

A COMPARISON OF ROBERT SCHUMANN'S AND HUGO WOLF'S SETTINGS
OF GOETHE'S MIGNON LIEDER

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CARRIE RIVERA

JOSEPH LEVITT – ADVISOR

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY

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The nine poems presented throughout Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre* have continued to fascinate German composers for the last three centuries. Of the three characters represented in these poems throughout the novel, one character in particular has remained the most fascinating, the character of Mignon. While at the same time seeming to possess a naïve quality about her, Mignon is also tainted by the suffering she had faced throughout her short life. In an attempt to capture what composers perceived as the true character of Mignon, several have set her poems to music. Of the many musical settings of the Mignon poetry found today, two stand out among the rest, that of Robert Schumann and Hugo Wolf. In order to find which composer's musical setting best represents the complex character of Mignon, this study will consist of comparing Schumann's and Wolf's settings of the Goethe's four Mignon poems to the character descriptions of Mignon found in Eric A. Blackwell and Victor Lange's English translation of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre*. The four poems that will be looked at include Goethe's "Kennst du das Land?" "Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt," "Heiss mich nicht reden," and "So lasst mich scheinen." While several past studies have claimed Hugo Wolf's setting of the Mignon lieder to be far superior to all other settings in its ability to represent the character of Mignon in the music, this study will instead strive to demonstrate how Robert Schumann's musical setting of Goethe's Mignon lieder best represents the character of Mignon.

Although the majority of *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre* is focused on the life and thoughts of the main character, Wilhelm, Mignon's character is realized through Wilhelm's observances of her. The first of these observances happens during Wilhelm's

initial meeting with Mignon upon his arrival at an Inn in Hochdorf. Wilhelm describes Mignon's outward appearance stating, "The child was neatly dressed in a short silk bodice with slashed Spanish sleeves and puffed out long slim trousers. Its long black hair was curled and wound in locks and braids on its head."¹ In Wilhelm's following descriptions, he reveals Mignon's name, that she is a girl, the rough estimate of her age being 12 or 13 years old, and lastly that she is a member of a group of acrobats and dancers performing at the Inn. Mignon's strange mannerisms are also explained by Wilhelm throughout the novel, along with a more detailed description of her looks. The following is a brief description of Mignon during one of Wilhelm's meetings with her.

she answered in broken German and a strange, formal manner, bowing deeply each time and placing her hands as before on her chest and temple...She was well built, her limbs suggested further development to come, which possibly had been arrested. Her features were not regular, but striking: her forehead seemed to veil some secret, her nose was unusually beautiful, her mouth, though too tight-lipped for her age and inclined to twitch at times on one side, had a certain winsome charm about it. The grease paint almost obscured her dark complexion.²

After Wilhelm learns that Mignon is a slave to the manager of the acting troupe and not just a member, he offers to buy her from the man for one hundred ducats. Mignon's origins are not established at this time. Upon saving Mignon from her previous master's beatings, she is thankful to Wilhelm and offers to be his servant, performing her

¹ Eric A. Blackall and Victor Lange, ed. and trans., *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 50.

² Blackall and Lange, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, 54.

tasks, “slowly and sometimes awkwardly, but correctly and very attentively.”³ In this next excerpt, Wilhelm describes Mignon’s awkward mannerisms while she worked.

There was something strange about everything she did. She never walked up or down the stairs, she always ran. She climbed up on banisters, and before one knew it, there she was on top of a closet, sitting quite still.⁴

More of Mignon’s awkward mannerisms surface as the novel continues including Mignon’s strange greeting system. She greeted Wilhelm “with arms folded on her breast.”⁵ Mignon’s unusual manner of speaking is also introduced. Some days she was completely silent and on other days she would only answer certain questions when asked, speaking in a strange mix of German, French, and Italian. Wilhelm also explains how “nothing could persuade her to sleep in a bed or on a straw mattress,”⁶ which points towards the hard life the girl must have had if she learned to like sleeping on the floor.

Mignon’s religious nature is discovered in Wilhelm’s remark that “early every morning she went to mass, and once he followed her and saw her kneeling in a corner of the church, piously saying her rosary.”⁷ While Mignon seems awkward and inept in many aspects of her life, she is completely capable in other areas. As Mignon performs what she calls an egg dance, Wilhelm is “amazed to see how completely her character was manifested in the dance. Severe, sharp, dry, and violent—all this she certainly was; and in

³ Blackall and Lange, *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, 60.

⁴ Blackall and Lange, *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, 61.

⁵ Blackall and Lange, *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, 61.

⁶ Blackall and Lange, *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, 61.

⁷ Blackall and Lange, *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, 61.

her quieter movements there was solemnity rather than grace.”⁸ Along with Mignon’s talent for dance, Wilhelm also discovers that she is an extraordinary musician, able to express her innermost self in the songs Goethe places throughout the novel.

While Mignon’s character is revealed through Wilhelm’s observances of her, Mignon’s song performances scattered throughout the novel also help in determining Mignon’s personality and ambitions. For the first time, brief glimpses of Mignon’s origins are revealed in “Kennst du das Land?” the first of Mignon’s songs. In the first verse, Mignon describes a beautiful land, which she later reveals as Italy and her homeland. She is reminiscent and almost whimsical in her description of a land complete with gentle breezes and lemon blossoms. She begins the second verse with the same whimsy, but an eerie change in her mood commences as she describes marble statues that ask her “You poor child, what have they done to you?” The fact that Mignon was kidnapped and brought to Germany as a slave is discovered in this verse. “They” must be referring to her captors. Although this verse is tinged with painful memories, Mignon still wishes to journey back in time to this moment with her protector, Wilhelm. Perhaps he would have been able to prevent her abduction. In the third verse Mignon explains the journey she made with her captors through dangerous terrain. At this point in her song, Mignon has become agitated, causing her to reach out for help from someone she refers to as “father.” This father Mignon speaks of could be referring to either Wilhelm or God, or possibly both. The complex feelings Mignon holds for Wilhelm are seen in this strophic poem. Mignon refers to Wilhelm first as beloved, then as protector and lastly as

⁸ Blackall and Lange, *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, 62.

father. By revealing this story to Wilhelm, it shows Mignon's love, faith and trust in him, something she did not have for anyone else.

“Kennst du das Land?” is the only poem of the four Mignon poems in which Goethe reveals his visions for how it might be set to music and performed. He does this through Wilhelm's description of Mignon's performance.

He found, however, that he could not even approximate the originality of the phrases, and the childlike innocence of the style was lost when the broken language was smoothed over and the disconnectedness removed. The charm of the melody was also quite unique. She intoned each verse with a certain solemn grandeur, as if she were drawing attention to something unusual and imparting something of importance. When she reached the third line, the melody became more somber; the words “You know it, yes” were given weightiness and mystery, the “Oh there, oh there!” was suffused with longing, and she modified the phrase “Let us fare!” each time it was repeated, so that one time it was entreating and urging, the next time pressing and full of promise.⁹

Example 1: Goethe, “Kennst du das Land ?”

Kennst du das Land,
wo die Zitronen blüh'n,
Im dunkeln Laub die Gold-Orangen glüh'n,
Ein safter Wind vom blauen Himmel weht,
Die Myrthe still und hoch der Lorbeer steht?
Kennst du es wohl?
Dahin! dahin,
Möcht' ich mit dir, o mein Geliebter, zieh'n.

Do you know the Land,
Where the lemon trees bloom,
Among dark leaves the golden orange glows
A soft wind from blue skies drifts
The myrtle quiet and high the laurel stands?
Do you know it well?
There! There,
Would I go with you, oh my beloved, go.

Kennst du das Haus?

Do you know the house?

⁹ Blackall and Lange, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, 81.

Auf Säulen ruht sein Dach.
 Es glänzt der Saal,
 es schimmert das Gemach,
 Und Marmorbilder steh'n und seh'n mich an:
 Was hat man dir du armes Kind, getan?
 Kennst du es wohl?
 Dahin! dahin,
 Möcht' ich mit dir, o mein Beschützer, zieh'n.

On pillars rests its roof.
 The hall glistens,
 The room shines
 And the marble statues stand and say:
 What have they done to you poor child?
 Do you know it well?
 There! There.
 Would I go with you, oh my protector, go.

Kennst du den Berg und seinen Wolkensteg?
 Das Maulthier sucht im Nebel seinen Weg;
 In Höhlen wohnt der Drachen alte Brut,
 Es stürzt der Fels und über ihn die Fluth.
 Kennst du ihn wohl?
 Dahin! dahin,
 geht unser Weg! O Vater, lass uns zieh'n!

Do you know the mountain and its path?
 The animal searches in the clouds for its way
 In caves dwells the dragon of old's brood,
 The cliff falls and over it the flood.
 Do you know it well?
 There! There,
 Leads out way! Oh Father, let us go!¹⁰

The next of Mignon's songs is sung as a duet with the Harper, a musician at the Inn and also Mignon's father (unbeknownst to her), after Wilhelm and the troupe is attacked by bandits. The two attempt to comfort Wilhelm in his depressed state. In the novel, Wilhelm describes "Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt" as having "passionate expressiveness" and "was like an echo of what he himself was feeling."¹¹ No other musical or performance descriptions are given. At first glance this poem could be interpreted into Mignon's romantic longing for someone she could not have, possibly Wilhelm. But if read in conjunction with Mignon's previous song, "Kennst du das Land?" this poem more than likely represents the feelings of longing Mignon has for her homeland and the family she had to leave behind in Italy. While "Kennst du das Land?" ends with Mignon longing to travel back to her homeland, "Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt" begins on an even greater level of longing, possibly heading in the direction of depression. If one chooses to interpret this poem on an even deeper level, the loved one

¹⁰ Translations by Bard Suverkrop, IPA Source.

¹¹ Blackall and Lange, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, 142.

Mignon refers to could once again be God. This song could be foreshadowing Mignon's death, which takes place at the end of the novel, as well as the last of Mignon's songs where she sings of welcoming death.

Example 2: Goethe, "Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt."

Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt Weiß, was ich leide! Allein und abgetrennt Von aller Freude,	Only one who knows longing, Knows what I suffer! Alone and separated From all joy,
Seh ich ans firmament Nach jener Seite. Ach! Der mich liebt und kennt, Ist in der Weite.	I look to the heavens To the other side. Ah! The one who knows and loves me, Is in the distance.
Es schwindelt mir, es brennt, Mein Eingeweide. Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt Weiß, was ich leide!	I am dizzy, it burns, My insides. Only one who knows longing, Knows what I suffer! ¹²

Mignon's third song, "Heiss mich nicht reden," is revealed at the end of book five. Rather than tie into the story line, the song is tagged on to the end of the chapter as an afterthought. Goethe offers this explanation for the odd placement of the poem stating, "And, so with many a thought and many a feeling, we leave our friend as he sets out on his journey and record at this point in our story a poem which Mignon has recited several times with great feeling and which we have neglected to offer before because of the pressure of telling about so many unusual incidents."¹³ The poem speaks of a secret Mignon is bound to keep from others. The secret is most likely her origins and the details of her abduction, or it could possibly be her struggle with deep depression and her

¹² Translations by Bard Suverkrop, IPA Source.

¹³ Blackall and Lange, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, 216.

longing for death. No one knows the hardships she has faced, for she has only revealed a small portion of them to Wilhelm in “Kennst du das Land?” Her reference to God in the last line leads us to believe only death will free Mignon from her long suffering.

Example 3 Goethe, “Heiss mich nicht reden.”

Heiß mich nicht reden, heiß mich schweigen,
Denn mein Geheimnis ist mir Pflicht,
Ich möchte dir mein ganzes Innre zeigen,
Allein das Schicksal will es nicht.

Ask me not to speak, let me be silent,
My secret I am bound to keep,
I want to reveal myself to you,
But fate will not allow it.

Zur rechten Zeit vertreibt der Sonne Lauf
Die finstre Nacht, und sie muß sich erhellen,
Der harte Fels schließt seinen Busen auf,
Mißgönnt der Erde nicht
die tiefverborgnen Quellen.

There comes a time when sun’s advancing
Dispels the dark night and brings the light;
The stony cliff unfolds its bosom
The earth will release
Deep hidden springs.

Ein jeder sucht im Arm des Freundes Ruh,
Dort kann die Brust in Klagen sich ergießen,
Allein ein Schwur drückt mir die Lippen zu,
Und nur ein Gott vermag sie aufzuschließen.

All men find peace in friend’s embrace
Each breast unloads its pain in words.
My lips by solemn oath are closed,
Only a god may unseal them new.¹⁴

While “Heiss mich nicht reden” is not derived by action in the novel, Mignon’s last poem, “So lasst mich scheinen,” most certainly is. If one would like to interpret the meaning of the poem alone, they would soon learn it cannot be understood out of context of the novel. In the novel, several of the other children and Mignon put on a play for the Inn guests. Mignon plays the part of an angel, dressed in a white dress with a gold crown and wings. While the other children ask her questions about her costume and eventually try to remove Mignon’s angel costume, Mignon refuses. She wishes she were really an

¹⁴ Translations by Bard Suverkrop, IPA Source.

angel, pure and lovely but also dead and free from the burdens her life has imposed upon her. “So lasst mich scheinen” is her reply.¹⁵

Example 4 Goethe, “So lasst mich scheinen.”

So lasst mich Scheinen, bis ich werde,
Zieht mir das weiße Kleid nicht aus!
Ich eile von der schönen Erde
Hinab in jenes feste Haus.

So let me appear, until I become so,
Do not force me to take off that white dress!
I hurry from the beautiful Earth
Down to that solid house.

Dort ruh' ich eine kleine Stille,
Dann öffnet sich der frische Blick;
Ich lasse dann die reine Hülle,
Den Gürtel und den Krants zurück.

There I will rest for a brief moment,
Then my gaze will open up refreshed;
I will then remove my pure garment,
Leaving behind both belt and wreath.

Und jene himmlischen Gestalten
Sie fragen nicht nach Mann und Weib,
Und keine Kleider, keine Falten,
Umgeben den verklärten Leib.

And those heavenly beings
They do not ask if one is man or women,
And no clothes, no robes,
Surround the transfigured body.

Zwar lebt' ich ohne Sorg' und Mühe,
Doch fühlt' ich tiefen Schmerz genug,
Vor Kummer altert' ich zu frühe,
Macht mich auf ewig wider jung.

It is true I have lived without care and toil,
Yet I have felt deep pain enough,
I have aged too early from sorrow,
Make me forever young again!¹⁶

At the end of novel, it is apparent that Mignon has become increasingly ill with heart problems, possibly resulting from her father's incest with his sister, who is Mignon's mother. Wilhelm states that she “concealed the fact that she often suffered from violent cramps around the heart.”¹⁷ Mignon's wish for a peaceful death in “So lasst mich scheinen” is also realized. The text “It is true I have lived without care and toil,” must be understood as sarcasm, for Mignon did not live a joyful life. The “solid house” she refers to is God's house in heaven. Once there, Mignon will no longer be in need of

¹⁵ Blackall and Lange, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, 315.

¹⁶ Translations by Bard Suverkrop, IPA Source.

¹⁷ Blackall and Lange, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, 314.

earthly clothing, nor will she need to worry about whether she is a man or a woman. She will be young forever more!

In order to ascertain how successful Robert Schumann and Hugo Wolf were in capturing Mignon's character through their musical settings, the study must turn to a musical analysis of each of the composer's Mignon settings. Robert Schumann's "Kennst du das Land?" is the only strophic setting among his four Mignon songs. Due to the clear three-verse structure of Goethe's poem, this form seems necessary. Schumann makes use of a lyrical four-measure piano prelude before the introduction of each new verse, which features a descending line beginning and ending on a tonic chord. The descending melodic line of the piano prelude carries into the entrance of the vocal line, enveloping the voice into the piano and suggesting that Mignon's memories started forming even before she began singing. As Mignon begins describing the land from whence she came, the lyrical nature of the piano accompaniment continues. Just as she ends her description of golden oranges glowing amidst dark leaves in m. 10, the piano texture changes to feature a driving chordal triplet accompaniment. Schumann could have been trying to follow Goethe's instructions when he stated in the description of Mignon's performance of this poem, "When she reached the third line, the melody became more somber."¹⁸ Schumann also could have been using the triplet accompaniment as text painting, referring to the gentle winds in the next line of text.¹⁹ This change in accompaniment along with a steady crescendo help to build to a climactic moment on the first statement of "Dahin mocht' ich mit dir, o mein Geliebter, zieh'n" (There I would go with you, my

¹⁸ Blackall and Lange, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, 81.

¹⁹ Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, *Robert Schumann: Words and Music: The Vocal Compositions*, Trans. Reinhard G. Pauly (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1988), 162.

beloved) as Mignon voices her wish for her beloved to take her back to the place she just described. Schumann repeats this line of text in mm. 23-26, reinforcing Mignon's request to her beloved. Mignon's thoughts then wander into the next stanza of text with the help of the same descending piano line Schumann used at the beginning. It is not long before the same chordal triplet piano accompaniment interrupts the lyrical piano accompaniment. Just as Mignon remembers certain marble statues in her home, Mignon is taken back to the moment she was abducted with this piano accompaniment. The third verse is not without this piano accompaniment. As Mignon is reminded of the dangerous conditions of her journey, specifically the horrifying dragon cave, this accompaniment returns for the last time, this time feeling more agitated as Mignon begins feeling scared at the memory. In the postlude, Schumann makes reference to the repeated four-note motif in the beginning of each verse in the vocal line, suggesting Mignon's thoughts are never ending. A weakness in Schumann's strophic setting of "Kennst du das Land?" is the lack of musical difference between the verses, especially on specific words such as beloved, protector, and father. Schumann relies on the performer to infuse specific words with different meaning, which is no different from Goethe's description of this song in which he states that Mignon did just that.

While Goethe intended "Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt" as a duet for Mignon and the Harper, most composers chose to set it as another solo piece for Mignon.²⁰ Both Schumann and Wolf are among those composers. Schumann musically connects the emotions Mignon feels at the end of her first song with the emotions she feels at the

²⁰ Debra Phillips Wilkie, "Composer's Delineation of Character in Franz Schubert's, Robert Schumann's and Hugo Wolf's Settings of Goethe's Mignon Lieder: A Performance Guide" (PhD diss, The University of Arizona, 1996), 37.

beginning of “Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt” by using the same key signature as well as the same four-note descending motif heard in the previous song. After the initial statement of a g-minor octave in the piano, the vocal line enters on the same four-note motif heard in “Kennst du das Land?” but it is missing the last interval of a fourth. Schumann infuses this setting heavily with feelings of longing derived from the text. This can be seen in his use of word painting on the first statement of “Sehnsucht” (longing) in m. 2 by placing the first syllable on an E flat heard over an F octave in the piano resulting in dissonance. He resolves the second syllable by placing it on a D heard over the same F octave. On all but one repeat of “Sehnsucht” throughout his setting, Schumann makes use of a dissonance on the first syllable resolving to consonance on the second syllable. The use of descending whole and half steps in the music throughout “Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt” also portray feelings of longing.²¹ An example of this is in m. 11 on “Seite” (side) as well as in m. 14 on “Weite” (distance). Although Schumann’s setting is through composed, he repeats the first section of text to round out the piece and in return saves the climax of the piece for the repetition of “Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt” (Only one who knows longing) not “Es schwindet mir, es brennt mein Eingeweide” (I am dizzy, my insides burn).²² Schumann does not stay true to Goethe’s text in this poem, using several textual repetitions, especially on the line “Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt, weiss was ich leide” (Only one who knows longing, knows what I suffer). He must have felt that Mignon’s suffering warranted several repeats of this text.

²¹ Ellen Jayne Maris Wheeler, “The Mignon Lieder of Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*: A study of literary background and musical evolution with particular emphasis on Hugo Wolf” (PhD diss., The University of Oklahoma, 1987), 66.

²² Barbara Baker, “A Comparison of Various Settings of Poems from Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Lehrjahre*” (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1978), 168.

Schumann's setting of "Heiss mich nicht reden" begins in c minor and features recitative as well as arioso-like passages.²³ The vocal line begins as an outcry from Mignon, warning her audience that she cannot speak of her secret.²⁴ The modulation from the initial key signature of c minor to C major after the second statement of "Heiss mich nicht reden, heiss mich schweigen" (Ask me not to speak, let me be silent) in m. 17 reinforces Mignon's change in emotion. In the text accompanied by c minor tonalities Mignon speaks of the solemn vow she made to herself to keep her origins from others. After this original statement of text, Mignon then changes her focus to explaining a time when God will come to earth and only he will be able to unseal her lips. The simple nature of C major suggests Mignon's need for an uncomplicated life in heaven, not on earth, where everything is complicated.²⁵ Schumann repeats the text "nur ein Gott!" (only a god) along with "ein Schwur drückt mir die Lippen zu, und nur ein Gott vermag sie augzuschliessen!" (My lips by solemn oath are closed, only a god may unseal them new) to reinforce the seriousness of Mignon's words. Schumann's accompaniment during this song is much more dramatic. This can be seen after the first repeat of "nur ein Gott!" with his use of a sudden forte dynamic on the downbeat of m. 50 which decrescendos to m. 52, where another sudden forte is heard. A startling dissonant chord is heard in m. 53 on a sforzando. It is during this dramatic piano interlude where Mignon must realize the burden of her secret. Schumann also begins to modulate back to c minor during this brief piano interlude with two measures of dominant prolongation on a b-minor seventh chord

²³ Fischer-Dieskau, *Robert Schumann: Words and Music: The Vocal Compositions*, 163.

²⁴ Wheeler, "The Mignon Lieder of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*," 67.

²⁵ Rita Steblin, *A History of Key Characteristics in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1996), 173.

followed by another measure of b-minor seventh with added F# tonalities resolving to g minor. This modulation takes place before the repeat of the initial words “Heiss mich nicht reden, heiss mich schweigen” along with the words of the last line of text “ein Schwur drückt mir die Lippen zu, und nur ein Gott vermag sie augzuschliessen!” Although the piece ends in c minor, Schumann naturalizes all E flats, making the end sound major, and possibly giving hope to Mignon. At the first statement of Mignon’s vow of secrecy, Schumann places “Schwur” (oath) on an F#, the highest pitch in this song, and also on a sforzando in m. 39. The use of descending whole and half steps in the music throughout also portray feelings of longing, even more so than “Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt.”

Whereas Schumann’s first three Mignon songs begin in minor key signatures, his last Mignon song “So lasst mich scheinen” begins in G major, suggesting Mignon’s transformation from utter hopelessness and longing for home, to a renewed hope; looking forward to the afterlife. Although Goethe’s poem features four separate verses, Schumann’s setting is through composed with the first and fourth verse beginning with the same three-note motif. Schumann separates the third and fourth verse with a short piano interlude that includes the same ascending three-note motif heard in the first entrance of the vocal line as well as the verse immediately following this interlude. This interlude could be due to Mignon’s temporary separation from reality, so consumed in her thoughts of the afterlife as spoken in the previous verse. The three-note motif in the piano portrays Mignon’s thoughts before she voices them in the next entrance of the vocal line, which features the same three-note motif. In m. 37, darker harmonies along with the use of a dotted half note on “doch” accompany Mignon speaking of having

feelings of profound pain. The darker feeling is accomplished by the dissonant pairing of A natural with A flat. Just as the first three songs, “So lasst mich scheinen” is also infused with falling half steps, likely to convey Mignon’s longing for the afterlife this time. Even the last resolution is infused with longing by Schumann’s use of the C resolving to the B in the last two chords in the piano.

In order to accurately compare Robert Schumann’s Mignon settings to Hugo Wolf’s they will be analyzed in the same order of the Schumann settings, regardless of the order in which Wolf published them, beginning with Wolf’s “Mignon: Kennst du das Land?” Wolf used a modified strophic setting for Goethe’s “Kennst du das Land?” titled “Mignon.” Similar to Schumann’s setting, Wolf also uses text repetition, but not to the extent Schumann does, only repeating the last line of text “lass uns ziehn” (let us go) at the end of the piece. This was something he often did not do, being a strict advocate of text adherence when setting poetry.²⁶ Wolf could have made an exception to repeating this last line of text for the sake of trying to capture Mignon’s overwhelming sense of longing at the end of the piece. But if so, why did he not warrant more frequent use text repetitions throughout his setting similar to Schumann?

Everything about Wolf’s setting characterizes Mignon as a restless creature. The vocal line features large intervallic leaps, taking away from any lyrical nature the piano lends to this piece. The lyrical piano texture changes before the refrain-like section of text on “kennst du es wohl?” (Do you know it?) as well as before “Dahin” (there) of each verse to feature a more frantic accompaniment with up-surgings octaves to suggest

²⁶ Wilkie, “Composer’s Delineation of Character,” 83.

restlessness.²⁷ The frequent change in key also adds to the agitation and fragmentation of the piece. While the piece begins in B-flat major, the key changes to E-flat major before the third line of text in the first two verses. The key of f minor is then introduced before the refrain section, and then modulates back to B-flat major on “Dahin” ending each verse in B-flat major. The key of f-sharp minor is introduced before the third verse of text in m.77, which quickly modulates back to f minor after the verse and before the last refrain section in m.98. Along with a frantic accompaniment and frequently changing key signatures, Wolf makes use of fragmentary vocal phrasing, suggesting that Mignon sung in fragmented sentences much like she did when speaking. Goethe makes it clear in his description of Mignon’s performance that her usual use of “broken language was smoothed over and the disconnectedness removed”²⁸ while she sang. This disconnectedness in vocal phrasing is also achieved through Wolf’s addition of several measures of rest between one line of text and the next.

The third verse of “Mignon” features a slightly different vocal melody and piano accompaniment, suggesting Wolf tried to follow Goethe’s instructions when he stated in the description of Mignon’s performance, “When she reached the third line, the melody became more somber.” But does Goethe mean the third verse? Or the third line of text of the first verse? If the latter is true, the third line of text is “Im dunkeln Laub die Gold-Orangen glüh’n” (Among dark foliage the golden oranges glow). Instead of achieving the somber quality Goethe mentions, Wolf instead achieves the opposite. By raising the key after this line from G-flat major to E-flat major, he achieves feelings of happiness and

²⁷Wheeler, “The Mignon Lieder of Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*,” 102.

²⁸Blackall and Lange, *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, 81.

contentment. It is more likely that Wolf believed the former was true, due to his modulation to f-sharp minor for the third verse of text only. Wolf also uses a vastly different piano texture during this third verse, featuring tremolos in both right and left hands, which are absent in the piano elsewhere in the piece. Along with the change in key signature and piano texture, Wolf also changed the vocal line during the third verse, beginning the verse with a low range that slowly ascends, completely opposite from how he begins the vocal line in verses one and two. Wolf clearly had his own interpretation of Mignon, separate from how Goethe describes her in the novel. This is suggested by his use of heavy fragmentation in every aspect of the music not only in “Mignon” but in all other Mignon songs to follow along with his change in key, piano texture and vocal line in the third verse and not the third line of text.

Wolf’s setting of Goethe’s “Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt” titled “Mignon II” is harmonically ambiguous. While the piece features a g-minor key signature, it does not begin on the tonic, but rather begins on the submediant. It slowly makes its way farther out of g minor with help from the fast moving piano accompaniment, both providing a feeling of restlessness. The swift change in dynamics from one phrase to the other also provides the piece with restless character. Even the repetitive rhythmic motive of the piano lends to the agitated nature of the piece, consisting of a dotted quarter note connected to a quarter note and eighth note in the right hand. Wolf incorporates the same large leaping vocal line as in “Mignon,” once again painting Mignon as restless. He also does not include any text repetitions or alterations in this setting, unlike Schumann. “Mignon II” is largely piano dominated with thirty-one of the fifty-seven measures occupied by the piano alone, suggesting that Wolf intended the lengthy piano interludes

for Mignon's thinking.²⁹ If that were not enough, Wolf also uses the vocal line to incorporate introverted emotional suffering. The first line of text continues to descend by half step until it almost reaches an entire octave lower than where it started, suggesting Mignon's sinking emotional state. This can be seen in mm. 9-12. The same sinking melodic line returns in the postlude. The piece is never resolved as Wolf ends on a dominant chord, leaving Mignon with her feelings of inner hopelessness.

Wolf's "Mignon II" depicts Mignon as being completely absorbed in her inner turmoil even though the singing of this song in *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre* was not intended for that purpose, but rather to console Wilhelm. Wolf's lengthy piano interludes and sinking vocal lines, evident of self loathing, detract from Mignon's efforts to console and include Wilhelm in her performance of the song and instead alienate him.

Similar to Wolf's setting of "Mignon II," his setting of Goethe's "Heiss mich nicht reden" titled "Mignon I" is also harmonically evasive. As the piece begins with a short two-measure piano prelude, the key of the piece is unknown. It is only with the entrance of the voice in m. 3 that the first F-major tonic chord is heard and the key of F major is established. By the fifth measure, the piece is no longer in F major. Beginning the piece without a clear sense of key and then almost immediately leaving that key again suggests Mignon's evasiveness. She has sworn an oath to keep all information about her origins a secret, and she strives to keep that oath. Also similar to Wolf's "Mignon II" setting, in "Mignon I" he makes use of a descending melodic line, suggesting Mignon's sinking emotional state, or in this case her failing resolve to keep her oath. The first example of this sinking vocal line can be seen in mm. 9-10, on the text "allein das

²⁹ Wheeler, "The Mignon Lieder of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*," 104.

Schicksal will es nicht” (fate will not allow). The vocal lines in m.26 and m.28 also feature a falling melody on “ein Schwur druckt mir die Lippen zu, und nur ein Gott vermag sie aufzuschliessen” (My lips by solemn oath are closed, only a god may unseal them new). The vocal line ending on a leading tone reveals that Mignon did keep her secret,³⁰ but the postlude tells a different story continuing to descend until cadencing on the tonic. In Wolf’s interpretation, Mignon either told her secret, or she was absolved by death.

Wolf sets Goethe’s “So lasst mich scheinen,” titled “Mignon II” in a minor, differing from Schumann’s setting in G major. Where Schumann’s Mignon welcomes death as relief from her tragic life as suggested by the major key, Wolf’s Mignon remains sorrowful in a minor. The quiet dynamic levels throughout the piece also contribute to the feeling of dying away, suggesting Mignon’s death.³¹ Only one line features a forte dynamic marking. This happens in m. 33 on “Macht” while Mignon exclaims, “Macht mich auf ewig wider jung!” (Make me forever young again!) suggesting Mignon’s last request before her death. Wolf’s use of high octave chords in the right hand piano suggests an ethereal atmosphere that Mignon conjures by imagining what heaven will be like after she dies.³²

After studying the musical aspects Robert Schumann and Hugo Wolf use throughout their settings of Goethe’s Mignon poetry, it is clear that both make use of unifying musical characteristics to portray Mignon’s character through all four of their settings. Schumann achieves this through a rich piano accompaniment that maintains

³⁰Wheeler, “The Mignon Lieder of Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*,” 109.

³¹ Wheeler, “The Mignon Lieder of Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*,” 109.

³² Wheeler, “The Mignon Lieder of Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*,” 110.

equal or greater importance than the voice. Schumann connects the piano with the voice through use of the same motifs in both parts. While the motif usually first surfaces in the piano, which may suggest a thought stemming in Mignon, the motif then usually transfers to the vocal line that follows, in which Mignon gives voice to the thought. Another musically unifying feature of Schumann's Mignon songs is his use of key relation to portray the overarching character of Mignon from one song to another. Both "Kennt du das Land?" and "Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt" are set in g minor, connecting the two settings by a somber mood which prevails from the first setting into the second. While "Heiss mich nicht reden" begins in c minor, it modulates to C major preparing for the happier setting "So lasst mich scheinen" which is set in G major. Schumann's use of falling half steps to convey longing, highlighting a major personality character of Mignon, is another unifying musical characteristic used throughout all four of his Mignon songs. Although Mignon's songs feature different types of longing, including her longing for home, her loved ones, her need to let go of a long kept secret, and lastly for death, she always longs for something. Schumann does quite well at portraying this sense of longing throughout all of his Mignon songs as well as accurately representing the character of Mignon through his use of unifying musical characteristics.

Wolf's unifying musical characteristics include his use of harmonic ambiguity; similar rhythmic motives in the piano accompaniment through each piece, and the descending vocal lines that suggest Mignon's falling emotional state. His use of fragmentation in every aspect of the music including the use of several different piano textures in one piece, large interval leaps in the vocal lines, as well as frequent modulations also act as unifying musical features in all four of his Mignon settings in

order to portray Mignon as a restless creature. Contrasting from Schumann's Mignon settings, Wolf's Mignon settings employ separation between the piano and vocal parts, once again causing a sense of fragmentation throughout and suggesting that Mignon has a restless personality. Due to Wolf's emphasis on the reading of individual poems and not their correspondence to Goethe's novel, he was not able to capture Mignon's overall character as seen in the novel but rather relied on his own interpretation of Mignon's character through the individual poems.³³ Mignon's poems are often not understood without the context of the novel and in reference to one another. They all fit together and form an over arching picture of the character of Mignon. Therefore, Wolf was not as successful in accurately setting the character of Mignon as seen throughout Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre* as Schumann was.

³³ Lorraine Gorrell, *The Nineteenth-Century Lied* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1993), 283.

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