Wagner’s earliest operas (Die Feen, Das Liebesverbot, Rienzi, Der fliegende Holländer, Tannhäuser, and Lohengrin) were designated “große romantische Oper” by Wagner himself, and were patterned in the German Romantic opera tradition of Weber and Marschner (see Table 1 for a list of Wagner’s music dramas). It was not until he started work on the Ring cycle in the early 1850s that Wagner began, for primarily philosophical reasons coupled with his burgeoning creative genius, to depart from the established operatic style of his day. The Ring project intrigued Wagner immensely, and although he made musical sketches of all the Ring operas during the decade of the 1850s, Tristan und Isolde persistently intervened and directly coincided with his intimate relationship, while the music composed for them unmistakably foreshadows Wagner’s music drama Tristan und Isolde. In fact, two of the songs, “Träume” and “Im Treibhaus,” were musical studies for the Act II Love Duet and the Act III Prelude, respectively (see Table 2 for a chart of the poetry, dates, and musical keys).

Surrounding Wagner’s personal sphere during the 1850s were several key determining influences. His twenty-year marriage to Minna continued to be a source of general unhappiness, making him emotionally vulnerable; his seminal essays written while enamored with the philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach were behind him, and he had begun to espouse the Weltanschauung of Arthur Schopenhauer; and his preoccupation with the Tristan myth, based on the Gottfried von Strassburg legend of 1210, continued to develop and expand. At the center of it all stood his lodestar, his impassioned attachment to Mathilde Wesendonck.

Wagner had fled Dresden due to his political involvement in the failed uprising of May 1849 and was sheltered by Liszt at Weimar before eventually making his way on a false passport to Switzerland. He settled in Zurich—German-speaking, politically liberal, outside the confines of the German states, yet teeming with fellow Germans. It was here that he met the Wesendoncks, Otto and Mathilde, who themselves had arrived in Zurich in April 1851. Wagner was conducting regularly for the civic Music Society in Zurich, and the Wesendoncks had become culturally involved in the small scale music life of the city, so it was not surprising that their paths would eventually cross, as they did in February 1852. The two families—Richard and Minna Wagner, Otto and Mathilde Wesendonck—became good friends. Wagner, who had always had a compulsion to teach and convert others, delighted in initiating this new, attentive pupil into his art and his theories. Mathilde referred to Richard as “the Master” in her diaries, and Richard affectionately called Mathilde “the Child.” Mathilde was able to respond to Richard’s musical schemes
Richard Wagner’s Wesendonck Lieder: Isolde Personified

Table 1. Wagner’s Operas and Music Dramas: Compositional Chronology.¹

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Dates of Composition</th>
<th>Date of First Performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Die Fên</td>
<td>1833-34</td>
<td>Munich, 1888</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Das Liebesverbot</td>
<td>1835</td>
<td>Magdeburg, 1836</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rienzi</td>
<td>1838-40</td>
<td>Dresden, 1842</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Der fliegende Holländer</td>
<td>1841</td>
<td>Dresden, 1843</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tannhäuser</td>
<td>1843-45</td>
<td>Dresden, 1845</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lohengrin</td>
<td>1846-48</td>
<td>Weimar, 1850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Der Ring des Nibelungen</td>
<td>Poems begun 1848, completed 1852</td>
<td>Bayreuth, 1876</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Das Rheingold</td>
<td>1853-54</td>
<td>Munich, 1869</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Die Walküre</td>
<td>1854-56</td>
<td>Munich, 1870</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siegfried</td>
<td>1856-57, 1864-65, 1869-71</td>
<td>Bayreuth, 1876</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Götterdämmerung</td>
<td>1869-74</td>
<td>Bayreuth, 1876</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tristan und Isolde</td>
<td>1857-59</td>
<td>Munich, 1865</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Die Meistersinger von</td>
<td>1862-67</td>
<td>Munich, 1868</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nürnberg</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parsifal</td>
<td>1877-82</td>
<td>Bayreuth, 1882</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Fünf Gedichte von Mathilde Wesendonck für Frauenstimme und Klavier (Wesendonck Lieder).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title [Study reference]</th>
<th>Date composed</th>
<th>Key</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Der Engel</td>
<td>30 November 1857</td>
<td>G major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stehe still!</td>
<td>22 February 1858</td>
<td>C minor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Im Treibhaus [Study for Act 3 Prelude, Tristan und Isolde]</td>
<td>1 May 1858</td>
<td>D minor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schmerzen</td>
<td>17 December 1857</td>
<td>C minor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Träume</td>
<td>5 December 1857</td>
<td>A♭ major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Study for Act 2 Love Duet, Tristan und Isolde]</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

and dreams in a way Minna had never been able to respond. Minna’s own health demanded frequent treatments and spa cures, which necessitated her being gone for weeks at a time. During these absences Wagner fell back increasingly on Mathilde Wesendonck as his attentive female sympathizer. She was undoubtedly overwhelmed by his genius and his attention. Their relationship became steadily more cordial, and it was not long before they underwent a transformation; the kind adviser and teacher amiably instructing his adoring student became the musical genius dispensing his gifts to his “tutelary goddess,” his muse.⁶

Wagner’s growing romantic interest in Frau Wesendonck during the six year period after February 1852 “precipitated, or at least paralleled, a philosophical preoccupation with the nature of love itself.”⁷ In a December 1854 letter to Liszt, Wagner bewailed his impetuous marriage to Minna, whom he claimed to respect but could not actually love. In such a painful mood he further wrote,

I now take a delight in living for my wife: if love is to be measured according to sacrifices, no one was ever loved so much, since for no one have such heavy, deliberate sacrifices been made . . . As I have never enjoyed the real happiness of love in my life, I now intend to erect a monument to this loveliest of all dreams, a work in which love shall really have its fill from beginning to end: in my head I have evolved a Tristan und Isolde.⁸

In September 1854 Wagner had been introduced to the quietist, renunciatory philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, which had a profound effect on his future outlook on life. Schopenhauer had written his three major aesthetic treatises under the direct influence of Ludwig Feuerbach, whose attacks on orthodox theology caused the philosopher to become the idol of young German intellectuals sympathetic to the uprisings of 1849 and had even attracted the interest of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.⁹ Feuerbach’s philosophy was materialistic, man centered, and atheistic.¹⁰ Schopenhauer’s philosophy had many parallels with Buddhist thinking. In his 1819 book The World as Will and Idea, Schopenhauer wrote of the will as the primal force of all being, as the source of all pain and misery on earth, as well as of all happiness.¹¹ Wagner, from his first readings of the philosopher in late 1854, was attracted more to Schopenhauer’s moral philosophy than to his views on aesthetics, and he was delighted to learn that he had already subconsciously incorporated much of the philosopher’s ideas into his own writings.¹² He subsequently integrated specific aspects of Schopenhauer’s philosophy into his operas, most notably in Tristan und Isolde, where the motifs of will and love are intertwined to create a work that is both musically and emotionally profound.¹³
hauer’s philosophy of music into Tristan und Isolde. Music was considered to be a direct objectification of the will; not a mere copy of ideas that tried to mirror the will, but instead a copy of the will itself. Therefore, through music all individuals had direct access to the will. Furthermore, Schopenhauer (and by extension Wagner) held that music was the most powerful of all the arts, not needing words or actions to be effective. Words could instead be used to call forth the power of music itself and give it specificity.13 In Tristan, he explored these deeply influential ideas in depth for the first time.

Certainly Wagner did not accept Schopenhauer without some modification of his own. Wagner contended that even music that appeared to be absolute had to borrow its formal structure from life, either from dance or from words, from “bodily motion” or from “spoken verse,” and of the two choices he felt that the poetic was the nobler one.14

Wagner had completed most of the poetry for Der Ring des Nibelungen by early 1853 and had even begun to compose the music. But the orbiting influences of Schopenhauer, Tristan, and Mathilde Wesendonck fused for him in the mid-1850s, propelling his creative energies in an entirely new direction.

Wagner’s earliest sketches for Tristan und Isolde date from June 1857, shortly after he and Minna moved into “Asyl,”15 his name for the cottage purchased for him by Otto Wesendonck at Mathilde’s insistence. Wagner was in the middle of the musical draft of Siegfried, but Tristan thrust the entire Ring conception from his mind. At the end of August he began his Tristan poem, which he claimed was “written in plain letters in my book of fate.”16 In early October he began the composition sketches for the first act, but he interrupted his Tristan absorption to set to music five poems written by Mathilde. This Fünf Gedichte collection represents one of the very few occasions on which he wrote music to words written by anyone other than himself.17

Frau Wesendonck’s literary aspirations on the whole may not have been particularly noteworthy, but the philosophical ideas in the five poems were concepts the poet and the composer had no doubt discussed many times. Filled as they were with Schopenhauer’s principal theme of renunciation and suffering as a means of liberation, they were the perfect metaphor for the Richard-Mathilde involvement. While the Fünf Gedichte poetry expressed Frau Wesendonck’s own personal perspective, Wagner preferred to dramatize the Richard-Mathilde-Otto triangle in his Tristan poem through the tragic characters of Tristan, Isolde, and King Mark.

The eminent German musicologist Carl Dahlhaus maintained that Tristan und Isolde was not the outcome and expression of Wagner’s love for Mathilde Wesendonck, as much as the love itself was a means whereby the dramatic conception took on musical and scenic shape.18 This is an important concept, inasmuch as it flies in the face of naïve nineteenth-century hermeneutics that held that music was an expression of a composer’s emotions and experiences. In truth, this notion found no support in Wagner’s own aesthetic concept, which can be roughly summarized as follows: It is not music that expresses drama, but drama that expresses music.19

Wagner composed Mathilde’s poem “Der Engel” on 30 November 1857; in a letter to her dated 31 December 1857 Wagner surely referred to Mathilde as his angel. The missive marked the completion of the draft of the first act of Tristan, which the composer celebrated in poetic form.

Tristan und Isolde, in keuscher Töne Golde, ihr Weinen und ihr Küssen leg’ ich zu deinen Füssen, dass sie den Engel loben, der mich so hoch erhoben.”20 Yet another instance of Wagner’s reference to Mathilde as “dear hallowed angel” occurred in the fateful letter of 6 July 1858 which, intercepted by Minna, precipitated the breaking up of the intimate Zurich living arrangements that had been in place since late April 1857.21

Wagner composed “Der Engel” in G major with a lightly arpeggiated texture that resembles the harp, that most angelic of instruments. The simplicity of both the piano accompaniment and the harmony lend sincerity to the text, which speaks of “der Kindheit frühen Tagen.” In the last two beats of m. 13 the key changes to an ominous G minor, mirroring the “Herz in Sorgen” in the text. Moving through A minor, then E minor/major which quickly modulates to D major, the dominant of tonic G, Wagner oddly sets the word “nieder” on an ascending perfect fourth. He then changes the key briefly back to G major at m. 25, then to F# major, where the textual intent of “und es sanft gen Himmel hebt” now matches the rising musical scale. The rapid modulatory sequence of “Der Engel” is a rather mild example of Wagner’s chromaticism; a more characteristic example is found in “Stehe still!” The first two-thirds of the C minor song is highly chromatic, changing key frenetically, until a modicum of harmonic quietude is reached in m. 70. Again, the music complements the
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poem, which begs the Eternal Creator to stop the mad rush of desire, silencing the unending day of wanting so that the worth of pure joy might be measured—Schopenhauer in his purest iteration. The poet claims that only when the inner soul begets no more desire will the riddle of Nature be solved. In both songs, Wagner’s basic motive for the ultimate source of existence is the major chord, surely the most fundamental harmonic element in music. But in Wagner’s hands the simple chord assumes profound significance, rising as it does from intensely chromatic passages. The listener feels a sense of relief, peace, even triumph in “Stehe still!” when the C major chord rises through the cadential V7 out of a series of dominant seventh and ninth chords in the measures preceding “heil’ge Natur” (mm. 84–86).

The wan charm of the Wesendonck poetry, inspired by Mathilde’s love for Wagner and by the Tristan poem, is “a classical example of a familiar phenomenon—that a beautiful song may as well be written to a mediocre poem as to a great one.” Wagner’s music, on the other hand, has all the chromatic sophistication and emotional intensity of Tristan und Isolde, with the vocal line weaving its “unendliche Melodie” above the rich harmonic texture. Perhaps in support of this endless melody concept, there is no repetition of words in the Fünf Gedichte. Wagner chose instead to use the endless melody “as a way of expressing the inexpressible.” The heart-rending melody in “Schmerzen” is initiated in C minor by the “weeping” descending sixteenth notes that function as appoggiaturi and by the three-bar introductory phrase (I5– VI7–IV3–ii–V7) which is immediately reproduced in the vocal line. Melodic amplification expands in the vocal line over the accompaniment, which serves to give rhythmic impetus (particularly in mm. 8–11) and harmonic fill. The voice and piano exchange functions in a melodic relay, each handing off melodic material to the other throughout the brief, thirty-one-bar song. The descending melodic theme encompasses nearly an octave and repeats five times in the vocal line, eleven times in the accompaniment. The distinct rhythmic figures of the melody consist of repeated dotted eighths with sixteenths and dotted sixteenths with thirty-second notes, simultaneously lending a strong sense of driving urgency and a frustrated resignation to the music. Mathilde Wesendonck’s fervent poem expresses these musical ideas, yet it would be difficult to argue that the music echoes the poetic sentiment. Rather, one gets a sense that the music is the poetic intention, that it pulls the poetry along with it, as Wagner himself delineated in his concept of die dichterische Absicht.

It is difficult to discuss Wagner in any form without some mention of the Leitmotive, the musical concept he is credited with having invented. The term itself did not come into being until music historian A. W. Ambrose coined it in 1865 to describe music that seeks to establish a higher unity by means of consistent themes. Wagner himself used it in his essay of 1879, Über die Anwendung der Musik auf das Drama. He had previously employed a variety of expressions to discuss thematic elements in his works, predominantly the Erinnerungsmotiv and the Hauptmotiv. The composer as conductor was no doubt aware of the extensive use of reminiscence motifs in the operas of Cherubini, Marschner, Weber, and Spohr. Although Wagner was attempting in Oper und Drama to construct formal musical units in order to respond vividly to the promptings of the text, in practice he certainly recognized the necessity for a small number of easily identifiable motifs. In his early works he used these primarily to distinguish his compositions from the florid vocal phrases of traditional nineteenth-century opera. In 1857, however, when he began to work on both Tristan and the Wesendonck Lieder, his aesthetic had evolved under the impact of Schopenhauer to the point where the music itself became the central feature. The effect of this was that leitmotivs became even less specific in meaning and even more subject to musical elaboration. There is the sense, especially in Tristan, that the motifs “lead” the music while remaining linked to the text. Dahlhaus bemoans the practice of giving Wagnerian leitmotivs a fixed identity, but he realizes the unavoidability of doing so, flatly stating that instinctive understanding of musical motives without the need for mediation through language is illusory.

While it seems self-evident that all five poems are clearly under the influence of the Tristan libretto, it is also obvious that all of the Fünf Gedichte contain moments of the Tristan music. For example, “Der Engel!” employs in the accompaniment at m. 41 the same appoggiatura figure that occurs numerous times in the famous Transfiguration scene at the close of Tristan (Example 1). The bass line of the accompaniment at mm. 43–46 in “Stehe still!” is the precursor of the Schicksalsthema (destiny theme) from Act I (Example 2). The “Schmerzen” accompaniment imitates the fortissimo warrior horns of King Mark in mm. 13–14 and mm. 30–31, representing the “royal instruments of power” when the musical
tonic four times before the voice enters, yet the weak pull of the iv-i progression never gives the listener a sense of harmonic completion. This Hauptmotiv continues for two more measures, while the vocal line begins a melancholy countermelody (mm. 1–9). The second Hauptmotiv occurs at mm. 4, 8, 16, 28–29, and 64 as an extension, an ascending melodic line of the first idea. Lasting only one measure (two measures at its fourth iteration, with slight rhythmic variation) it nevertheless leads into the third motif in an organic linking with the first.35 The third Hauptmotiv begins in the accompaniment in the second beat of m. 9 and continues to the A7 chord in m. 13, and repeats in mm. 55–58. Throughout, the poetry of “Im Treibhaus” reflects a mournful decline, an impending doom. Yet the healing presence of “Isolde” finds its counterpart in the “I” of the poem, a sympathizing narrator who expresses her feelings of kinship for the doomed plants37 (translations of poems appear at the end of the article):

WohI, ich weig es, arme Pflanze: ein Geschicke teilen wir, ob umstrahlt von Licht und Glanze, unsre Heimat ist nicht Filer!

“Träume” was chronologically the second of the Wesendonck poems Wagner set, although it appears last in the Fünf Gedichte published editions. Composed on 5 December 1857, less than a week after the 30 November composition of “Der Engel,” this song served as the study for the Act II Love Duet and figured prominently as well in Isolde’s “Transfiguration.” The most striking element in “Träume” is the lack of inherent tension. Dynamically, the song hovers around variations of p, only once reaching ff and then imme-

Example 1. a) “Der Engel,” mm. 39–41; b) Tristan und Isolde, Transfiguration scene.

The musical setting that the words of “Im Treibhaus” evoke parallels the dramatic situation found in Tristan und Isolde as Act III opens. Frau Wesendonck’s greenhouse imagery corresponds closely to the predicament of the ailing Tristan; the sorrowing plants, surrounded by warmth and light, are yet cut off from their true home. They stretch their limbs wide in passionate longing yet embrace only the horror of empty space.

In both the Act III Prelude and the song, the same ascending musical figure (as in mm. 1–2) is associated with the idea of struggling against restraint.33 D minor, the key of “Im Treibhaus,” is also “the tonality of [King] Mark’s grief,” according to Jean-Jacques Nattiez.34 In this song, more than any other, the poetic intent may function to draw drama from the music even before the words have been revealed. Wagner called this function in music the “foreboding” function. The song is made up of three musical ideas, or Hauptmotiven, which alternate to give the music its form.35 The song opens on the subdominant G minor and quickly resolves to
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Example 2. a) “Stehe still!” mm. 45–49; b) Tristan und Isolde, Schicksalsthema, Act I.

diately backing off. This is in high contrast to the anguished intensity of “Schmerzen,” the reiterated f–p dynamic surges of “Stehe still!” and the più p lassitude of “Im Treibhaus.” Wagner makes use of the flat sixth in m. 3 in tonic A major as the music progresses harmonically through a series of seventh and diminished seventh chords over a pedal A. The restful tonic resolution at m. 13 with the recurring 6–5 suspension provides melodic interest and prepares the vocal entrance with a V7 cadence (mm. 15–16). The opening four-bar vocal phrase is driven up a whole step by means of a diminished A7 chord to Bb major at the initiation of the second four-bar vocal phrase (m. 21). A syncopated bass figure under rising dotted rhythms intensifies the meter for six bars beginning at m. 32, and continues to build sequentially even as the accompaniment figure returns to its initial soothing undercurrent of repeated eighth notes at m. 50.

Wagner wrote nachlassend (easing or letting up) in the score at m. 54 and immer mehr nachlassend at m. 58, taking advantage of the relative musical calm to introduce two major Hauptmotiven. The first occurs at mm. 55–56 and is part of a much-developed theme heard throughout the opera. The second occurs in mm. 60–64 and figures predominantly in the Act II “Love Duet” (Example 4). Though only heard in fragments in “Träume,” the two themes play prominent developmental roles in the music drama. The song ends in much the same way it began. The tonality of A major gradually establishes itself out of the tonal flux that precedes it, tapering off gently with an elongated final 6–5 suspension.

Composed over a five-month period between 30 November 1857 and 1 May 1858, the Fünf Gedichte were written to piano accompaniment. The first performance of the whole cycle was given in July 1862 by Emilie Genast at a country house belonging to Franz Schott, the music publisher. Present were Minna Wagner, who was to die before the year was out; Mathilde Wesendonck, whose adulation inspired both Wagner the man and Wagner the artist; and Cosima von Bülow, who would soon begin her own tumultuous liaison with the composer. Oh, to have been a fly on the wall that night! Ronald Taylor writes how one of the guests described in his memoirs the difference between an emotional and a commercial response at the performance’s end: “Tears poured down Cosima von Bülow’s face. Herr Franz Schott [the music publisher] rubbed his hands in glee and immediately locked the manuscript away in a drawer.” Wagner arranged “Träume” for solo violin and chamber orchestra and conducted it himself on 23 December 1857 as a surprise for Mathilde’s twenty-ninth birthday at the Wesendoncks’ Zurich villa. The other four songs were orchestrated by the Austrian conductor Franz Mottl, whose skill has no doubt resulted in the enduring popularity of the songs. Hans Werner Henze reorchestrated the cycle in 1976, resulting in “a more radical but sensitive rescoring,” but the songs are almost always performed today with Mottl’s orchestration. Many sopranos and mezzo sopranos have recorded the cycle, including Jessye Norman, Jane Eaglen, Eileen Farrell, Birgit Nilsson, Astrid Varnay, Kirsten Flagstad, and Christa Ludwig, whose 1962 recording with Klemperer is...
absolutely stunning. However, no recording is known to exist with the original piano accompaniment. These masterpieces are not for the beginner or even the self-absorbed intermediate; but for an advanced or mature singer they offer access to German song through the world of idea to a degree no other lieder composer had ever attempted, allowing the singer to stimulate her brain as well as her heart, to grow mentally as well as musically.

Richard Wagner’s musical genius coupled with Mathilde Wesendonck’s poetic inspiration resulted in the Fünf Gedichte, five songs that belong both biographically and musically to the world of Tristan. The writing of Tristan und Isolde, like the writing of the Fünf Gedichte, cannot be separated from the personal drama of the relationship between Herr Wagner and Frau Wesendonck. Nor can it be separated from the somber mood of uncertainty and frustration that accompanied the composer’s exile. Likewise, the intellectual substructure of the two works owes much to the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer. Of all Wagner’s works, these two compositions are the closest to the experienced reality of his life, and the most directly expressive of the “emotional strains and spiritual pressures” that tore at him during the years of their development. Wagner and Mathilde surely knew that their passion for each other could result only in renunciation and self-abnegation; and just as surely they both knowingly, even joyfully, endured the birth pangs that brought forth the artistic fruit of their forbidden desires. Art is the victor over life, and the victory is music’s.

At the heart of this profound personal experience lies the music itself, music the likes of which the world had never heard before. The dissolution of tonality, the emancipation of melody and counterpoint from preformed chordal associations, and the suspension of the principles of harmony all serve to render both Tristan and the Fünf Gedichte as mainsprings in the history of modern music.43

NOTES


2. The three essays were *Art and Revolution* (1849), *The Artwork of the Future* (1850), and *Opera and Drama* (1852).


4. The spelling of the family name was changed to Wesendonk, without the c, by the American branch of the family shortly after the turn of the twentieth century. This article will honor the German spelling in use during the time of these events.


7. Brener, 82.


10. Ibid.

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Example 4. a) “Träume,” mm. 54–69; b) Tristan und Isolde, Love Duet.
Sources Consulted


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THE POEMS

Der Engel

In der Kindheit frühen Tagen
hört ich oft von Engeln sagen,
die des Himmels hehre Wonne
tauschen mit der Erdensonne,
daß, wo bang ein Herz in Sorgen
schmachtet vor der Welt verborgen,
daß, wo still es will verbluten,
und vergehn in Tränenfluten,
daß, wo brünstig sein Gebet
einzig um Erlösung fleht,
dafs, wo brunstig sein Gebet
in Tränenfluten vergeht,
daf, wo bang ein Herz in Sorgen
schmachtet vor der Welt verborgen,
daß, wo still es will verbluten,
und vergehn in Tränenfluten,
Ja, es stieg auch mir ein Engel nieder,
und auf leuchtendem Gefieder
führt er, fern jedem Schmerz,
meinen Geist nun himmelwärts!

In the early days of childhood
I often heard tales of angels
who exchange the higher joys
of Heaven for the sunshine of earth,
so that whoever with sorrowing heart
languishes hidden from the world,
whoever is passing away in floods of tears,
whoever with fervor prays
only for release from life—
to him the angel descends
and gently raises him to Heaven.

Stehe still!

Rushing, roaring wheel of time,
kniife blade of eternity,
glowing spheres in distant space
closed about the globe of earth;
first creation, stop your turning,
enough of existence, let me be!
Hold back, power of begetting,
primal thought, eternal creator!
Stop this breathing, still this desire,
silence it only a few seconds’ time!
Swelling impulse, restrain your blow,
end the unending day of wanting!
So that in sweet and happy forgetting
I might measure the worth of joy!
When eye drinks in the joy of eye,
when soul is sunk in another’s soul,
when being finds itself in another’s being,
and we reach the end of all hoping:
when lips are dumb in wondering silence,
the inner soul will beget no more desire:
then man will know the eternal sign
and solve your riddle, holy Nature!
Im Treibhaus

Hochgewölbte Blätterkronen,  
Baldachine von Smaragd,  
Kinder ihr aus fernen Zonen,  
saget mir, warum ihr klagt?  
Schweigend neiget ihr die Zweige,  
malet Zeichen in die Luft,  
und der Leiden stummer Zeuge,  
steigt aufwärts, süßer Duft.  
Weit in sehndem Verlangen  
breitet ihr die Arme aus,  
und umschlingt wahnbefangen  
oder Leere nicht'gen Graus.  
Wohl, ich weiß es, arme Pflanze:  
ein Geschicke teilen wir,  
ob umstrahlt von Licht und Glanz,  
unsre Heimat ist nicht hier!  
Und wie froh die Sonne scheidet  
von des Tages leerem Schein,  
hültet der, der wahrhaft leidet  
sich in Schweigens Dunkel ein.  
Stille wird's, ein säuselnd Weben  
füllt den dunklen Raum:  
schwere Tropfen seh' ich schweben  
an der Blätter grünen Saum.

Schmerzen

Sonne, weinet jeden Abend  
dir die schönen Augen rot,  
enn im Meersspiegel badend  
dich erreicht der frühe Tod;  
doch ersehlest in alter Pracht,  
Glorie der düstren Welt;  
du am Morgen neu erwacht,  
wie ein stolzer Siegesheld!  
Ach, wie sollte ich da klag'en,  
wie, mein Herz, so schwer dich seh'n,  
muß die Sonne selbst verzagen,  
muß die Sonne unterg'hn?  
Und gebiert Tod nur Leben,  
geben Schmerzen Wonnen nur:  
o wie dank' ich daß gegeben  
solche Schmerzen mir Natur!

High-arched leafy crowns, canopies of emerald, children of a distant clime, tell me, why do you mourn? Noiselessly your branches bend, shaping gestures in the air, and as silent witness of sorrow there rises upwards a sweet scent. Wide in yearning desire you spread out your arms and embrace the maddening void horror of empty space. Well do I know, poor plants, that we share one destiny, even with light and glass above us, our homeland is not here! Just as the sun gladly withdraws from the empty light of day, so does he who truly sorrows veil himself in the dark silence. All grows still, a rustling motion fills the darkened space with grief: I see heavy drops suspended on the green edges of the leaves.

Sun, you weep every evening until your fair eyes are red, when bathing in the sea's mirror you reach your early death; yet you rise with accustomed splendor, glory of the gloomy world, newly awakened at morning as a proud, victorious hero! Ah, why should I complain, why, my heart, pit you so when the sun himself must despair, when the sun must sink? Death always gives birth to life, pains always bring forth joys: oh, how thankful am I that Nature has given me such pains!
Träume

Say, what wondrous dreams
hold my mind in thrall,
so that they have not like empty bubbles
passed into oblivion?
Dreams, that in every hour,
every day, grow fairer,
and with their heavenly message
pass through my soul with blessings!
Dreams that, like celestial rays,
penetrate my very soul
and paint an unfading picture there
of forgetting and remembering!
Dreams that, like the sun of spring,
draw flowers from snow with a kiss;
and greet the new day;
then they grow, and they bloom,
and dreaming give forth their scent;
gently they cool upon your breast
and then sink into the grave.

[translations by S. Weiler]

Mezzo soprano Sherri Moore Weiler received both the BA and MEd degrees from Clemson University. She received the MM degree from the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music and the DM degree from Florida State University in 2004. Dr. Weiler has taught voice at Alaska Pacific University, University of Alaska Anchorage, Florida A&M University, Florida State University, and is currently Assistant Professor of Music at Shorter College in Rome, Georgia. She served as Director and Artistic Director of Anchorage Opera’s Studio Theatre, a young artist program, from 2000–2002. Her professional presentations include a lecture-recital tracing folk elements in Russian art song from 1850–1950 performed for the College Music Society at regional and national conferences in 2004. Weiler was a featured chamber music performer at the 48th national conference of NATS in New Orleans in July 2004, has held office in the Alaska Chapter of NATS, and has had an article about Berlioz’s Les Nuits d’été published in Journal of Singing. She has also written articles reviewing voice pedagogy classics for Classical Singer magazine.

As a performer Weiler was selected by Mstislav Rostropovich to sing the mezzo solo in Prokofiev’s Alexander Nevsky with the National Symphony in 1992, which helped instill a great love and appreciation for Russian vocal literature. For more than a decade Weiler coached Russian language and song literature with Svetlana Velichko, a graduate and twenty-nine-year member of the piano faculty of the Moscow Conservatory. The two have a compact disk on the Centaur label, released in 2001, titled Russia: Golden Century of Song. Weiler’s doctoral treatise centered on preventing counterproductive tensions induced by Russian diction in American singers. She has performed the Verdi Requiem with Jerome Hines, Mendelssohn’s Elijah with Eric Mills, and a Schubert bicentennial recital with John Wustman in 2000. She has appeared in numerous roles with Anchorage Opera, Sacramento Opera, Florida State Opera, and Cleveland Opera. Dr. Weiler has given recitals for Willamette University, Portland State University, Oregon Music Teachers’ Association, Anchorage Opera, Anchorage Festival of Music, the University of Alaska Anchorage, Florida A&M University, and Shorter College.