

## In Praise of Simplicity: Marie Hinrichs's op. 1, *Neun Gesänge*

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### Abstract

In a chapter from *German Lieder in the Nineteenth Century* (1996), Jürgen Thym describes the historiography of the German Lied as “a hike through the high-peak area of a mountain landscape where the trail along the ridge leads from one glorious peak to the next.” Beneath the high peaks of Schubert, Robert Schumann, Brahms, and Wolf, he notes, are smaller peaks not reachable by trail. Thym clears paths through this unexplored landscape by surveying the Lieder of Carl Loewe, Fanny Hensel, Franz Liszt, Robert Franz, Clara Schumann, and Peter Cornelius. My essay charts one such path, exploring the songs of Marie Hinrichs (1828–1891), who published only one song collection in 1846 (op. 1, *Neun Gesänge*). The songs of Hinrichs's op. 1 are of extraordinary quality—as unassuming as they are affecting—and their quality was recognized by nineteenth-century critics. Studying them raises crucial questions about the obstacles to female creativity, and also about the premium that music analysts have placed on complexity and ingenuity, over and above the simplicity and restraint that define so many overlooked Lieder from this era. I focus on the first song of Hinrichs's collection, “Du welker Dornenstrauch,” which demonstrates that simplicity and sophistication are not mutually exclusive, and that amid the mountaintops of the nineteenth-century Lied lie hidden clearings waiting to be discovered.

Keywords: German Lieder, Marie Hinrichs, simplicity and complexity, music by women composers

In a chapter from *German Lieder in the Nineteenth Century*, Jürgen Thym describes the historiography of the German Lied as “a hike through the high-peak area of a mountain landscape where the trail along the ridge leads from one glorious peak to the next.”<sup>1</sup> Beneath the high peaks of Schubert, Robert Schumann, Brahms, and Wolf, he notes, are smaller peaks not reachable by trails. In a series of beautiful vignettes, Thym clears paths through

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This is a lightly revised version of a chapter that first appeared in *Music: A Connected Art/Die Illusion der absoluten Musik: A Festschrift for Jürgen Thym on his 80th Birthday*, ed. Ulrich J. Blomann, David B. Levy, Ralph P. Locke, and Frieder Reininghaus (Baden-Baden: Verlag Valentin Koerner, 2023), 167–72. The version here includes the score of Hinrichs's song, which was mistakenly dropped during production of the festschrift. Thank you to the editors of the festschrift for giving me permission to have the chapter published in a different venue.

1. Jürgen Thym, “Crosscurrents in Song: Six Distinctive Voices,” in *German Lieder in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Rufus Hallmark (New York: Routledge, 2010), 178.

this unexplored landscape, surveying the Lieder of Carl Loewe, Fanny Hensel, Franz Liszt, Robert Franz, Clara Schumann, and Peter Cornelius.

My essay charts one such path, exploring the songs of Marie Hinrichs (1828–1891), who published only one song collection (in 1846, at the age of eighteen: op. 1, *Neun Gesänge*). To some, the songs of Hinrichs might seem less a peak than a hill, or even just a cluster of trees atop a hill, barely recognizable even when viewed beside the small peaks that Thym traverses. Yet Hinrichs’s songs, though small in number, raise big questions about the biases we bring to our analytical endeavors, the musical features we tend to prize, and the importance of exploring as much of the terrain of nineteenth-century Lieder as possible, no matter how hidden.

I first learned of Hinrichs’s songs from Susan Youens, who discusses two of Hinrichs’s Heine settings in her book *Heinrich Heine and the Lied*.<sup>2</sup> Youens is, to my knowledge, the only scholar to have written about Hinrichs’s songs: Hinrichs gets no mention in *Grove Music Online*, *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, or *The Norton/Grove Dictionary of Women Composers*. Her op. 1 did, however, receive a favorable review in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*; the reviewer praised the songs’ “depth and warmth of feeling” and the composer’s ability to “grasp the essence of the poetry.”<sup>3</sup> Why Hinrichs published just one opus we cannot know for sure, but the timing is telling: in 1846, the year her op. 1 appeared, she was engaged to the composer Robert Franz. (The couple married in 1848.)

Regardless of whether Franz urged her to stop composing or she decided to do so on her own accord, or whether it resulted from some combination of the two, it is clear that the demands of marriage and motherhood—and/or societal expectations—cut short her creative efforts. This is our loss.

I played and sang Hinrichs’s songs a lot over the past couple of years, especially during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. I was home more, and playing the piano provided my only real chance to make music during the restrictions of 2020. What drew me to her songs was, in large part, their simplicity; I am not a professional pianist, and these nine songs were at just the right level for me, as they would have been for amateur pianists who purchased Hinrichs’s op. 1 in the mid-nineteenth century. But it was not just any old form of simplicity; it was simplicity equally matched by subtlety and sophistication. While performing them, I kept thinking of a passage from Marcia Citron’s book *Gender and the Musical Canon* in which she points out the fallacy of automatically linking complexity and quality. The idea that complexity equals quality, she points out, is historically contingent, and it is an adage that applies more neatly to music by men than music by women:

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2. Susan Youens, *Heinrich Heine and the Lied* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

3. *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 46 (November 18, 1846): 763.

The respect accorded stylistic complexity after 1800 may result from a socio-political fabric that was itself becoming increasingly complex. In this post-aristocratic era there was greater personal opportunity, but the potential was much more relevant to men than women. This difference could partly explain the interest of nineteenth-century women in musical simplicity and their frequent avoidance of complex musical structures like symphony and opera. Many female composers and listeners seemed to prefer musical simplicity, at least as gauged by the many tuneful songs and piano works composed by women.<sup>4</sup>

These words nicely describe the nine songs of Hinrichs's op. 1, which show little interest in upending conventions, challenging listeners' preconceptions, or showcasing that which is abstruse, complicated, or perplexing.<sup>5</sup> This is especially true of the first song of the collection, "Du welker Dornenstrauch." The poem first appeared in an 1834 issue of the Viennese periodical *Feierstunden*, with the author listed, cryptically, with only one name: "Noway." In it, the poetic speaker compares her lost happiness to a wilted thorn bush (example 1):

Du welker Dornenstrauch	You wilted thorn bush
Machst meinen Reichthum aus,	Are the sum total of my wealth,
Bring' mir entschwind'nes Glück	My vanished happiness—bring it
Zurück, zurück!	Back, back!
Einst war die Zeit wohl da,	Once there was a time
Wo ich die Rose sah,	When I saw the rose

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4. Marcia Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 132.

5. After writing this essay, I discovered that the Handel House in Halle, Germany (where Marie and Robert Franz lived) has a booklet containing fifteen of her song manuscripts. The title page of the booklet reads "15 Songs with Piano by Marie Franz née Hinrichs." That the title uses her married name suggests that sometime after 1848 she made clean copies of her unpublished songs. It is not clear how many of these songs were written before her marriage and how many were written after, but at least two of the poems were not published until 1848. This means that Marie Hinrichs did indeed continue composing some music after she was married, even if she did not publish what she composed. Many of her unpublished songs are just as simple as the songs in her op. 1, but others are much more adventuresome—which suggests that she may have chosen for publication those songs that she felt would be palatable to a broad audience. For more on her songs as a whole, see my essay "Analysis, Performance, and the Deep Nineteenth Century: The Case of Marie Franz," in *The Lied at the Crossroads of Performance and Musicology*, ed. Benjamin Binder and Jennifer Ronyak (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). I also created a page about her songs on my website, *Art Song Augmented*; the page includes a link to her unpublished song manuscripts, as well as my modern edition of them: <https://www.artsongaugmented.org/marie-franz>.

Aus deiner Blätter Grün  
Voll Reiz erblühn.

From out of the green of your leaves  
Blossoming forth full of charm.

Bist nun gleich kahl und dürr,  
Bleibst du doch theuer mir,  
Press' dich in stiller Lust  
Fest an die Brust.

Though you are now leafless and dried out,  
You remain dear to me,  
In quiet joy I press you  
Firmly to my breast.

Mein Herz, o klage nicht,  
Wenn wund der Dorn dich sticht,  
Denk' an der Rosenzeit,  
Die dich erfreut.

My heart, oh do not lament  
When the thorn pricks and wounds you,  
Think about the time of the rose  
That gladdened you.<sup>6</sup>

Example 1. Noway, “Du welker Dornenstrauch,” text and translation.

Hinrichs sets only the first, second, and fourth stanzas, and does so with a strophic form that features only the slightest of variations to the second and third strophes (see example 2 for the score).<sup>7</sup> If the form is simple and straightforward, other aspects of the song are even more so. Harmonically, the song spends much of its time hovering on the tonic; not until the end of m. 6 do we hear anything other than a tonic triad, and not until m. 5 do we hear anything other than a tonic triad in *root position*. The tune is equally repetitive. The rhythm of the piano’s introductory gesture (quarter–four eighths–quarter) recurs throughout, sometimes beginning on a downbeat and sometimes on an upbeat, as with Hinrichs’s setting of the first three lines of each stanza. So do the pitches of the piano’s opening motto (E $\flat$ –D–C–G–A $\flat$ –G). Then there is the piano texture, which is simple enough to be playable by even the most inexperienced of piano players: homophonic; closely spaced; slowly paced; with mostly four voices, never more than six, and in a couple of instances only two.

A common analytical maneuver at this point would be to argue that there are, in fact, deeper complexities that compensate for the song’s seeming simplicity: phrase-structural irregularities perhaps (i.e., phrases that are longer or shorter than expected, or cadences that are obscured or avoided), or Schenkerian-style “hidden repetitions” (i.e., melodic patterns that appear on different structural levels), or broader tonal patterns that give it a “stronger” sense of cohesiveness and direction. But Hinrichs’s song poses challenges to this approach. There is nothing idiosyncratic or distortive about its phrase structure: the vocal melody

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6. The translation, from the LiederNet Archive, is by Sharon Krebs:

[https://www.lieder.net/lieder/get\\_text.html?TextId=1286009](https://www.lieder.net/lieder/get_text.html?TextId=1286009).

7. For a recording of the song by baritone Tim Krol and pianist Michael T. C. Hey, see the CD *Robert Franz: Ordinary Man, Extraordinary Songs, Book One* (CDBaby, 2017). The CD contains six of the nine songs of Hinrichs’s op. 1.

**Andante con moto** *p* **Innig**

Du wel-ker Dor-nen-strauch machst mei-nen Reich-tum aus, bring

7 mir ent-schwun-des Glück zu-rück, zu-rück! Einst war die Zeit wohl

13 da, wo ich die Ro-se sah, aus dei-ner Blät-ter Grün voll Reiz er-blühn.

Example 2. Marie Hinrichs, "Du welker Dornenstrauch," op. 1, no. 1.

20 *p* *mf* *p* *poco riten.*  
 Mein Herz, o kla - ge nicht, wenn wund der Dorn dich sieht, denk' an die Ro - sen -

20 *p* *mf* *p* *poco riten.*

26 *pp*  
 zeit die dich er - freut.

26 *mf* *a tempo* *smorzando*

Example 2, continued.

moves entirely in four-measure units, and each strophe ends with a clear-cut perfect authentic cadence. The vocal melody itself is so simple as to include only the occasional passing or neighbor tone—little is hidden, in other words, but instead laid bare, like a building with its scaffolding plainly exposed. The tonal structure is similarly unadorned. The expansion of tonic in the opening phrase (mm. 3–10), for example, involves nothing more than a single move to a  $i^6$  chord in m. 5. And, astonishingly, the song includes only two chromatic pitches: the  $D\flat$ s in mm. 24–26 and the  $B\sharp$  in m. 27.

All of this is to say that Hinrichs's song gains its peculiar power not from the way it belies its own simplicity but rather from the way it embraces it. "Du welker Dornenstrauch" is boldly and deliberately uncomplicated—and it is this skirting of difficulty that, paradoxically, makes the song so difficult to analyze. Making sense of it requires looking beyond some of the standard operating procedures of music-analytical inquiry, such as seeking out expressive distortions of normative models or homing in on moments of greatest tension. When nothing seems particularly distorted, one has to consider how the simple adherence to a norm can be expressive in its own right. When there are no real

moments of tension and heightened affect, one has to think about how stasis and a *lack* of affect can be just as meaningful.

For my part, having to approach this song without some of these standard operating procedures has helped me to understand better how it creates a kind of listlessness that suits the text. The poetic speaker speaks of her lost joy (“You wilted thorn bush are the sum total of my wealth, my vanished happiness—bring it back, back!”). Where some composers might choose to set these lines in an anguished tone, interpreting them as a cry of pain, Hinrichs opts instead for lethargy and melancholy. The music sounds as wilted as the bush, unable to summon the energy to move beyond tonic harmony or the repetitive, almost banal rhythm of the opening eight measures. Even when, in the second stanza, the poetic speaker remembers the time when she saw the rose “blossoming forth full of charm,” all the music can muster is an oscillation between C minor and an A $\flat$ -major chord in second inversion (mm. 11–13). Again, another composer might have opted for a modulation to a major key; Hinrichs only gives us a major *chord*, and an unstable one at that—even memory provides no comfort. It’s only fitting, therefore, that she omits the poem’s third stanza, which describes the “quiet joy” the speaker experiences.

And what of the obsessively repeating motto, heard first in the piano introduction? A carefully wrought motivic transformation, suggesting some sort of emotional trajectory or gradual discovery, might be easier to account for analytically, but what is there to say about a motive that never changes and occurs almost always in the same tonal context? A clue comes from a small but crucial change that Hinrichs makes to the poem. The original poem is titled “Du kahler Dornenstrauß” (You leafless bouquet of thorns), not “Du welker Dornenstrauch” (You wilted thorn bush), as in Hinrichs’s song. A leafless bouquet can never be revived because it contains cut flowers that are already dead. A wilted thorn bush, on the other hand, *can* be revived, with enough water. In this context, the unchanging motto, drooping gently downward each time, could represent the remaining leaves falling from the bush, or perhaps the repeated action of watering the bush, in hopes of bringing it back to life. That both of these possibilities arise suggests that even the simplest of musical materials can be richly significant. All that is required is that we tend to them carefully.

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