

Adele
Johnston
sings
Wagner and
Korngold Lieder

featuring
Wesendonck Lieder

Accompanied by Andrew Greene





ADELE JOHNSTON

was the winner of the 1997 City of Melbourne Song Recital Award. Mietta O'Donnell and Tony Knox established the Award in 1995 with the aim to revive professional Art Song performance in Australia and the Asia Pacific region. Art songs bring together poet, composer, singer, pianist and audience, and are distinguished by their unique ability to highlight intimacy and power. Patrons of the Award are Lauris Elms, Geoffrey Tozer and Gregory Yurisch.



WAGNER'S RELATIVELY small output of songs was remarkable, considering his passion for poetry and his prolixity in other areas, inside and outside music. But there were reasons for this; as his defenders explain: 'The *Lied* was one of those genres which were fairly remote from his thoughts. As a result, he wrote only a small number of songs and he usually had special, concrete reasons for doing so.'¹ His return to the form in 1857, driven by his love for the poet Mathilde Wesendonck, whose husband, Otto, was a wealthy merchant, was under very different circumstances to his earlier song-writing days of 1839-40.

By 1857 Wagner was at the height of his creative powers and able to survey an already considerable operatic output, with the greater balance of his work in sight. The year before, he had completed *Die Walküre* and had begun work on *Siegfried*; on Good Friday (10 April 1857) he sketched the first notes of *Parsifal*. Later that month, Wagner moved into a small cottage, Asyl, near Zurich, which he was renting (at a reduced fee) from the Wesendoncks. It was at Asyl, that August, that Wagner broke off composing Act II of *Siegfried* to begin work on *Tristan und Isolde*. He needed (he wrote) 'to drive himself to the brink' musically - a condition certainly proved over time.

During the *Tristan* gestation period, Wagner set five poems by Frau Wesendonck, under the collective title *Fünf Gedichte für eine Frauenstimme*, but

which have become more popularly, and less formally, known as the *Wesendonck-Lieder*. The songs were scored for soprano voice and piano, but later orchestrated by Felix Mottl, under the composer's supervision; Wagner himself orchestrated *Träume* for violin and orchestra. With one exception, these songs were the first such output by Wagner since his Paris days; but their musical complexities and dramatic ardency can be compared only with Wagner's more mature writings. The songs, with their order of composition given in brackets, are usually sung in the following order:

Der Engel - The Angel
(30 November 1857)
Stehe Still - Stand still!

Songs of different men

I have never produced anything better than these songs, and very few of my works will be able to stand comparison with them.

RICHARD WAGNER, ON HIS WESENDONCK-LIEDER

(21 February 1858)

Im Treibhaus - In the greenhouse

(1 May 1858)

Schmerzen - Agonies

(17 December 1857)

Träume - Dreams

(5 December 1857)

The third and fifth songs, each labelled 'study for *Tristan und Isolde*', are indeed microcosms of the twilight world of the doomed lovers. *Im Treibhaus* is a complete sketch for the Prelude to Act III; and *Träume* contains material associated with the Love Duet of Act II. The other songs, too, carry references not only to *Tristan* but (with *Der Engel*) the earlier *Das Rheingold*.

The five poems are simple in form, and essay the bliss of heaven, the stopping of

time (a precursor, perhaps, to the Marschallin in Richard Strauss' *Der Rosenkavalier*), the sheltered nature of plants, the setting and rising of the sun, and the glories of dreaming. They are slight poems, perfumed rather than saturated with imagery, but attain immortal dignity through Wagner's inspired settings.

The other Wagner songs on this recording come mostly from his formative years and reflect various aspects of his character and social circumstances. *Gretchen am Spinnrade* (*Meine Ruh ist hin*) is from one of his earliest compositions, *Sieben Kompositionen zu Goethes Faust*, Op.5, 1831, revised the following year.

Wagner's sister, Rosalie, gave the premiere performance of this song in Leipzig. *Der Tannenbaum* (to G. Scheurlin's poem) was written in Riga in 1838. The songs set to French poems, *Tout n'est qu'images fugitives* (Soupire) *Trois Mélodies - Dors, mon enfant* (Anon), *Mignonne* (P de Ronsard), and *L'Attente* (Victor Hugo) - come from Wagner's stormy Paris years, and were written in 1839. 'I have no reason to be ashamed of these small pieces,' their composer once said², comparing *Dors, mon enfant* to the Spinning Chorus, from *Der Fliegende Holländer*. Despite such self-assurance, Wagner could not convince French publishers or singers to use the songs; even the great Pauline Viardot (Wagner's first choice) did not wish to perform them, although Wagner noted, she 'did not fail to express approval of them'³.

The songs bear deliberate resemblance to the *salon* songs of the period, yet must have contained enough aspects of Wagner's own emerging style to fail to attract interest. As a result, he was humiliated sufficiently to abandon song-writing for almost 17 years.

While in Dresden Wagner composed a choral piece, *Gruss seiner Treuen an Friedrich August den Geliebten* (*Greeting of his Faithful to Friedrich August the Beloved*) to commemorate the return of King of Saxony's return from England. This ambitiously hagiographic piece, scored for 200 singers and 100 instrumentalists (the same year, Wagner rescored it for baritone and piano), was performed at the King's country seat, Pillnitz, on a summer's afternoon, 12 August 1844. It was conducted by Wagner's colleague, Reissiger, with the composer himself singing with the tenors. 'The King and the Royal Family were visibly moved,' wrote Wagner in his memoirs. The work contains distinct references to the Pilgrims' Chorus from *Tannhäuser*, which Wagner was composing concurrently.

ERICH WOLFGANG KORNGOLD (1897-1957) was a different composer and person from Richard Wagner, who could never have been called obscure at any stage of his career. Yet, it has taken many years for Korngold to regain the popular acceptance as a serious musician he once enjoyed. Gustav Mahler, hearing the 11-year-old Erich's music, called him 'A genius! A

genius!'; Richard Strauss expressed 'awe and fear' at the boy's talent; and Puccini said, 'He has so much talent he could easily give us half - and still have enough left for himself!'⁴ Arthur Schnabel championed Korngold's Piano Sonata in E flat; while a 1928 newspaper poll in Vienna listed Korngold and Schoenberg as the two greatest living composers.

Korngold, who fled Austria to America in 1934, achieved his greatest fame as a Hollywood film composer. Yet he composed in many other forms, including a violin concerto, a handsome list of chamber works and five operas. His song output was considerable and spans virtually his entire career.

Sommer (1916) and *Liebesbriefchen* (*Love Letter*) (1913) come from Korngold's Op.9 *Six Simple Songs Sechs einfache Lieder*, published in 1916 and are fine examples of his budding youthful genius. *Gefasster Abschied* (*Resigned Farewell*) and *Sterbelied* (*Dying Song*) are from Korngold's Op.14 cycle of four Farewell songs (*Abschiedslieder*), piano version published 1921 and acknowledged as his finest songs; they speak of the longing that comes from parted lovers. They also reflect the composer's maturing skills and look forward to the opulence of his most famous opera, *Die tote Stadt* (1920). Korngold's use of the vocal glissandi used both in *Gefasster Abschied* and *Sterbelied* are reminiscent of the string portamenti in the works of Gustav Mahler. The remaining songs on this recording come from Korngold's American years.

Unvergänglichkeit (Release), Op.27 (1935), is from a cycle set to texts by Eleonore van der Straaten; while *My mistress' eyes*, Op.38 No.5 (1947) from *Five Songs for Middle Voice (Fünf Lieder für mittlere Stimme und Klavier)* and the five *Twelfth Night: Songs of the Clown*, Op.29 (1939), are set to Shakespeare, and enhance much of the Bard's bawdy and boisterous mood through Korngold's irresistibly entertaining music.

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1 Note from the critical edition of Wagner's works.

2 Wagner, by John Chancellor.

3 My Life, by Richard Wagner

4 From Brendan G. Carroll's notes to the Decca recording of Korngold's opera, *Das Wunder der Heliane* (1993).

ADELE JOHNSTON ~ Soprano

Sydney-born Adele Johnston has had a multi-faceted induction into the performing arts with expert tuition in voice, drama and dance. Adele is a versatile artiste excelling in a variety of genres including cabaret, musical comedy, opera, operetta, concert and lieder recitals. Adele had notable success with her one woman show *Scaling the High Cs* at the Tilbury Hotel, Sydney and her operatic debut as the Secretary in Gian Carlo Menotti's *The Consul* for the Inaugural Brisbane Festival. Adele has been the recipient of many awards and a finalist in major competitions. The most notable, other than the City of Melbourne Song Recital Award, were runner-up in the 1991 Melbourne Herald Sun Aria and finalist in the McDonald's Aria, Sydney. These awards enabled her to pursue her vocal and language studies in London and Europe. Whilst overseas she studied and performed with Martin Isepp at the Abbaye du Royaumont, France; as Rosalinde in *Die Fledermaus*. In London she performed with Abbey Opera. In 1995 she gave her farewell recital with vocal coach and pianist David Harper at Australia House, London. It was during her time in London that she was introduced to the evocative music of Erich Wolfgang Korngold. A penchant for his music particularly his lieder followed. Adele was delighted to discover a wonderful collection of his lieder during a browse through the Hamburg City Library, Germany. Adele's first opportunity to record Korngold arose in 1996 for director Rodney Fisher and composer Max Lyandvert. She recorded "Marietta's Lied zur Laute" from Korngold's opera *Die tote Stadt*, for their CD recording of *Dead City*, accompanied by Andrew Greene. Adele was thrilled to have the opportunity to record some of his most beautiful, evocative and witty lieder for this CD. Being born a Gemini the art of communication is of great importance to the spirit

of Adele. The *Wesendonck Lieder* are an ideal source to explore the emotions and colour of the human voice to create the atmosphere of the poetry and music created by Mathilde Wesendonck and Richard Wagner. Adele's timbre is well suited to the Wagner repertoire and she continues to explore his operatic repertoire as her voice matures.

ANDREW GREENE ~ Pianoforte

Sydney-born Andrew Greene is one of Australia's most versatile musicians. He has conducted thirty-six operas in over fifty different productions for every opera company in Australia with particular emphasis on the works of Mozart and Rossini. He has appeared in concert with all of the Australian symphony orchestras and has conducted many works in the genres of operetta and musicals. He has also revived much forgotten operetta repertoire in concert, with great success, notably at the New Year's Eve Gala Concerts at the Concert Hall of the Sydney Opera House which he has conducted since 1993. As a pianist he has acted as accompanist in everything from lieder recitals to cabaret and has made many recordings where he appears as accompanist and conductor.

Adele Johnston accompanied by Andrew Greene

Richard Wagner (1813-1883)

- 1 Tout n'est qu'images fugitives (Soupir) (Everything is only fleeting images) J. Reboul 2'07"
- 2 Meine Ruh ist hin – Gretchen's Lied (My Peace is Gone) Goethe 3'08"
- 3 Der Tannenbaum (The Fir Tree) G. Scheurlin 3'00"

TROIS MÉLODIES (Three Songs)

- 4 Dors, mon enfant (Sleep, my child) Anonymous 2'36"
- 5 Mignonne (Darling) P. de Ronsard 2'59"
- 6 L'attente (Anticipation) Victor Hugo 1'46"
- 7 Gruss seiner Treuen an Friedrich August den Geliebten 6'13"
(Greeting of His Faithful to Friedrich August the Beloved) Richard Wagner

FÜNF GEDICHTE VON MATHILDE WESENDONCK (Five Poems by Mathilde Wesendonck)

- 8 Der Engel (The Angel) 3'25"
- 9 Stehe still! (Stand still!) 3'40"
- 10 Im Treibhaus (In the hothouse) 6'26"
- 11 Schmerzen (Agonies) 2'34"
- 12 Träume (Dreams) 5'23"

Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1897-1957)

- 13 Sommer Op. 9 No. 6 (Summer) S. Trebitsch 2'49"
- 14 Liebesbriefchen Op. 9 No. 4 (Love Letter/Billet Doux) Elisabeth Honold 3'01"
- 15 Gefaßter Abschied Op.14 No. 4 (Resigned Farewell) Ernst Lothar 4'15"
- 16 Sterbelied Op.14 No.1 (Dying Song) Christine Rosetti-Kerr 4'42"
- 17 My Mistress' Eyes (Sonnet CXXX) Op.38 No. 5 William Shakespeare 2'53"
- 18 Unvergänglichkeit Op.27 No. 1 (Release) Eleonore van der Straaten 2'54"

SONGS OF THE CLOWN – TWELFTH NIGHT Op.29 (texts by William Shakespeare)

- 19 Come Away Death 2'28"
- 20 O Mistress Mine 2'51"
- 21 Adieu, Good Man Devil 0'45"
- 22 O Mistress Mine 1'02"
- 23 Adieu, Good Man Devil 3'40"



- The 1997 City of Melbourne Song Recital Award committee was chaired by Professor John Poynter with members Michael Bertram, Carl Carthy, Sonja Chalmers, Margaret Haggart, Linnhe Robertson, Michael Shmith, Joan Spiller, Maria Vandamme and Jeremy Vincent
- Judges in 1997 were Margaret Haggart, Rosamund Illing, Hartley Newnham, Maria Vandamme and Professor John Poynter
- The Award is sponsored by ABC Classic FM, Adelaide Festival 2000, Allans Music, Alliance Francaise de Melbourne, AMP Investments, Australian National Academy of Music, Barossa Music Festival, Bilcon Engineering, Castlemaine State Festival, City of Melbourne, Consulat Général de France, Chris Perks Design, Discurio, French Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Goethe Institut Melbourne, Italian Institute of Culture Melbourne, Keon Couture Design, The Melbourne Festival, Mietta's Queenscliff Hotel, Mildura Arts Festival, Move Records, MLC Music Academy, Dame Elizabeth Murdoch, Musica Viva, Novotel Melbourne on Collins, Rhone Poulenc, SSL Leisure Services, Stephen Sheriffs, The Robert Stolz Society, Thomas Music, The Age, Victorian Arts Centre, VicHealth and Westwood Wine Agencies
- Introductory program notes: Michael Shmith
- Digitally recorded at Move Records, Melbourne 2/3/4/5 September 1997
- Recording, editing and mastering: Martin Wright and Vaughan McAlley
- Production Adviser: Maria Vandamme
- Photograph: Chris Walsh (Patrick Jones Photography)
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