des Vaters Zelle
   Zu schnelle
   Erlosch'ner Freudenschein!

   When your dear mother
   Walks in through the door,
   And I turn my head,
   To look at her,
   Upon her face at first
   My gaze does not fall,
   Rather at the place,
   Just past the threshold,
   There where would be
   Your sweet little face,
   Bright with joy,
   If you were to come in,
   As usual, my little girl.

   When your dear mother
   Walks in through the door,
   With the glowing candle,
   It feels to me as always,
   That you would come,
   Flitting along behind her
   Just as usual into the room.
   Oh you, from your
   father's world
   Too quickly
   Extinguished light of joy!
Oft denk' ich, sie sind nur ausgegangen,
Bald werden sie wieder nach Hause gelangen,
Der Tag ist schön, o sei nicht bang,
Sie machen nur einen weiten Gang.

Jawohl, sie sind nur ausgegangen,
Und werden jetzt wieder nach Hause gelangen,
O sei nicht bang, der Tag ist schön,
Sie machen den Gang zu jenen Höh'n!

Sie sind uns nur voraus gegangen,
Und werden nicht wieder nach Hause verlangen;
Wir holen sie ein auf jenen Höhn
Im Sonnenschein, der Tag ist schön!

In diesem Wetter, in diesem Braus,
Nie hätt' ich gesendet die Kinder hinaus;
Man hat sie hinaus getragen,
Ich durfte dazu nichts sagen.

In diesem Wetter, in diesem Saus,
Nie hätt' ich gelassen die Kinder hinaus,
Ich fürchtete, sie erkranken,
Das sind nun eitle Gedanken.

In diesem Wetter, in diesem Graus,
Nie hätt' ich gelassen die Kinder hinaus.
Ich sorgte, sie stürben morgen,
Das ist nun nicht zu besorgen.

In diesem Wetter, in diesem Braus,
Sie ruhn als wie in der Mutter Haus,
Von keinem Sturm erschrecket,
Von Gottes Hand bedecket.

Often I think they have merely gone out,
Soon they will be coming home,
The day is beautiful, oh do not worry,
They are only taking a long walk.

Yes, indeed, they have merely gone out,
And will now be returning home,
Oh do not worry, it’s a beautiful day,
They are on their way to yonder heights.

They have simply gone on ahead of us,
And they will no longer yearn to come home;
We will catch up with them on yonder heights
In sunshine, the day is beautiful!

In this weather, in this bluster,
I would never have sent the children out;
Someone must have carried them out,
I was not allowed to say anything about it.

In this weather, in this tumult,
I would never have let the children out,
I would have feared they would get sick,
Those are now idle thoughts.

In this weather, in this gruesomeness,
I never would have let the children out.
I would have worried they would die tomorrow,
Now that does not matter.

In this weather, in this bluster,
They are resting as if in their mother’s house,
Not frightened by any storm,
Sheltered by the hand of God.