

Hans Sommer's late-romantic gems

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Hans Sommer

In the 1880s, Brunswick-born Hans Sommer (1837–1922) secured a place for himself in the concert halls for some three decades with his songs. As far as the development of the late-romantic piano song was concerned, Erich Valentin – Sommer's only biographer to date – placed the composer immediately prior to Hugo Wolf: "In him, the lines from Schumann and Liszt

converge – perhaps for the first and only time.” Sommer’s songs are now enjoying a renaissance and have been released on CD with the exceptional soloists Elisabeth Kulman and Bo Skovhus. Sebastian Weigle conducts the Bamberg Symphony Orchestra.

Hans Sommer studied music privately and took lessons in composition with Franz Liszt, among others. He was the Chairman (and, along with Richard Strauss, the initiator) of the Genossenschaft Deutscher Komponisten (Cooperative of German Composers) (1898–1903). In 1875, Sommer met Richard and Cosima Wagner for the first time and founded a Wagner Association in Brunswick. In the years that followed, he was part of the group of artists based at Wahnfried, although he tried to avoid being “a blind follower”, as Sommer himself wrote in his memoirs.

“It’s simply great music.”

Bo Skovhus

Sommer’s career as a freelance composer began at the age of 40(!). From 1882 on, he published over one hundred songs and ballads in quick succession with Henri Litolff’s publishing house. Following the success of his opera Lorelei (world première in 1891), which Richard Strauss also presented in Weimar in 1892, he became an established opera composer. With the Munich-based baritone Eugen Gura, who was famous as an early performer of Hugo Wolf’s songs, and Sommer’s father-in-law Karl Hill, Wagner’s first Alberich in Bayreuth, Sommer’s songs found their way into the concert halls – as well as onto record, thanks to Leo Slezak – and were mentioned in the arts sections of the press.

The piano parts of a number of highly dramatic songs – particularly Romances and Ballads op. 8/op. 11, published in 1886 – already evoked a late-romantic orchestra. Consequently, in late 1884, Sommer orchestrated his six-part song cycle Sapphos Gesänge, which had been published a few months earlier as op. 6, following a short study stay with Franz Liszt and possibly at his suggestion (Liszt: “Although the songs are certainly very dramatic, they show understanding and taste. Carry on!”).

“I definitely want to sing Hans Sommer’s songs more often.”

Elisabeth Kulman

Liszt’s role as a trailblazer for the late-romantic orchestral song was demonstrated once again – albeit indirectly – with Sapphos Gesänge. Sommer was clearly the first in the German-speaking world to transform a song cycle with related contents (lasting around 25 minutes) into an orchestral song cycle for solo voice and symphony orchestra. However, Sommer probably did not publish the orchestral performance material of Sapphos Gesänge until around 1903.

The first public mention of an orchestral song cycle, on the other hand, was in January 1885 (Allgemeine Musik-Zeitung, Berlin). One song from Sommer’s cycle premièred in the Netherlands in 1889, while the cycle as a whole received its world première in Brunswick in 1903. Sommer left behind a total of 29 orchestral songs (including a complete group of 20 Goethe songs, composed and orchestrated between 1919 and 1921).

Despite an initial vehement rejection of Saint Foix – the first historical “conversation opera” (world première in 1894) – by the public and the critics, the one-act opera, composed in Weimar in 1892–93, was the first of Sommer’s ten operas to awaken the interest and esteem of his colleagues, particularly Richard Strauss (“a modern equivalent of The Barber of Seville and The Marriage of Figaro”). Sommer and Strauss had been acquaintances since their time in Weimar (1889–1894). What began as a close friendship later lost its intensity, although they remained life-long friends and shared a mutual respect for each other.

“Hans Sommer’s orchestral songs are a real discovery.”

HANS SOMMER

- Born 20 July **1837**, died 26 April **1922** in Brunswick, Germany
- From **1847**: regular piano lessons
- **1854–1858**: studied mathematics in Göttingen, lessons in composition with Julius Otto Grimm, a friend of Schumann. Met Johannes Brahms, Clara Schumann and Joseph Joachim in Göttingen
- **1863–1870**: founder and artist director of the Braunschweiger Verein für Konzertmusik (Brunswick Association for Concert Music), concerts with Joseph Joachim, Clara Schumann, Hans von Bülow
- **1865**: world première of his first opera Der Nachtwächter at the Hoftheater in Brunswick
- Around **1875**: five piano songs published as op. 1 by Henri Litolff's publishing house
- Composition lessons in Weimar with Franz Liszt
- From **1885**: freelance composer
- **1891**: world première of Lorelei op. 13 in Brunswick
- **1894**: world première of the one-act opera Saint Foix op. 20 under Hermann Levi in Munich
- **1904**: world première of Rübezahl op. 36 in Brunswick. 1905: performances under Richard Strauss in Berlin
- **1912**: world première of Sommer's last opera Der Waldschratt op. 42 in Brunswick, revival of Saint Foix in Stuttgart under Max von Schillings
- **1922**: admitted to the Academy of Arts in Berlin