

Heinz Hollinger

on "Sechs Lieder nach Christian Morgenstern", 1956

Sarah: Dear Heinz, you were seventeen years old when you wrote your Morgenstern song cycle. Looking back, the voice has played an important role in the whole of your compositional career. Was it an interest of yours from the start?

Heinz: I sang as a treble in a children's choir, in which I also sang a lot of solos in cantatas. Then my voice broke at a very early age and I couldn't do it any more. The oboe is in reality my replacement for my lost treble voice. I wrote songs very early on, particularly when writing music for plays. Various little cycles, such as one with guitar for 'Leonce and Lena' by Brentano. It was always very practical music however. As far as I can remember, my first song for soprano and piano that I ever wrote was dedicated to my teacher Sándor Veress for his 50th birthday. That was 'Der Möwenflug' by Conrad Ferdinand Meyer and I wanted to write something unbelievably modern and complex... I don't actually like that piece at all. (laughs) It was constructed with a mirror-symetry, very tough, very dissonant. It had only just been finished when I wrote the Morgenstern Lieder, which have a completely different sense of harmony. Not like I had attempted at first with Veress, but very soft, with a harmonic style somewhere between Debussy, Alban Berg, Ravel...

I've never disavowed this cycle. Even in my most avant-garde periods, I've always thought it was as it should be. Veress read it for a long time and at first said nothing. After half an hour, he gave it back and said 'That's fine, we can leave it as it is'. That was the greatest compliment that I ever received as his pupil.

We became very close friends later.

I wrote the second song, 'Evening', on the day of Robert Walser's death, the 25th of December 1956. I had actually conceived of it as a present for my mother, whose birthday was on the 26th. Only later, once it had been finished, did I write the whole cycle and dedicate it to my mother.

Sarah: So you discovered that Walser had died on that same day later on?

Heinz: In the morning of the 25th of December, Walser died in the snow. I can still remember reading his obituary in the newspaper in Zürich. Later I wrote an a 40-minute song cycle ('Beiseit') and an entire opera about Walser ('Snow White'). "Be like the butterfly", says Snow White and then there's the third

song from the Morgenstern cycle, "The Butterfly". I quoted it in the opera. The Morgenstern Cycle has had an important meaning across my whole composition career. Forty-seven years later, I orchestrated the songs. Actually sort-of transcribed them, as I wrote a lot of "echo-voices", the harmonies of the sustain-pedal. I haven't changed the vocal line at all. Even so, the piece doesn't sound so different from other works I wrote in 2003 or 2004.

Sarah: Names and dates seem to have played a part in your compositional technique even in this first cycle. Many composers use names and dates here and there but your use of them is very distinctive.

Heinz: Yes, it's almost an obsession of mine sometimes. (laughs) But I didn't use any kind of rhythmic cryptogram in this piece. In the "Melancholy Bird" one can see, particularly in the orchestral version, that there's a good deal of influence from Veress' "Threnos in memoriam Béla Bartók". This ostinato pulsating beat that goes through the whole thing. But there's no Melancholy Bird singing in Threnos – Threnos is rather hard, a Sirató, a song of mourning. You can see my flirtation with twelve-tone technique in the fifth song. There are some little twelve-tone constellations. One can also tell that I had taken Alban Berg completely to heart. The G minor of the last song is actually the G minor from Berg's Violin Concerto.

Sarah: Did you only notice these references afterwards? Was it, as a young composer, a conscious or subconscious decision of yours?

Heinz: It was definitely a subconscious decision but the subconscious is much more exact and powerful than the conscious, which is only responsible for the first ten percent of creativity.

Perhaps its noticeable that, even then, I made no great distinction between composing for violin or oboe and for the voice. It was very instrumentally conceived, like Bach, like Mozart. Mozart was often accused of writing too instrumentally for the voice.

Sarah: When I listened to your "Study II" for solo oboe the day before yesterday (on the 26th January 2017 at the Musikhochschule Dresden Carl Maria von Weber, portrait concert of Heinz Holliger) it gave me a much better understanding of the meaning of your piece for soprano solo "Des Knaben Ohrwunder".

Heinz: Yes, that piece could also be played on the oboe. I've actually played the soprano part from "Inceschantüm" on the oboe in Japan. I like a style of singing that creates clear lines. Many singers are also trained instrumentalists, and you can tell that straight away when they sing.
(long pause)

I chose Morgenstern as song texts at that time... I was an unbelievably big fan of Georg Trakl back then and wrote my own very expressionistic poems, as well as translating Rimbaud, Baudelaire and Valéry. So I was somewhere else entirely at the time. These Morgenstern poems were in a collection of poetry that we were given when I was twelve or thirteen. And I wanted to use a language (for these songs) that wasn't to my 'most exclusivist' taste: a language that could really be sung and would gain something from it.

Singing Celan, for example, makes no sense whatsoever, it doesn't work at all. And the most complicated texts by Hölderlin can't be sung. For this reason I've only set late Hölderlin, Scardenelli: because it's so song-like.

In hindsight, I think that Morgenstern is an extremely sensitive poet. He's unfortunately only really known for his comic works, such as the Galgenlieder and so on. But he uses wonderful language and was also Robert Walser's editor and said very good and beautiful things to him. About the "Geschwistern Tanner", for example.

Hindemith also wrote wonderful early songs to Morgenstern's texts which he only wanted to be published after his death. For string quartet. At the same time, he wrote an orchestral piece with soprano on the Galgenlieder while he was still very young. Eisler set "Palmström" for the "Pierrot Lunaire" instrumentation. Morgenstern was very important but died early, at the beginning of the First World War. He was a bit old-fashioned in the Brecht-era. As well as being an Anthroposophist.

Sarah: In Waldorf schools, you learn an enormous amount of Morgenstern's poetry. Forwards and backwards.

Heinz: Yes, but somehow very reverentially, in purple plush... That's not the Morgenstern I think I see in his poems.

Interview in Dresden, January 27th 2017