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# An Encounter with Hugo Wolf in his Jubilee Year: Revisiting “Begegnung”

Žarko Cvejić

*Singidunum University, Belgrade*

## ABSTRACT

This reappraisal of “Begegnung,” a seldom discussed Hugo Wolf setting of the eponymous poem by Eduard Mörike, shows that despite its ostensible simplicity, the poem, typically for Mörike, harbours a wealth of ambivalent meanings, which are only further enriched in Wolf’s setting.

**Keywords:** Hugo Wolf, “Begegnung,” Lied, Eduard Mörike, musical hermeneutics

## IZVLEČEK

Ponovno vrednotenje »Begegnung«, malokrat obravnavane Wolfove uglasbitve istoimenske pesmi Eduarda Mörikeja, kaže, da pesem kljub svoji navidezni preprostosti, ki je značilna za Mörikeja, v sebi skriva številna protislovja, ki še bolj pridejo do izraza v Wolfovi uglasbitvi.

**Ključne besede:** Hugo Wolf, »Begegnung«, Lied, Eduard Mörike, glasbena hermenevtika

The past year, 2020, when this article was first drafted, will undoubtedly be remembered for the onset of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the resulting crisis in global public health, and, inevitably, the economic, political, and social hardship that awaits us. But it also marked a jubilee of the Austro-Slovenian composer Hugo Wolf: 160 years since his birth in Windischgrätz, now Slovenj Gradec, Slovenia, whose brief but turbulent and rich creative life was cut short by acquired syphilis in Vienna already in 1903, an epidemic that in his time claimed the lives of many an artist. Despite the ongoing global crisis, arguably the most challenging the world has had to face in living memory – or, perhaps, because of the current crisis – the present paper is intended as a contribution to the memory of Wolf and his art, as a source of comfort as well as inspiration in our struggle to survive and retain a modicum of “normality” at a time of adversity.

On account of his highly expressive late-Romantic idiom, infused with post-Wagnerian chromaticism, especially his Lieder, Wolf’s admittance to the canon of Western art music arguably began already in his brief lifetime. This is attested to, among other things, by the formation of the Vienna Hugo Wolf-Verein in 1897 and his early German biographies such as those of Eugen Schmitz<sup>1</sup> and Ernst Décsey.<sup>2</sup> In the English-speaking world, Wolf’s canonisation was cemented by the appearance of the first life-and-works, Ernest Newman’s *Hugo Wolf* in 1907, barely three years after the composer’s untimely death. Already in this early biography, Newman places Wolf “at the head of the songwriters of the world.” In his assessment, Wolf “surpasses them all,” by “the extraordinary breadth, depth, and variety of his conceptions,” the range and intensity of his expression.<sup>3</sup> Writing around the same time, Décsey similarly opined that it was “amazing how well Wolf could hear the inner music of the poems.”<sup>4</sup> Half a century later, Eric Sams would judge Wolf’s contribution to the Lied in similar terms, as “lending fresh life and force to the Lied form and enhancing its expressive vocabulary to a pitch never since surpassed,” thus attaining a highly original style.<sup>5</sup> More recently, Susan Youens has singled out the uniqueness of Wolf’s Lieder for his striving “to make audible as many levels of poetic meaning as he could grasp,”<sup>6</sup> reading “the poems inside out from a desire to milk as many of their meanings for music as he possibly could.”<sup>7</sup>

1 Eugen Schmitz, *Hugo Wolf* (Leipzig: P. Reclam jun., 1906).

2 Ernst Décsey, *Hugo Wolf: Das Leben und das Lied* (Berlin: Schuster & Loeffler, 1921). However, the first part of Décsey’s book, “Hugo Wolfs Leben 1860–1887” appeared as early as 1903, the year of Wolf’s death.

3 Ernest Newman, *Hugo Wolf* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2012; first edition: 1907), 153.

4 “Überraschend wie Wolf die innere Musik der Dichtungen hörte.” Décsey, *Hugo Wolf*, 149.

5 Eric Sams, *The Songs of Hugo Wolf* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011; first edition: 1961), “Wolf as a Song-writer,” EPUB e-book.

6 Susan Youens, *Hugo Wolf and his Mörike Songs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 17.

7 *Ibi.*, 167.

But Wolf's pre-eminence in the genre of the *Lied* has proven to be at best a mixed blessing for his posthumous reputation and reception of his music; according to Sams, writing in 1982, when the second edition of his monumental study of Wolf Lieder came out, the appreciation of his songs was still "a minority taste."<sup>8</sup> Among the main reasons for this Sams singled out the brevity of Wolf's creative life, especially the mercurial character of his inspiration, adding up to "less than eighteen months," his "refractory temperament, with its innate defiance of authority, mistrust of instruction, and irregular mood-swings ranging from exaltation to despair," compounded throughout his adult life by "the severe physical and mental stress and trauma of serious illness."<sup>9</sup> But perhaps most damning of all for Wolf's posthumous reception, in Sams's view, was Wolf's near confinement to the Lied, a "small" genre "still generally held to be an inferior art-form."<sup>10</sup>

In my view, another factor that shaped Wolf's reception was his embrace of a genre that combines music **with** poetry and has thus often been judged as inferior to "absolute music" genres such as the symphony or string quartet. "Only when form as well as content could be directly derived from a poetic source, without subjective intervention," wrote Sams, "could Wolf's genius shine out at its resplendent best."<sup>11</sup> Several decades earlier, around the time of Wolf's death, Décsey had already made a similar observation, when he wrote: "In truth, there was a musical force in Wolf that came to the fore when called upon and made him think and talk and laugh to shape the poem with his melody."<sup>12</sup> Bearing in mind that in European music aesthetics and criticism, the nineteenth century saw the enthronement of instrumental art music, which, in E. T. A. Hoffmann's memorable phrase, "scorns all aid, all admixture of other arts,"<sup>13</sup> as the epitome of all *Tonkunst* – abstract, self-referential, and aesthetically autonomous at least since Hoffmann's famous review and like-minded writings of Schumann and others – it may be that Wolf's achievement, resting almost exclusively on his Lieder and opera – therefore vocal-instrumental and dramatic music – seemed inherently inferior to those of most other canonised composers who excelled in large genres of instrumental ("absolute") music as well. More recently, Amanda Glauert has similarly pointed out that Wolf may have "struggled with the image of himself as a specialist song-writer, sensing the limitations this placed on

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8 Sams, *The Songs of Hugo Wolf*; "Preface to the Second Edition."

9 Sams, *The Songs of Hugo Wolf*; "Wolf as a Song-writer."

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 "In Wahrheit saß in Wolf eine Musikkraft, die stoßweise ans Licht drängte, wenn sie gerufen war, und ihn grundsätzlich denken und reden ließ und lächelnd das Gedicht mit ihrer Melodie formte." Décsey, "Hugo Wolf," 149.

13 E. T. A. Hoffmann, "Beethoven's Instrumental Music," in *E. T. A. Hoffmann's Musical Writings: 'Kreisleriana', 'The Poet and the Composer', 'Music Criticism'*, ed. David Charlton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 96.

him in the eyes of the public”<sup>14</sup> – a composer confined to a single genre and, at that, a “small” and “inferior” genre of vocal-instrumental music.

But arguably the most compelling summary of Wolf’s problematic posthumous reception has come, in my mind, from Lawrence Kramer, in the following lines written in 2011:

*Hugo Wolf occupies an anomalous position in the canon of “classical” music. [...] although his reputation is high, he has attracted only a modicum of critical attention. And although his music is expressively and sometimes structurally elusive, reflecting his notorious penchant for setting complex texts, Wolf’s small cadre of critics has until recently found only one story to tell about him. This is what might be called the Wolf legend: the tale of the moody, sensitive, but aesthetically disciplined artist who submerged himself in first-rate literary texts, understood them preternaturally well, and “expressed” them to perfection by repeating their sound and meaning in the form of music.*<sup>15</sup>

This article is intended as a contribution to countering that “Wolf legend,” so amply diagnosed by Kramer, especially the notion that Wolf’s songs merely “repeat” the sound and meaning of the poems he set. To that end, I offer another (re-)reading of “Begegnung,” Wolf’s setting of the eponymous poem by Eduard Mörike, his favourite poet. I hasten to add that my (re-)reading is just one among many possible readings of Wolf’s Lied, and at that, arguably a relatively modern one, meant to highlight the ambiguity of the poem and Wolf’s setting as an intrinsic quality of both. One of Wolf’s least discussed and analysed *Mörike-Lieder*, this unjustly neglected song, as I argue below, was written in his *Wunderjahr* of 1888 and published in his famous *Mörike-Lieder* songbook. Perhaps the reason for the song’s neglect in scholarship has something to do with its uncharacteristically simple diatonic setting, a far cry from Wolf’s trademark Wagnerian expressive style of song-writing. Again, I will argue below that this simplicity is deceptive and that the Lied – both Mörike’s poem and Wolf’s setting – are profoundly ambiguous, allowing for many different readings. Save for a fleeting reference in a single sentence in Décsey,<sup>16</sup> I failed to find a single German source with an extended discussion of the song. Newman and, more recently, Youens mention it only in passing, as an example of the sheer diversity of style in Wolf’s songs (Newman) and a “lighter incarnation” of the association of storm winds with passion (Youens; more on that below). Sams dispatches it in a single paragraph, noting in general Mörike’s “fresh and colourful lyric” and Wolf’s “unity of theme and concept

14 Amanda Glauert, *Hugo Wolf and the Wagnerian Inheritance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 32.

15 Lawrence Kramer, “Hugo Wolf and Subjectivity in the Fin de siècle,” in *German Lieder in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Rufus Hallmark (New York: Routledge, 2011), 239.

16 Décsey mentions it as an example of, in his view, the primacy of the melodic idea and musical form in most Wolf songs; Décsey, *Hugo Wolf*, 149.

that refreshes and rarefies the poem still further,”<sup>17</sup> with an additional paragraph of slightly more detailed observations, which are discussed below. There is a brief mention of the song in a 1967 article by Jack M. Stein, an overview of Wolf’s Mörike songs, scarcely going farther than noting that the song is “fully a match to the” poem.<sup>18</sup>

The only detailed analytical discussion of the song appears in a chapter of Deborah J. Stein’s dissertation *Hugo Wolf’s Lieder and Extensions of Tonality* from 1985, which is therefore discussed in detail below. Although Mörike’s song and Wolf’s setting perhaps do seem light-hearted, as Youens put it, a more thorough engagement with the song, along the lines of Kramer’s “musical hermeneutics,”<sup>19</sup> reveals that this is far from the case and that the poem harbours multiple ambivalent and mutually exclusive meanings, whose ambivalence the song does nothing to alleviate but, quite to the contrary, only works to enrich them further, posing additional questions but, like most engaging works of art, withholding definitive answers. And yet, so little scholarly prose has been written about it. That is why it forms the main focus of this essay.

The remainder of this text proceeds with a brief description of the poem and the song, followed by Deborah Stein’s reading of the song and my own interpretations, both of her reading and the song itself.

“Begegnung” (“Encounter”) is one of the 53 Mörike poems that Wolf set in 1888 and published in his *Mörike-Lieder* songbook of the same year, at no. 8, flanked by two more famous settings, “Das verlassene Mägdlein” (“The Forsaken Servant-girl”) and “Nimmersatte Liebe” (“Insatiable Love”). The poem consists of five quatrains, set in alternating 9- and 8-syllable iambic tetrameters in a traditional alternating rhyme scheme (9–8–9–8, ABAB). This relatively simple structure perhaps mirrors the poem’s seemingly uncomplicated subject – a (probably) adolescent boy daydreaming about the previous night spent with a charming girl, probably of a similar age. Below is Mörike’s poem in its German original, with Wolf’s tonal structure in the left-hand column, followed by two English translations, Julia von Bose’s earlier poetic translation, found in most British and North American editions of Wolf’s songs, and Richard Stokes’s more recent and more literal rendering.<sup>20</sup>

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17 Sams, *The Songs of Hugo Wolf*; “II. The Mörike Songs.”

18 Jack M. Stein, “Poem and Music in Hugo Wolf’s Mörike Songs,” *The Musical Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (1967): 37.

19 Lawrence Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice, 1800–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), “Tropes and Windows: An Outline of Musical Hermeneutics.”

20 “Songs: Begegnung (1888), No. 8,” *Oxford Lieder*, accessed July 22, 2020, <https://www.oxfordlieder.co.uk/song/1561>.

**“Begegnung”**

Ab minor	Was doch heut Nacht ein Sturm gewesen, Bis erst der Morgen sich geregt! Wie hat der ungebetne Besen Kamin und Gassen ausgefegt!
Eb minor	
Eb major	Da kommt ein Mädchen schon die Strassen, Das halb verschüchtert um sich sieht; Wie Rosen, die der Wind zerblasen, So unstet ihr Gesichtchen glüht.
Bb major	Ein schöner Bursch tritt ihr entgegen, Er will ihr voll Entzücken nahn: Wie sehn sich freudig und verlegen Die ungewohnten Schelme an!
C minor	Er scheint zu fragen, ob das Liebchen Die Zöpfe schon zurecht gemacht, Die heute Nacht im offenen Stübchen Ein Sturm in Unordnung gebracht.
G major	
Eb major	Der Bursche träumt noch von den Küssen, Die ihm das süsse Kind getauscht, Er steht, von Anmut hingerissen, Derweil sie um die Ecke rauscht.

**“Encounter,” trans. Richard Stokes**

**“Encounter,” trans. Julia von Bose**

What a storm there was last night,  
It raged until this morning dawned!  
How that uninvited broom  
Swept the streets and chimneys clean!

What dreadful storm last night was raging  
until the morning light appeared!  
The uninvited broom was sweeping  
and soon the streets and chimneys cleared!

Here comes a girl along the street,  
Glancing half bashfully about her;  
Like roses the wind has scattered,  
Her pretty face keeps changing colour.

Now down the street a maid comes wand'ring,  
glances around half timidly;  
like roses, that the wind's been blowing  
thus glow her cheeks so tenderly.

A handsome lad steps up to meet her,  
Approaches her full of bliss,  
How joyfully and awkwardly  
Those novice rascals exchange looks!

With rapid steps a youth advances,  
radiant with joy his love to greet,  
with what embarrassed joyful glances  
the two young knowing rogues do meet!

He seems to ask if his sweetheart  
Has tidied up her plaited locks,  
That last night a storm dishevelled  
In her gaping wide room.

He seems to ask with voice so tender  
if she's had time her hair to comb,  
that last night got in sad disorder  
when swept the storm wind through her room.

The lad's still dreaming of the kisses  
The sweet child exchanged with him,  
He stands enraptured by her charm,  
As she whisks round the corner.

The youth of kisses still is dreaming  
that he exchanged with her last night,  
he stands, transfixed by grace so charming,  
meanwhile she whisks past, out of sight.

The poem treats one of Mörike's favourite subjects – male sexual initiation. That much is clear from the final line of the central (third) stanza onward, with its reference to the two “novice rascals” / “young knowing rogues” (“un-gewohnten Schelme”). This is then affirmed in the following two stanzas: as early as 1961, Sams already noted the “obvious significance of the storm, in all senses.”<sup>21</sup> In more general terms, Youens tells us that the “association of storm winds with passion is a recurring motif in Mörike,” with “Begegnung” being

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21 Sams, *The Songs of Hugo Wolf*; “II. The Mörike Songs.”

a “lighter incarnation” thereof.<sup>22</sup> Then there is the girl’s “gaping wide room,”<sup>23</sup> which almost takes us into the domain of pornography, a not uncommon feature in Mörike’s poetry despite his unwanted occupation as a Lutheran pastor in rural Swabia. Youens, who has produced the most detailed study of Wolf’s Mörike Lieder, informs us again that “the domestic enclosure of a house is a traditional symbol of the female, of vaginal chambers and wombs,”<sup>24</sup> so the girl’s open bedroom likely signifies her sexual availability. And as if any further confirmation were needed, there is the final stanza, with its explicit mention of the “kisses / The sweet child exchanged with” the boy (“den Küssen, / Die ihm das süsse Kind getauscht”).<sup>25</sup>

That much is clear. But as is commonly the case with both Mörike and Wolf, upon a closer look, both the poem and the song turn out to be considerably more ambivalent, their intrinsic ambiguity inviting divergent readings. Glauert’s assessment that taking “the Mörike volume as a whole, the impression that comes out of Wolf’s settings is that nothing is what it first seems”<sup>26</sup> definitely applies to “Begegnung” as well, despite its treacherous simplicity. For instance, is the storm from the opening stanza the same as that of the penultimate stanza? Wolf’s “stormy” piano accompaniment in his setting of both stanzas (more on which below) would suggest that it is, but Mörike’s indefinite article, “**ein** Sturm,” at the beginning of the final line of the fourth stanza might be taken to suggest otherwise. This would be neither a rare nor a particularly eye-catching instance of Wolf imposing his own interpretations on Mörike’s poems, whatever the latter’s intended meanings might be. After all, even though Wolf is rightly credited with “discovering” Mörike as a great German poet at least in the domain of music, Youens describes the two as one of “the oddest of odd couples,” noting how often Wolf’s songs are “at cross-purposes with his chosen poetry.”<sup>27</sup> She rightly concludes that it “is in the polyphony of ideas, his and Mörike’s, that the richness of these songs resides.”<sup>28</sup> For reasons discussed below, this, in my view, certainly includes “Begegnung,” a richly ambivalent setting. In the introduction to her study, Glauert similarly asserts that

*any serious consideration of Wolf’s work soon reveals that his songs never conformed straightforwardly to the expectations set by a poem’s content or structure. His poetic interpretations bear the signs of processes of negotiation and reflection that allow little to be taken for granted.*<sup>29</sup>

22 Youens, *Hugo Wolf and his Mörike Songs*, 117.

23 “Offnen Stübchen”; this is regrettably lost in Bose’s translation.

24 Ibid.

25 And not the other way around, as suggested by Bose’s translation.

26 Glauert, *Hugo Wolf and the Wagnerian Inheritance*, 71.

27 Youens, *Hugo Wolf and his Mörike Songs*, x.

28 Ibid., xii.

29 Glauert, *Hugo Wolf and the Wagnerian Inheritance*, 2.

In what follows, I argue that “Begegnung” is no exception in that regard either.

More importantly still, there is the possibility that the girl herself is not real, but a figment of the boy’s (sexually aroused) imagination. In the penultimate stanza, a typical instance of Mörike’s proneness to ambivalence, the boy only “seems to ask” (“Er **scheint** zu fragen”), neither her nor anyone in particular but, apparently, himself – “ask” in the sense of wondering – while in the final stanza he is left “dreaming” of their kisses, “enraptured by her charm” / “transfixed by grace so charming” (“von Anmut hingerissen”), while the girl “whisks round the corner” / “whisks past, out of sight” (“um die Ecke rauscht”), like a breeze, as though nothing had happened. Incidentally, the boy’s stupefaction with the girl’s charms, including her “dishevelled” locks, may be seen as an example of the significance of women’s freely flowing hair in European nineteenth-century culture, as diagnosed by Kramer, Richard Leppert, and many others: “Unbound and flowing, such hair lulled men into a quasi-infantile state of bliss.”<sup>30</sup> The boy’s own state of bliss at the end of “Begegnung” certainly resembles the condition that Kramer describes. But such a reaction could equally be provoked by merely fantasising about such a girl, who need not be empirically real, and this is the reading that Stein opts for in her interpretation of the song, supported by her analysis of Wolf’s setting, which is further discussed below. In my mind, though, this is far from clear in this intrinsically ambiguous poem and Wolf’s music only poses further questions, rather than offering definitive answers, which will be demonstrated in due course.

But enough about the poem for now. What makes the song **musically** interesting is its discrepancy with much of the rest of Wolf’s Mörike Lieder, that is, with many of their typical traits. At first sight, however, the song perhaps seems hardly remarkable: like most Wolf *Lieder*, it is through-composed but faithful to the Mörike poem’s original structure, with five sections corresponding to the poem’s five stanzas, preceded by a four-bar piano introduction, separated by brief piano interludes (varying in length between two and four bars), and rounded off with a somewhat longer, ten-bar piano postlude. In line with Wolf’s usual practice, there are no instances of word repetition, omissions, changes to the ordering of the lines or stanzas, or otherwise tampering with the original structure of the poem; inasmuch as its “form derives directly and objectively from the text Wolf found on the printed page of the source-book before him,”<sup>31</sup> “Begegnung” is a typical Wolf song. The same might be said about the prevailing mood and overall construction of the song, with “a strong central poetic image or idea” – in this case, the “storm” – evoking “an iron logic

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30 Kramer, “Hugo Wolf and Subjectivity,” 259.

31 Sams, *The Songs of Hugo Wolf*, “Wolf as a Song-writer.”

of musical construction,<sup>32</sup> anchored in the alternating rising and falling, diatonic and lightly chromatic, syncopated piano accompaniment, evoking the drama of the “storm.” Regarding that last matter, the syncopation in the piano accompaniment, it is also a typical Wolfian device, using rhythm “to provide formal shape and continuity throughout a song, as the effectively unobtrusive and unchanging background to explicit emotional colour and contrast”; like many a song by Wolf, “Begegnung” “creates and sustains rhythmically its own mood and its own world.”<sup>33</sup> In terms of melodic writing, too, the song is a fine example of Wolf’s “rarely complex” melodic lines, perhaps shaped more by his heritage of Austrian, Italian, and Slovene folksong than French and Italian opera.<sup>34</sup> Example 1 below shows the song’s opening bars.

**Lebhaft bewegt**

Was doch heut Nacht ein Sturm ge-wen, bis erst der Mor-gen sich ge-regt!

Example 1: Hugo Wolf, “Begegnung,” mm. 1–8.

That last point, however, brings us to some of the song’s less typical characteristics: save for a few passing notes that are little more than ornaments, there is practically none of that heavily expressive Wagnerian chromatic harmony that characterises many of Wolf’s more famous songs, especially in the Mörike songbook.<sup>35</sup> By contrast, “Begegnung” features largely diatonic melodic and harmonic writing, possibly due to its “light-hearted” poetic content, which, as I suggested above, may be the cause of its near-neglect in music scholarship. Another, more prominent point of divergence between “Begegnung” and a typical

32 Sams, *The Songs of Hugo Wolf*, “Wolf as a Song-writer.”

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Glauert, *Hugo Wolf and the Wagnerian Inheritance*, 49.

Wolf Lied, and the genre in general, is the song's "directional tonality," that is absence of mono-tonality or a single clear tonic: even though it has three flats in the key signature, "Begegnung" begins in what is clearly A $\flat$  minor, but ends, quite emphatically, in E $\flat$  major, in consistence with the opening key signature. It should be added here that the opening A $\flat$  minor does not seem like a brief deferral of the initial tonic, a minor subdominant or such: as in most songs by Wolf, in "Begegnung," too, the piano introduction is used "to establish the tonality, important harmonic elements, the principal musical material, and the atmosphere" of the song,<sup>36</sup> over an A $\flat$ -minor pedal point, which is sustained in the ensuing first stanza; the only problem with this is that the key is "wrong," which is "corrected" by a modulation toward the end of the opening stanza, in mm. 11–12, to E $\flat$  minor. This is in turn followed by a mutation to E $\flat$  major in the two-bar piano interlude, preceding the second stanza, which is firmly in that key. As for the new tonic, it is emphatically affirmed in the final stanza and the ten-bar piano postlude, both of which are set on an E $\flat$ -major pedal, which, combined, take 18 bars, preceded by a strong authentic cadence in E $\flat$  major. This comprises almost a third of the entire song. Incidentally, it is consistent with Sams's observation that in most Wolf songs, either

*there is a definite well-established home key or keys from which the tonality diverges at moments of stress or tension; or else, conversely, there is a fluctuating tonality, corresponding to a basic poetic mood of complexity or stress, from which a definite tonality emerges as the tension is resolved.*<sup>37</sup>

This is where, for me at least, a "hermeneutic window" opens up, to borrow Kramer's term<sup>38</sup> – an anomaly or unusual occurrence in the music that may enlighten us about Wolf's interpretation of Mörike's typically ambivalent lyrics. In other words, it is as though the entire song, with its overall tonal plan going from i (A $\flat$  minor) to V (E $\flat$  major), were set as a big question mark, challenging the poem's ostensible simplicity and pointing to its underlying and arguably irresolvable ambiguities.

Peering through this hermeneutic window must have been at least part of Stein's motivation, too, in her own dealing with the song. She analyses it as one of her select examples of "extended tonality" in nineteenth-century Western art music, seeking to assess the applicability of Schenkerian analysis in resolving formal-structural riddles such as that of directional tonality in Wolf's setting of "Begegnung." Even though Heinrich Schenker himself provided entirely mono-tonal analyses of a number of non-mono-tonal pieces, Stein argues that

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36 Youens, *Hugo Wolf and his Mörike Songs*, 17.

37 Sams, *The Songs of Hugo Wolf*; "Wolf as a Song-writer."

38 For a detailed discussion, see Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice*, chapter "Tropes and Windows," especially pp. 6–14.

his method does not apply to “Begegnung.” In her view, what makes the song irreducible in strictly Schenkerian terms, is “tonic transformation”: the song does indeed begin in the tonic, but that tonic gradually shifts from the opening Ab minor to Eb minor that concludes the first stanza. This transformation is then undermined by the second stanza’s Eb major, interpreted as the dominant of the opening Ab minor. In Stein’s account, the Eb major of the second stanza thus serves to perpetuate confusion regarding the tonic key in the opening of the song, by recasting the Ab minor as the real tonic of the song.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, she posits another decidedly un-Schenkerian tonal procedure in “Begegnung”: dominant replacement. Here, the penultimate stanza is the main protagonist. Set in C minor with a modulation to G minor, it thwarts a direct return from the third stanza’s Bb major to the (new) tonic, Eb major, thus undermining the middle-ground authentic cadence (wherein the third stanza’s Bb major would be seen as the Eb major V), which would be indispensable to a proper Schenkerian understanding of the song in tonal terms. Instead of the expected dominant middle term of a middle-ground cadence in Eb major, a functionally subdominant key is provided, by means of what Stein labels “plagal substitution.” In other words, a properly Schenkerian authentic cadence is substituted by a plagal cadence in Eb major, but with Eb major vi (i.e. C minor) stepping in for IV.<sup>40</sup>

Stein then uses her analysis of the song’s tonal structure to substantiate her reading of Mörike’s poem, which she then attributes to Wolf. While she recognises the obvious meaning of the “storm,” Stein’s understanding of the two “novice rascals” encounter as well as the girl herself carries more substantial implications:

[...] *the last stanza also suggests that the “Begegnung” might be really in the imagination of the young boy, that the storm and the girl are imaginary components of a youthful sexual fantasy. [...] the idea of the “Begegnung” as an imaginary occurrence recasts the role of the girl as that of an illusive – and elusive – persona. [...] If the storm is a fantasy, then Ab minor is an illusory tonic. The association of Eb major with the appearance of the girl is also delusive, since the girl exists only in the dream of the boy. The boy’s harmony, V/Eb is resolved obliquely through VI, because his role of dreamer must be relayed through a plagal relationship. The use of dominant replacement is thus part of a replacement of the tonic-dominant axis (boy, reality) with the fantasy-associated plagal axis (girl, storm). [...] The closing plagal cadence creates symmetry with the opening IV-I, and the middleground dominant, Bb, becomes a harmonic fulcrum surrounded by two plagal axes. The centrality of Bb is symbolic of the poetry, where the boy assumes the role of central and pivotal protagonist.*<sup>41</sup>

39 Deborah Stein, *Hugo Wolf’s Lieder and Extensions of Tonality* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985), 47–50.

40 Stein, *Hugo Wolf’s Lieder*, 51–53. For ease of reference, the song’s overall tonal scheme is summarised above on pp. 5–6, along with the poem and Julia von Bose and Richard Stokes’s respective English translations.

41 Stein, *Hugo Wolf’s Lieder*, 53.

Thus with remarkable ease, perhaps all too easily, Stein relegates the girl to the domain of the boy's steamy imagination: neither the storm nor their stormy encounter really took place in reality, but only in the boy's fantasy, which means that the girl is not real herself, but exists only in his daydreams; by contrast, the only real protagonist, "central and pivotal," is the boy, legitimised by the "centricity" of his B♭ major. But I am not entirely convinced by Stein's reading. First of all, it is not at all unequivocally clear – to me, at least – that the final stanza does suggest that "the storm and the girl are imaginary components of a youthful sexual fantasy." After all, the last stanza tells us that the "lad's still dreaming of the kisses / The sweet child exchanged with him" ("Der Bursche träumt noch von den Küssen, / Die ihm das süsse Kind getauscht") suggesting in the indicative not subjunctive mood that kisses were indeed exchanged, that the girl **did** exchange them with the boy. Second, even if one accepts Stein's contention that the "storm" never took place in reality but only in the boy's imagination, which is far from certain, it is unclear why that should recast "the role of the girl as an illusive [...] persona": even if the encounter of the previous night never really happened, that does not necessarily mean that the girl and her appearance in the poem's present – the morning after – are likewise a fantasy. The girl **does** come along the street ("Da kommt ein Mädchen schon die Strassen"), her movement typically "conveyed by upward runs" as in many a Wolf song,<sup>42</sup> the boy **does** approach her "full of bliss" / "radiant with joy" ("Er will ihr voll Entzücken nahn"), and the two "novice rascals" / "young knowing rogues" **do** "exchange looks," "joyfully and awkwardly" / "with what embarrassed joyful glances the two young knowing rogues do meet" ("Wie sehn sich freudig und verlegen / Die ungewohnten Schelme an!"). In other words, the girl, as it were, returns the boy's gaze and then "whisks round the corner" / "out of sight" ("um die Ecke rauscht"), her disappearance indicated by diminuendo, another common Wolfian gesture.<sup>43</sup>

From there, Stein proceeds to argue that if "the storm is a fantasy, then A♭ minor is an illusory tonic," which may very well be, since the music quickly, already at mm. 11–12, the end of the first stanza (the description of the previous night's "storm"), moves first to E♭ minor and then to E♭ major for the second stanza – the appearance of the girl (see Example 2). There, Stein's account turns somewhat problematic again, in my mind at least, arguing that "the association of E♭ major with the appearance of the girl is also delusive, since the girl exists only in the dream of the boy" – but that is valid only if one accepts that the girl herself is an illusion and that is far from clear. What is much clearer, though, is that the girl's stanza is firmly set in E♭ major, the real tonic of the song, which is unequivocally confirmed as such in the ten-bar

42 Sams, *The Songs of Hugo Wolf*; "Wolf as a Song-writer."

43 Ibid.

piano postlude; moreover, both the postlude and the girl's appearance are set on an Eb major pedal point almost throughout. Incidentally, Sams notes that in Wolf's songs "Eb or Ab major [...] embody moods of serene assurance, especially in love-songs."<sup>44</sup> Be that as it may, the boy's appearance in the third stanza is similarly set on a pedal point, but in Bb major, which may be "pivotal" but is certainly secondary to the girl's Eb major as the song's tonic key. Therefore, the respective appearances of the girl and the boy are both set to music that is entirely stable in terms of tonality. Moreover, in both stanzas the piano accompaniment is free from the syncopation of the introduction, the opening and the penultimate stanza, where syncopation apparently serves as a sort of leitmotif for the storm, whether imaginary or not, reaffirming the link between the storm of the opening and the "novice rascals" intercourse from the previous night.

Wie hat der un - ge - be - tene Besen Ka - min und Gas - sen aus - ge - legt!

Da kommt ein Mäd - chen schon die Stra - ssen,

Example 2: Hugo Wolf, "Begegnung," mm. 9–16.

It is likewise unclear why the boy's "role of dreamer must be relayed through a plagal relationship," with the boy's Bb major followed by C minor and G minor/major in the ensuing fourth stanza and only then vicariously resolving back to the tonic Eb major in the final stanza (V – vi – III – I in Eb major), in other words why a plagal relationship (not only between the boy's Bb major followed by C minor and its "resolution" to Eb major, but also between the opening Ab minor (the "storm") and the girl's Eb major) must necessarily denote an illusion – some further explication would have been useful at this point, but Stein probably thought the link between plagal relationships and

44 Ibid.

illusion self-evident. Be that as it may, if we accept the link, then we must turn our attention to the penultimate stanza (see Example 3 below) and its **plagal** movement from C minor to G minor/major, setting the boy's (imaginary?) question to the girl about "her plaited locks, / That last night a storm dishevelled / In her gaping wide room" ("Die Zöpfe [...] / Die heute Nacht im offenen Stübchen / Ein Sturm in Unordnung gebracht"). Interestingly, Stein neglects to make the point, but if we accept her plagal-illusory link, then we might have to dismiss the entire contents of the fourth stanza – the boy's question as well as the boy himself, the girl, and the "storm"/encounter, therefore pretty much the entire poem – as illusory. Incidentally, this stanza is the only one where the piano accompaniment mirrors that of the introduction and first stanza – probably because the "storm" features in both of them and denotes sexual activity. Also, they are the only two tonally unstable stanzas, both featuring a plagal modulation (A $\flat$  minor to E $\flat$  minor in the first stanza and C minor to G major in the fourth). This would agree with Stein's link between plagal and illusory, since in the penultimate stanza the boy only **seems** to ask if his sweetheart / Has tidied up her plaited locks" ("Er **scheint** zu fragen, ob das Liebchen / Die Zöpfe schon zurecht gemacht"),<sup>45</sup> which makes it unclear whether he **actually** asks her (or anyone else) or not. Therefore his question may indeed be illusory and, by extension, the previous night's "storm" as well.

Er scheint zu fra - gen, ob das Lieb-chen die Zü - pfe schon zu - recht ge - macht,

die heu - te Nacht im off - nen Stübchen ein Sturm in Un - ord - nung ge - bracht.

Example 3: Hugo Wolf, "Begegnung," mm. 37–44.

45 Julia von Bose's translation similarly reads "He seems to ask with voice so tender / if she's had time her hair to comb."

But none of that necessarily means that the girl herself is an illusion. The boy may be only daydreaming about their encounter from the previous night and even about approaching her and conversing with her in the poem's present, but that does not necessarily imply that she does not exist in reality. If anything, the firm tonal setting of the second stanza – “her” stanza – in the song's “real” tonic key of Eb major suggests that she is at least as real and central to the song as the boy, if not more so. She appears first and thus sets the narrative of the poem in motion, the opening stanza merely setting the scene, and she is the one who actively leaves, her exit effectively ending the poem, while the boy can't even bring himself to ask her a simple question and is left standing there in the end, “enraptured by her charm” (“Er steht, von Anmut hingerissen”) and entirely passive. Although Stein assigns “the role of central and pivotal protagonist” to the boy, in my view it is the girl who seems to deserve it more, in Mörike's lyrics and Wolf's music alike, for all the reasons explained above.

That, however – a real and active girl as the central protagonist of the song – would be incompatible with nineteenth-century and perhaps our own unconscious notions of normative femininity, always passive and consigned to the domestic sphere of home-making and child-rearing. By contrast, in this song, the main protagonist is arguably the girl: she begins the song, she exchanged kisses with the boy the previous night, and she is the one who leaves at the end, while the boy passively looks on, dumbstruck and helpless. In my mind, this is what makes “Begegnung” – both the poem by Mörike and Wolf's Lied – so interesting: the boy only appears to be the protagonist, while the girl has all the action. That might also be an unconscious reason for wanting to consign her to the boy's imagination (the “central and pivotal protagonist”), away from reality, because a central and pivotal girl-protagonist might simply be unthinkable in Western culture. The association of femininity with passivity and domesticity and, conversely, of masculinity with agency and activity in nineteenth-century Western culture is well known and amply documented in European and North American art, literature, and, not least, music; there is no need to rehash it here. In musicology, it has been discussed since at least the late 1980s, most prominently by American and British scholars such as Susan McClary, Ruth Solie, Suzanne Cusick, Carolyn Abbate, Lawrence Kramer, and Richard Leppert, to name but the few most classic examples.<sup>46</sup> What makes “Begegnung” so interest-

46 For instance, see any of the following: Carolyn Abbate, “Opera; Or, the Envoicing of Women,” in *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Musical Scholarship*, ed. Ruth Solie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 225–259; Suzanne Cusick, “Gender, Musicology and Feminism,” in *Rethinking Music*, eds. Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 471–498; Richard Leppert, *The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation, and the History of the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); Ruth A. Solie, “Whose Life? The Gendered Self in Schumann's *Frauenliebe* Songs,” in *Music and Text: Critical Inquiries*, ed. S. P. Scher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 219–240.

ing then, in my mind, is that none of its two protagonists, either in Mörike's lyrics or Wolf's music, conform to the nineteenth-century norms regulating their respective gender identities: the girl has all the action, her appearance and disappearance frame the song, while the boy seems hopelessly passive and powerless, literally immobilised by the end of the song. To paraphrase Judith Butler, due to its intrinsic ambiguity, in Mörike's poem patriarchal masculinity stages its own failure: as though the poet wanted to make the boy the main protagonist, but ended up empowering the girl. In its turn, Wolf's setting does nothing to resolve the ambiguity, but only further exacerbates it. In my view, it is therefore doubly unfortunate to banish this non-conformist girl out of reality and consign her to the boy's imagination, thus arguably perpetuating nineteenth-century patriarchal gender norms, which, as we may see in countless examples from Western popular culture, retain a significant presence in our own time.

But to do justice to Stein – and further complicate matters here – there do remain some compelling arguments for a completely different reading of the song, one that might be considerably closer to Stein's. The boy **is** the storm, after all – assuming that the stormy encounter did happen, contrary to Stein. Incidentally, that was Décsey's assumption, when he wrote back in 1921: "In 'Begegnung', the storm of the previous night is already in the past; but the composer turns it into an urban scene in the morning, when the two lovers meet, therefore, in the present."<sup>47</sup> It was he who ventured into the girl's open bedroom and tousled her plaits, not the other way around. And Wolf's music could almost as easily be reinterpreted to support this kind of reading: the only two minor keys in the song – Ab, which sets the "storm" in the opening stanza, and C, which sets the boy's sexual innuendo thinly veiled as the seemingly innocuous question he **seems** to ask in the penultimate stanza – can indeed be construed to revolve around the boy's Bb and not the girl's Eb major. Furthermore, the contour of the vocal line in the centrally positioned third stanza, which introduces the boy, is much closer to the vocal lines of the crucial first stanza (the "storm"/encounter) and penultimate stanza (the boy's question to the girl), than the largely static vocal line of the "girl's" second stanza. Having said that, it is also true that both that stanza and the ensuing "boy's" stanza are set to music that is entirely static in terms of both harmony and tonality, featuring tonic pedals in Eb and Bb major throughout. Without any harmonic or tonal support whatsoever, the upward thrusts of the vocal line in the third stanza seem like an empty gesture, deprived of all substance. Therefore it seems as though, however we choose to read Wolf's setting of this poem by Mörike, the boy and the girl both seem at best ambivalent in their respective gender roles, in line with the Lied's overall ambiguity.

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47 "In der 'Begegnung' liegt der Sturm der letzten Nacht schon in der Vergangenheit; aber der Musiker mach daraus das städtische Pritschelwetter am Morgen, wobei sich die beiden Liebesleute begegnen, also eine Gegenwart." Décsey, *Hugo Wolf*, 149.

But maybe that is precisely the whole point of the song. Perhaps the song should be heard with consideration of the *fin-de-siècle* model of sexual desire that Sigmund Freud theorised in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, as a free, unfettered force that seeks an object but does not depend on it. This would be the Freudian libido, which is both directed at an object but also transcends it and is never fully satisfied by it. In Freud's words, the "genital drive [i.e. desire] is probably independent of its object initially, and its origin is likely not owed to the object's attractions."<sup>48</sup> According to his model, desire is both originally independent of its object and invariably transcendent of it. It is a fluid force that is commonly posited in metaphors of surging, ebbing and flowing. The Freudian libido is a process that freely flows back and forth between the self and other, using them both as objects, regardless of their gender identities. Perhaps that is why Mörike and Wolf's two "novice rascals" are so hard to pin down in terms of their normative gender roles. Indeed, the only two stanzas in the song that exhibit any tonal agency whatsoever are the only two modulating stanzas – the opening and the penultimate stanza, underpinned by their shared syncopated piano accompaniment – both of which concern desire (i.e. the "storm") itself and not the two protagonists, its objects in the song. Indeed, the static setting of "their" two stanzas – the second and third – in harmonic and tonal and, in the girl's case, even in melodic terms, might be construed to portray them as helpless puppets in the hands of an all-engulfing and ever-flowing desire. By contrast, the song's overall dynamic pattern, especially whenever the "storm" is concerned, constantly veering from *piano* to *forte* and back, combined with rising and falling lines in the piano accompaniment, might be seen as an apt musical representation of this model of desire. Some of that may be seen in Examples 1 and 2 above.

Kramer has made a somewhat similar argument regarding another Wolf song, his setting of Goethe's "Ganymed" (and Wolf's reaction to Schubert's setting of the same poem). In his discussion, Kramer singles out the "tremolos, with their blurring of rhythmic and melodic boundaries," which "become the ultimate image in the song for the fluidity, the deliquescence, of libidinal desire [...] The effect is intensified when [...] the tremolos repeatedly swell to forte and subside to piano or pianissimo."<sup>49</sup> If anything, in "Begegnung" this sort of effect is only more pronounced, as may be gleaned from Examples 1 and 2. In his own brief reading of the poem, Sams reached a similar conclusion, on account of its "typically vivid and intense erotic symbolism, which [...] strikingly anticipated Freud. In particular, the idea that love is as wayward as winds in their power and gentleness is a recurrent image in Mörike's verse and prose."<sup>50</sup>

48 Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (London: Verso, 2016; first edition: 1905), "1. The Sexual Aberrations," EPUB e-book.

49 Lawrence Kramer, *Classical Music as Cultural Practice*, 14.

50 Sams, *The Songs of Hugo Wolf*, "II. The Mörike Songs."

Sams further notes that this is duly borne out in Wolf's setting, wherein the "sighing and moaning winds [i.e. syncopated rising and falling thrusts in the right hand] reappear in the piano interludes, and at the mention of delight ('voll Entzücken') are delicately recalled as a pianissimo memory or metaphor while the brief encounter and imagined question are described at 'Er scheint zu fragen'.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, since Wolf structured his songbooks in more-or-less coherent pairs or groups of songs,<sup>52</sup> rather than slavishly following the ordering found in his sourcebooks, interpreting "Begegnung" as a song about desire would nicely couple it with the song that follows it in the *Mörrike-Lieder* – the more famous "Nimmersatte Liebe," another song about (sexual) desire that, as Youens incidentally notes, uses offbeat rhythms to evoke "sexualized panting" in a rather explicit way, similarly to the piano accompaniment in "Begegnung."<sup>53</sup> Pairing "Begegnung" with "Nimmersatte Liebe" seems even more compelling when one compares the former song with its preceding item in the *Mörrike-Lieder*, "Verlassene Mägdlein," which features a passive and victimised female protagonist, quite unlike the proactive "sweet child" of "Begegnung." On the other hand, it may further corroborate a reading of "Begegnung" as a song about desire *qua* Freudian libido, an impersonal, universal force rather than a steamy encounter, whether fictional or not, between two individuals, illusory or not.

Be that as it may, we must remember that this is only one among many possible – and plausible – readings of this highly ambiguous song. What I hope it shows, along with the rest of my discussion, is what a little gem of a Lied Wolf's "Begegnung" is. I also hope that it demonstrates just how richly and innately ambivalent even some of Wolf's seemingly simplest works may be. By extension, it may also remind us that the Lied, despite its relatively low standing as a "small" genre of vocal music, historically deemed inferior to "big" instrumental genres, may yield a wealth of ambivalent and complex meanings, only if one is prepared to dig a little deeper. Of course, that has already been amply demonstrated concerning other, more famous Wolf songs by many of the people quoted in this paper and still by many others regarding more celebrated Lied composers such as Schubert, Schumann, and Brahms. It is high time, notwithstanding our current crisis and other challenges of our time, to devote a comparable amount of attention and appreciation to Wolf and his favoured genre because, as this paper hopefully suggests, both Wolf and the Lied certainly deserve it. May this paper be received as a token of appreciation and gift to the composer in what would have been his 160<sup>th</sup> year.

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51 Ibid.

52 Kramer, "Hugo Wolf and Subjectivity," 253.

53 Youens, *Hugo Wolf and his Mörrike Songs*, 126.

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## POVZETEK

### Srečanje s Hugom Wolfom v njegovem jubilejnim letu: nov pogled na »Begegnung«

Lani je minilo 160 let od rojstva avstrijsko-slovenskega skladatelja Huga Wolfa, katerega dela spadajo v kanon zahodne glasbe, predvsem njegovi samospevi, ki jim je dodal zelo ekspresiven wagnerjanski pridih in jih spremenil v pravo malo glasbeno dramo. Po drugi strani so ravno ti omajali njegov kanonični status, saj se je ukvarjal z »obrobnim« žanrom vokalne/dramske glasbe, ne pa z enim od »velikih« žanrov »absolutne« glasbe. Zato se je vredno ukvarjati z Wolfom, še posebej v njegovem jubilejnim letu.

Bistvo tega prispevka je po krivici zanemarjana Wolfova pesem »Begegnung« (»Srečanje«), uglasbitev istoimenske pesmi njegovega najljubšega pesnika, Eduarda Mörikeja. Morda je bil samospev zaradi navidezno preproste strukture uglasbitve, ki odraža strukturo pesmi, navidezno brezskrbnega lirskega subjekta, ki opisuje sanjarjenje najstnika o spolnem odnosu z očarljivim dekletom prejšnje noči, in Wolfove varljivo preproste diatonične zasnove deležen le malo znanstvene pozornosti – malodane nič, razen krajših zapisov Erica Samsa in Susan Youens in s pomembno izjemo temeljite schenkerjanske analize Deborah Stein v disertaciji iz leta 1985, ki je edina podrobna obravnava pesmi doslej.

Kljub temu »Begegnung« ni tako preprost samospev, kot se zdi. Kot je značilno za Mörikejeve pesmi, v sebi skriva številna protislovja, ki pa jih Wolfova glasba ne pomaga razrešiti, temveč jih še bolj zaplete. Ključno je, da pesem nakazuje, da niti »srečanje« niti njegova protagonistka ne obstajata v resničnosti, temveč zgolj v fantovi oz. protagonistovi domišljiji. To je najljubša interpretacija Steinove. Vendar pa morda Wolfova uglasbitev, ki se začne v eni tonaliteti (v as-molu) in konča v drugi (v Es-duru) nakazuje, da je dekle vsaj tako resnično in pomembno za pesem kot fant, če ne še bolj: zdi se, da je v pesmi aktivnejša protagonistka, ki s svojim nastopom začne in konča tako, da fanta zapusti, on pa je osupel in povsem pasiven. Zdi se, da Wolfova glasba to podkrepi tako, da »dekletovo« (drugo) kitico uglasbi v »pravi« toniki, v Es-duru, medtem ko je »fantova« (prva) kitica v B-duru.

To pa se ne sklada z normativnim pasivnim položajem, ki je bil v zahodni družbi 19. stoletja in drugod rezerviran za ženske, kar pomeni, da je skladatelj morda nezavedno želel dekle pregnati iz resničnosti in jo omejiti na fantovo domišljijo. Po drugi strani pa Wolfova uglasbitev ponuja nekaj prepričljivih argumentov za interpretacijo, ki je bližje Steinovi, saj se zdi, da oba protagonista odstopata od normativnih spolnih vlog. Morda pa je namesto neimenovanih ljubimcev resnični lirski subjekt v pesmi »Begegnung« poželenje samo v freudovski rekonceptualizaciji libida na prelomu stoletja – neosebna, univerzalna in nenasitna sila, ki je neodvisna in seže onkraj svojih objektov in njihovih spolnih identitet.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**ŽARKO CVEJIĆ** (zarko.cvejic@fmk.edu.rs) is an Associate Professor and vice-dean at the Faculty of Media and Communication at Singidunum University in Belgrade, Serbia. He holds a PhD degree from Cornell University (Ithaca, NY, USA) and an MSt and BA degrees from the University of Oxford (UK). Cvejić has authored and edited books and articles on a variety of subjects, including critical reception of instrumental virtuosity in 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century Western music, aesthetics and philosophy, critical theory, Renaissance music, popular music, and music historiography.

## O AVTORJU

**ŽARKO CVEJIĆ** (zarko.cvejic@fmk.edu.rs) je izredni profesor in prodekan na Fakulteti za medije in komunikacijo na Univerzi Singidunum v Beogradu. Doktoriral je na Univerzi Cornell (Ithaca, NY, ZDA), podiplomski in dodiplomski študij pa je zaključil na Univerzi v Oxfordu (VB). Je avtor in urednik knjig in člankov z različnih področij, vključno s kritiško recepcijo instrumentalne virtuoznosti v zahodni glasbi 18. in 19. stoletja, estetiko in filozofijo, kritično teorijo, renesančno glasbo, popularno glasbo in glasbenim zgodovinopisjem.