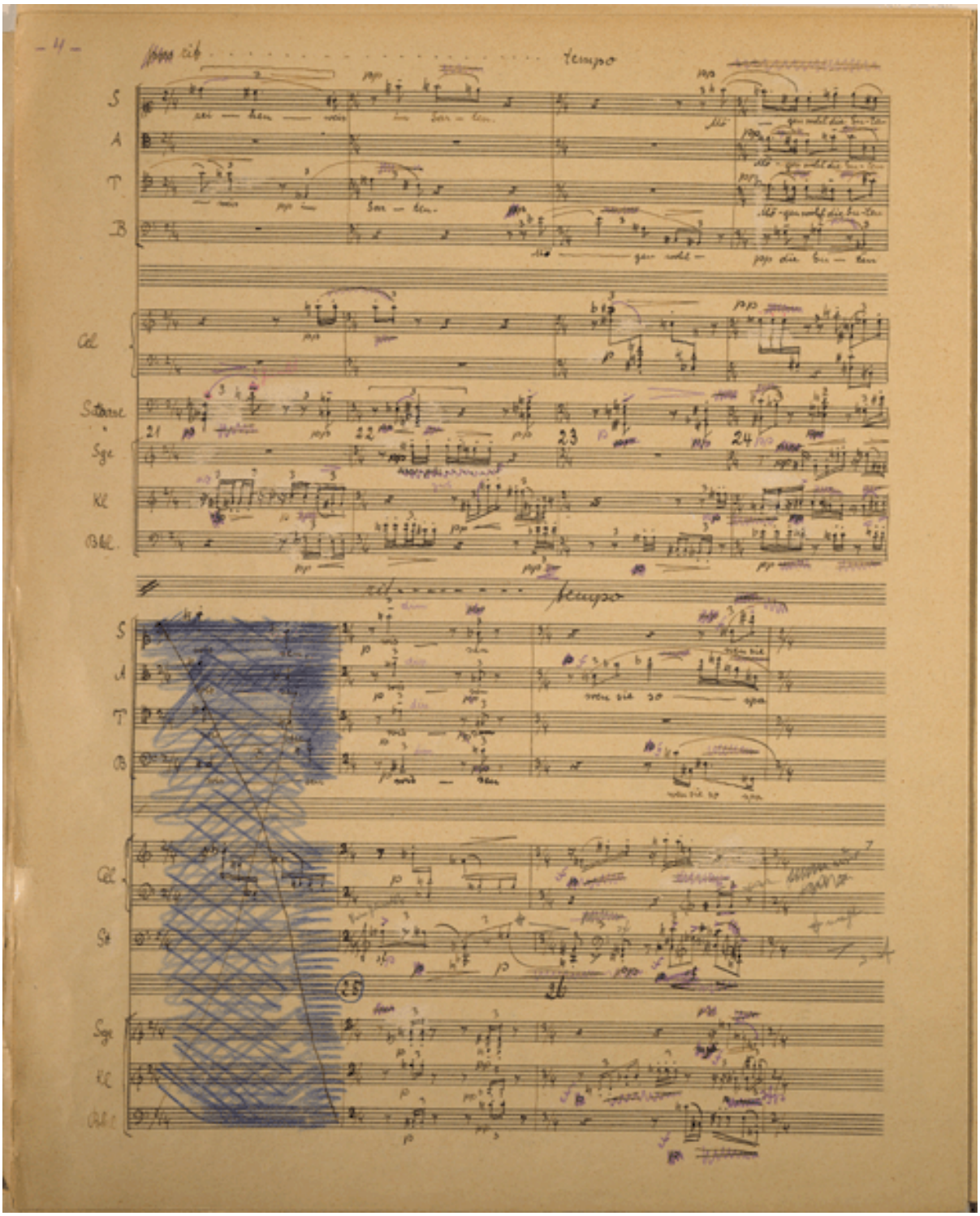
Anton Webern's *Zwei Lieder für gemischten Chor*, op. 19

Lauriejean Reinhardt

Anton Webern's *Zwei Lieder für gemischten Chor*, op. 19 (1925-1926) remains one of his least-known compositions, yet it occupies an extremely important position in his oeuvre. Not only is this Webern's first twelve-tone work on a comparatively large scale, it also marks the first time he organized constituent movements around the same row. His previous experiments with twelve-tone composition had treated the row rather as an isolated device and emphasized solo lieder accompanied by two to three instruments. Beginning with op. 19, however, and continuing with the instrumental works of opp. 20-22, Webern embarked on a series of multimovement compositions that featured an increasingly more sophisticated handling of the row and expanded performing forces as well as extended forms.[1] The choral lieder of op. 19 thus seem to signal the composer's readiness to test his twelve-tone skills on a larger, more expanded scale.[2]

The op. 19 choruses are notable additionally for the fact that their texts are drawn from the writings of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Goethe's influence on Webern's aesthetic outlook remains undisputed, and he was equally important to Webern as a composer: sketches on ten separate Goethe poems exist from every stage of Webern's career. Yet only three Goethe settings were completed and published by Webern: the two choral movements of op. 19 and an earlier, piano-vocal setting of the poem "Gleich und Gleich" (1917), which Webern included in his *Vier Lieder*, op. 12, No. 4.[3]

By a curious coincidence, Goethe's *Chinesisch-deutsche Jahres- und Tageszeiten*, Webern's literary source for op. 19, occupies a similarly important yet often undervalued position in Goethe's oeuvre. Written during the summer of 1827, these fourteen short poems blending Chinese and German themes constitute Goethe's final lyric cycle. The larger theme of the work concerns aging and the onset of maturity, represented, as the cycle's title suggests, by the metaphor of the changing seasons and the passing of time. The nature imagery that permeates the poems invokes the rich heritage of German pastoral poetry, while the aged Mandarin-poet at the center of the cycle harks back to the rococo era and its fascination with chinoiserie. The depth of



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wisdom the Mandarin personifies and the larger philosophical meaning that underlies much of Goethe's symbolism have, on the other hand, led some to suggest a more poignantly autobiographical level of interpretation.[4]

Webern's interest in this late Goethe cycle is remarkable for a number of reasons. Not only do the *Tageszeiten* poems stand outside the canon of Goethe texts traditionally set by lieder composers, they were also dismissed as vague in intent and design and even retrogressive until very recently.[5] In addition to the two poems Webern set as op. 19, he turned to the *Tageszeiten* lyrics once again in 1929 and began sketches on "Nun weiß man erst, was Rosenknospe sei," a pivotal poem from the end of the cycle that relates directly to the two poems he had set earlier as op. 19.[6]

Recent studies that evaluate the *Tageszeiten* cycle more favorably have identified characteristics that may help to explain Webern's interest in the poems. Among these characteristics are Goethe's exceptionally graphic representation of the natural world and his strong emphasis on visual perception and color imagery, both of which recall his *Zur Farbenlehre*, a work with special significance for Webern during the twelve-tone period. Also significant are Goethe's elliptical mode of diction and his aphoristic approach to cyclical structure, which have been compared to the style exploited by the Expressionist writers of Webern's day. In addition, the Oriental mysticism that threads its way through Goethe's cycle may also have been attractive to Webern. The Mandarin's ascetic detachment from the outside world, his advocacy of rapturous contemplation (*Begeisterung*) over intellectual instruction (*Belehrung*), and the Eastern concept of time implied by the larger cycle are all themes with an obvious appeal to a generation of Viennese artists who had long been fascinated by Eastern philosophy. Webern himself counted Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*, a work based on Hans Bethge's German adaptations of Chinese verse, among his favorite compositions, and he had recently attempted a number of his own Bethge settings.

For the present composition, Webern chose a pair of *Vorfrühlingsgedichte* from the opening section of Goethe's cycle. "Weiß wie Lilien" and "Ziehn die Schafe von der Weise," poems II and III in Goethe's ordering, locate the aged Mandarin in the idyllic, isolated setting where he has chosen to live out his final days, having retreated from the burdens of "the North." The poems portray this setting alternately as a paradise garden and a verdant shepherd's meadow; they are further related through the use of parallel color imagery[7] and the shared theme of a heightened anticipation of spring in full bloom.[8] The thematic connections that bind the two poems may also have contributed to Webern's decision to unify his songs around a single row.

Webern responded to both of these themes in his musical settings, as we can see here. Goethe's vivid color imagery is matched by an admirably colorful instrumentation. The shimmering quality of the celesta and guitar is contrasted by a trio of more traditional orchestral timbres comprising violin, clarinet, and bass clarinet. The celesta was a favorite instrument of Webern's, and it features prominently in a number of his scores, but he composed rarely for guitar, perhaps because of the instrument's association with folk and popular music. He may have used the guitar in this context to complement the sound quality of the celesta, but also to evoke the *Volkslied* roots of Goethe's images.[9]

The second theme common to both texts, the Mandarin poet's anxious anticipation of the brilliant spring foliage to come, is conveyed by a luminous and dynamic musical surface. As our manuscript reveals, the songs are characterized by rapidly shifting layers of sound determined largely by performing forces and deployed in passages of homophony, polyphony, and heterophony. Webern's approach to the row results in a peculiar echoing and doubling effect that contributes further to the perception of shifting musical layers. In both songs, the trio of violin, clarinet, and bass clarinet "accompanies" the voices by presenting the same row as one or more of the vocal parts. While the instruments occasionally double the voices in a clear and audible fashion, more often their pitches are arranged so that the instrumental lines do not directly duplicate those of the voices.

This curious "accompanimental" effect can be seen in measures 23-25. Together, the soprano, alto, and tenor present the untransposed prime form for the phrase "Mögen wohl die," while the same row is given simultaneously in the three lower instruments. But while the bass clarinet literally duplicates the tenor line, the violin and clarinet perform a sort of *Stimmtausch,* revoicing the row pitches from the soprano and alto parts. The sonic effect is at once both lively and highly resonant, but the exact nature of this resonance remains somewhat obscured. The repeated-note figures seen herein, which are peculiar to Webern's early twelve-tone style, further blur these pitch correspondences and they create a lively rhythmic backdrop that contributes to the busy quality of the score. The resulting admixture of patterns, textures, and colors beautifully captures the vitality and sensuous pleasure of the Mandarin's garden paradise and his increased expectation of spring blossoms.

The manuscript shows an intermediate stage in the genesis of Webern's choral lieder. It appears to preserve his first attempt to write out the songs in a full, fair-copy score, proceeding from the sketches and done before a cleaner manuscript that was used as an engraver's copy.[10] Measures 21-26 are from the first song, "Weiß wie Lilien." The extensive amount of revision evident here and elsewhere in the manuscript does not

constitute recomposition per se, but rather a refinement of details such as dynamics, phrasing, tempo, and articulation. Many of these details are either additions to, or revisions of, instructions already found in the sketches, and they reflect the special weight and importance Webern imparted to each musical gesture.

The most substantial compositional change in the manuscript is that seen in measures 25-26. The text for the passage, "Mögen wohl die Guten wissen,/wenn sie so spaliert erwarten." ("How well the good ones may know,/when thus they await the display,") follows a concise, objective description of a white narcissus bed, and it ends the poem on a conditional note, in keeping with the theme of the expectation of spring. The manuscript shows that Webern revised his musical interpretation of the word "wissen" in measure 25, creating a tentative, "hocket" effect by syncopating the vocal parts, shortening their note values, and suspending them within the context of a triplet beat. This creates a slight hesitation at the end of the conditional phrase "How well the good ones may know," undermining in particular the cadential authority of the verb "to know." The dynamic level of the ensuing measure is then changed from piano decrescendo to forte. This sudden dynamic shift, coupled with the equally sudden shift to a more ecstatic style of declamation and a more active, polyphonic texture, adds to the instability of the passage, thereby heightening the Mandarin's anxious anticipation of the brilliant spring foliage to come.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the manuscript concerns Webern's approach to the use of clefs. Three of the four vocal parts (soprano, alto, and tenor) employ their respective transposable C-clefs. Practically speaking, this use of C-clefs would have been unusual for Webern's day, and it would most likely have been considered anachronistic and even somewhat mannered. The symbolic significance the clefs may hold becomes obscured when the poems are removed from the context of Goethe's original cycle. Webern may have intended the clefs to suggest an antique appearance, in keeping with both the character of the aged Mandarin who inhabits the garden world of the two poems and the theme of old age that the larger cycle addresses. That these musical symbols were employed deliberately is confirmed by Webern's sketches. Both the tenor and alto parts are notated from the very outset in their respective C-clefs; however, the soprano part was originally notated using a traditional treble clef.[11] Rather than revise the tenor and alto parts to conform to modern practice in the present manuscript, Webern intentionally recopied the soprano part using the anachronistic C-clef. The published score destroys this symbolism by adopting a conventional format featuring treble clefs for the three upper voices.

Webern's cover page for the manuscript is revealing in two ways. First, it indicates that he considered but later rejected an instruction suggesting that the songs might be

performed by a solo quartet as well as a full, SATB choir. Second, it attests to the composer's fidelity to his literary source. Not only does he identify his poetic source in the title of the score, he also places Goethe's name above his own. A similarly comprehensive title accompanies the later fair copy manuscript that Webern submitted to Universal Edition.[12] The published title page omits any reference to Goethe or the *Tageszeiten* cycle, however, and it identifies the work simply as *Zwei Lieder für gemischten Chor*. Webern's red pencil revisions to the present title page follow the layout and contents of the published title page, and they were most likely made during or after 1928, when the work was published.

[1] Also common to this group of works is the fact that they were all planned in three movements, but in each case the third movement was not completed.

[2] Perhaps not coincidentally, a similar pattern of experimentation with texted compositions followed by a consolidation of technique in instrumental works can be seen around 1908-1909, in Webern's early atonal works.

[3] A youthful setting of the poem "Blummengruss" (1903) was not published by Webern, but was instead made available posthumously by Rudolph Ganz in *Eight Early Songs* (New York: C. Fischer, 1965).

[4] On the meaning of Goethe's *Tageszeiten* cycle and the qualities associated with his later lyric style, see: Meredith Lee, *Studies in Goethe's Lyric Cycles* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), pp. 129-47; Wolfgang Preisendanz, "Goethe's 'Chinesisch-deutsche Jahres- und Tageszeiten'," in *Jahrbuch der deutschen Schillergesellschaft* 8 (1964): 137-52; Friedrich Burkhardt, "Goethe's 'Chinesisch-deutsche Jahres- und Tageszeiten': Eine Ergänzung zur Entdeckung des biographischen Hintergrundes durch Wolfgang Preisendanz," in *Jahrbuch der deutschen Schillergesellschaft* 13 (1969): 180-95; Alfred Zastrau, ed., *Goethe Handbuch: Goethe, seine Welt und Zeit in Werk und Wirkung*, 2nd rev. ed. (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1961), see esp. Erich Trunz, "Alterslyrik," Bd. 1., pp. 171-73, and "Altersstil," Bd. 1, pp. 179-80; and Erich Trunz, "Goethe's späte Lyrik," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift f¨ur Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 23 (1949): 419-22, 427-28.

[5] See Lee, op. cit., pp. 131-33, and Preisendanz, op. cit., pp. 137-38.

[6] Webern's incomplete sketches on "Nun weiß man erst," begun as a choral work and then changed to a setting for voice and piano, are reproduced in *Anton von Webern Sketches* (1926-1945): *Facsimile Reproductions from the Composer's Autograph Sketchbooks in the Moldenhauer Archive* (New York: Carl Fischer, Inc., 1968), pl. 13-14. On the significance of this particular poem within the larger Goethe cycle, see: Lee, op. cit., p. 133; Preisendanz, op. cit., pp. 140-41, and Trunz, "Altersstil," p. 180, and "Goethes späte Lyrik," pp. 420-22.

[7] The colors found in Webern's first text (i.e., the white of the narcissus bed, as compared to lilies, candles, and stars, and the red glow of anticipation in which these images are enveloped)

are mirrored subtly in the second poem by the white implicit in the images of sheep and clouds, and the red glow of the sun.

[8] i.e., the closing lines of Webern's first text, "Mögen wohl die Guten wissen,/wenn sie so spaliert erwarten." (How well the good ones may know,/when thus they await the display.), and those of his second text, "Wunscherfühllung, Sonnenfeier,/ Wolkentheilung bring' uns Glück!" (Wish fulfillment, sunburst,/parting clouds bring us luck!).

[9] Webern had also written for guitar in his recently completed *Drei Lieder*, op. 18 (1925). This opus includes a folk text in Austrian dialect ("Schatzerl klein") and another taken from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* ("Erlösung"). The only other composition in which he wrote for the guitar is the *Fünf Stücke für Orchester*, op. 10 (1911-1913), a work that was conceived programmatically and that at one time included a setting of his own folkish nature poem, "O sanftes Glühn der Berge."

[10] The sketches for op. 19 extend from Webern's first sketchbook, now in the Robert Owen Lehman Collection at the Pierpont Morgan Library, to his second sketchbook, now located at CH Paul Sacher Stiftung. The cleaner fair copy, once owned by Webern's publisher, Universal Edition, is also found in the Lehman Collection at the Pierpont Morgan Library.

[11] Webern's approach in the sketches can be observed most readily in the published sketches for an abandoned third movement, based on the poem "Auf Bergen in der reinsten Höhe" from Goethe's *Gott, Gemüt und Welt*; see Moldenhauer, *Anton von Webern Sketches*, pl. 2-3.

[12] The second title page reads: "Anton Webern/Zwei Lieder/aus/'Chinesisch-deutsche Jahres- und Tageszeiten'/von Goethe/für/gemischten Chor/Celesta, Gitarre, Geige, Klarinette und Bassklarinette/op. 19/Partitur."