

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The *Wesendonck Lieder* or *Fünf Gedichte für eine Frauenstimme* (Five Poems for a Female Voice (WWV91)) captures the imagination of lovers of romantic classical literature, not just because they are a wonderful vehicle for heroic voice, often recorded by dramatic sopranos and mezzos, but also because of the story behind their creation.

Mathilde Wesendonck, the poet of the five poems, was the wife of Richard Wagner's wealthy patron, Otto Wesendonck. Academic papers and biographies have devoted chapters to whether Mathilde Wesendonck and Richard Wagner "were romantically or even adulterously involved"<sup>1</sup>. However, despite his love for Mathilde and the words and inspiration provided by his Muse, when Wagner fell on hard times and decided to publish these songs, he did not seek to credit Mathilde with her part of the creation. It was not until after Mathilde's death in 1902 that she was credited with having written the poetry, prior to that the words were credited to Wagner himself. To redress this the pieces are now published by some publishers as "*Fünf Gedichte von Mathilde Wesendonck*".<sup>2</sup>

This paper describes a project which involved listening to a number of different accounts of the *Wesendonck Lieder* recorded between 1948 and the current day to determine how different singers approach three difficult lines in the cycle. I use these lines to argue that although men can sing these cycles, Wagner

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Cabaud, *Mathilde Wesendonck Isolde's dream* (Milwaukee: Amadeus Press, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Wagner, "*Wesendonck Lieder Fünf Gedichte von Mathilde Wesendonck (Five Poems of Mathilde Wesendonck)*," ed. Jon Robert Cart (MMO Music Group Inc, 2012).

composed them specifically for female voice and the challenges of the pieces are best surmounted by female voice.

I discuss these findings with reference to current scholarship in Voice Science, Biography and Feminist Musicology, discussions of Voice and theories of Gender and Music. As a Performer-Researcher I use this discussion to determine if it is useful to think of the songs as being not just the province of the female voice, but as having been composed by Wagner to represent his ideal woman, thus assigning the pieces a female gender to give voice to Mathilde Wesendonck.

## 2. INSPIRATION FOR THE PROJECT

This project was inspired by two articles in the popular press. The first was a review of recordings on Music Web International. In this review, Ralph Moore justifies his favourite recordings by stating “I can say that I want a big, velvety female voice also capable of delicacy and am therefore ready to jettison those by lighter, soprano-tilted singers and the two tenors...”<sup>3</sup>. I did not feel Moore’s assessments were based on more than personal preference, so I undertook this project to explore the recorded literature and deduce how different singers navigate the demands of three difficult lines in the cycle.

The second article was titled “Why Shouldn’t Men Sing Romantic Drivel, Too?” and appeared in the New York Times in November 2005. In the article, Matthew Gurewitsch generalises that “Wagner’s “Wesendonck Lieder” have been the undisputed province of women, for reasons that are more nebulous...Though there is nothing gender-specific in the texts, the lock that sopranos and mezzo-

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<sup>3</sup> "Wagner's Wesendonck Lieder - A survey of recordings," <http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2021/Mar/Wagner-Wesendonck-survey.htm>.

sopranos maintain on the “Wesendonck Lieder” probably does have everything to do with the poetry”.<sup>4</sup> I wanted to analyse the cycle and the way different singers approach three difficult lines in the cycle to critique this idea and determine whether there might be other reasons that the cycle has mostly been performed by sopranos and mezzo-sopranos.

### 3. HYPOTHESIS

I hypothesise 2 things:

1. Wagner uses compositional devices that force a singer to sing in certain ways. These technical and interpretive challenges are more easily achieved in the dramatic female voice because male and female voices function differently, and dramatic female voices have different qualities and abilities to lyric and light-lyric female voices; and
2. These compositional devices were deliberate choices by Wagner as these compositions are a musical expression of his muse and "ideal woman", Mathilde Wesendonck. Wagner so admired his ideal woman for qualities that were both strong and gentle, which are evident when sung by dramatic female voice. Arguably the "Voice" of the piece is Mathilde's, and the gender of the songs are female.

### 4. MATERIALS AND METHODS

For the purposes of this paper, I have listened to a number of different accounts of the Wesendonck Lieder recorded between 1948 and the current day.

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew Gurewitsch, "Why Shouldn't Men Sing Romantic Drivel, Too?," *The New York Times*, 6 November 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/06/arts/music/why-shouldnt-men-sing-romantic-drivel-too.html>.

I am going to explore three lines of two songs that require different technical and interpretive expertise and look at how 12 different singers (10 women and 2 men) do this. I have chosen female singers that range from the heaviest dramatic soprano and dramatic mezzo sopranos to lighter more lyric voices. Both male voices are tenors who sing Wagnerian repertoire. The reason I have not selected an equal number of men and women is that the cycle is mostly recorded by women.

The 3 lines to be analysed are as follows:

Excerpt 1 comes from song no. 2 "Stehe Still!" - it requires the singer to access chest register to sing the low notes over the furious accompaniment. See Appendix 1, Figure 1.

Excerpt 2 comes from song no. 4 "Schmerzen" - it requires the singer to pitch a high A flat in a crescendoed phrase after a quaver breath at the beginning of the words "Glorie der dürsten Welt. See Appendix 1, Figure 2.

Excerpt 3 comes from song no. 3 "Im Treibhaus" - it requires the singer to sing or float several high notes marked piano over a pianissimo accompaniment. See Appendix 1, Figure 3.

I analysed what these singers did in order to successfully navigate these lines, to be heard over the orchestra and to observe the composer's and poets intentions – in particular I assessed which register the singer was using (that is the amount of chest or head voice), the use of vibrato, timbre, the accuracy of attack or use

of portamento, the use of diction and legato and whether the piano or orchestral accompaniment had an impact on the singer's interpretations.

## 5. RESULTS:

### FINDING 1

Both Men and Women can and do sing the Wesendonck Lieder with varying degrees of success. Of the women who record the Wesendonck lieder they are mostly larger female voice types, either mezzo or soprano, ranging from heavy lyric voices to Hoch-dramatic voices. The range and tessitura are unsuitable for lighter, higher voices as they do not have the range or strength in the bottom of their range to be audible over the accompaniment.

### FINDING 2

Men are less successful in navigating the higher floated lines as they sing the majority of their range in chest voice. When men float, they are using their "falsetto" which, due to the loose approximation of their vocal chords in that range, has an airy quality and losses vibrancy. This does not occur for the female singers as they start accessing their head voice around E4/F4 and the amount of stretch in their vocal chords an octave above this, and ability to approximate their chords cleanly at these pitches, gives a more vibrant floated tone which "spins" on the airflow rather than becoming airy.

### FINDING 3

Similarly, the female voice is able to access a more ringing, clarion tone on the declamatory high notes than the men due to the female voice singing these notes an octave above the male singer.

## 6. DISCUSSION

### **Voice Science**

My determinations that female dramatic voices are best placed to meet the compositional demands of the Wesendonck Lieder are informed in part by advances in voice science which has investigated what happens in the instrument of the singer when they sing.

In particular, the work of Johan Sundberg, amongst others, has determined that the larynx is composed of 3 main cartilages (one is paired), 1 bone, and 5 muscle groups and it is the interaction of these muscle groups that stretch or thicken the chords and bring them together or pull them apart - affecting pitch, timbre, registration amongst others.<sup>5</sup>

Importantly for the project and findings I made, is that different women's voices function differently due to the variety in size of vocal chords and laryngeal structure. Consequently, the low chested notes of the first example required singers with thick vocal chords to reach these pitches. This meant men and larger voiced females could surmount this challenge.

Regarding the floated notes in example 2, women were better at surmounting this challenge than men. Advances in voice science would say this is because male and female voices function differently.

Lowell and Story<sup>6</sup> discovered that the two muscles that thicken and/or stretch work antagonistically. This has been interpreted by singing pedagogues that

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<sup>5</sup> "Inside the Larynx," accessed 15 September, 2021, <https://www.voicescienceworks.org/inside-the-larynx.html>.

<sup>6</sup>Soren Y Lowell and Brad H Story, "Stimulated effects of cricothyroid and thyroarytenoid muscle activation on adult-male vocal fold vibration," *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 120, 1 (2006), <https://doi.org/doi:10.1121/1.2204442>.

women can access head tones more easily, especially a vibrant, soft and spinning tone as the stretching muscle is more active than the thickening muscle. Men can ape this sound, but it is in their falsetto which, because of the action of another muscle that brings the vocal chords together, does not allow their chords to approximate cleanly in this range and timbre. Consequently, the sound is airy and not very vibrant.

This assessment leads me to disagree with Matthew Gurewitsch in the *New York Times*<sup>7</sup>. The reasons Wagner's "Wesendonck Lieder" have been the undisputed province of women are not nebulous, they are in part due to the differences in how men and women can sing. These reasons have been intuited by performers and listeners such as Moore preferencing "a big, velvety female voice also capable of delicacy"<sup>8</sup> since the pieces were created, but these intuitive decisions can now be substantiated by advances in voice science.

### **Theories of Voice**

While it is possible for an expert practitioner to analyse voice quality and the suitability of music for different voices, it is less easy to use the methods employed in this study to determine if Wagner was "giving voice" to Mathilde's thoughts. To paraphrase Edward Cohn in "The Composer's Voice: "Whose voice do we hear when we listen to Wagner's setting of poems by Mathilde Wesendonck. We hear a singer, with a distinctive physical voice, we hear the protagonist of the song, the "I" of the narrative; we hear the poem's author, Wesendonck, in the distinctive organisation of the words and their argument; and we hear Wagner, in whose voice the whole thing is composed."<sup>9</sup> However,

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<sup>7</sup> Gurewitsch, "Why Shouldn't Men Sing Romantic Drivel, Too?."

<sup>8</sup> Moore, "Wagner's Wesendonck Lieder - A survey of recordings."

<sup>9</sup> Simon Frith, "The Voice," in *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Harvard University Press, 1996), 184.

this project does provide a springboard to discuss some of the literature regarding voice and the intersections of this with gender and discuss how these ideas might usefully inform my performance of this work.

### **Biography and Feminist Musicology**

Certainly, feminist biographers such as Judith Cabaud and Martha Schad have investigated Mathilde's role in the co-creation of the songs and as muse for some of Wagner's operas. Some of the historical silencing of Mathilde's voice has been redressed by these investigations. Knowledge of Mathilde's place in the creation of these songs and acknowledgement that she was the poet of the words certainly allows us to say that the words of songs are the voice and thoughts of Mathilde Wesendonck.

As a performer of these songs, it can be productive for me to understand the words as Mathilde's thoughts, written as love letters to Wagner. It is also helpful for me to understand that Wagner rarely wrote lieder or art or set words that were not written by himself, yet he was so inspired by his relationship with Mathilde and her poems that as he wrote in a letter to Franz Liszt "Certain pretty verses, which were sent to me, I have set to music, which I never happened to".<sup>10</sup> By knowing this, my own interpretation of the songs is influenced by the love letters and gestures of their authors. Knowledge of this background also allows me as an interpreter of the cycle to not get caught up in Gurewitsch's characterisation that "Mathilde wrote the verse of an inept amateur. She had a fondness for symbolism, but her images are trite and go nowhere".<sup>11</sup> Instead, I am intrigued by the symbolism and suggest that Mathilde may have been

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<sup>10</sup> Heather J Baldwin, "Richard Wagner's "Wesendonck Lieder" The perfect synthesis between the master and his Muse" (Doctorate of Musical Arts University of Kansas, 2018), 2.

<sup>11</sup> Gurewitsch, "Why Shouldn't Men Sing Romantic Drivel, Too?."



writing images and symbols so as not to have her affair with Wagner found out by either of their spouses. This adds layers to my interpretation and allows me to find vocal colours that suggest the secrecy and symbolism involved in the creation of the pieces and poetry.

## **Gender**

Feminist biography intersects with discussions in music scholarship regarding gender. The *Wesendonck lieder*, as a cycle of five songs originally written for performance with piano, is arguably a cycle designed for the salon or Parlour tradition. Traditionally, this space was seen as the domain of women as described by Lucy Green; “predominantly, female and typically limited to close friends and family, the salon tradition saw performances of popular music, Lied and chamber music. Women’s music favoured vocal compositions both because of the more feminine implications of singing and the common use of the voice in accompanying domestic activities”.<sup>12</sup>

The *Wesendonck Lieder*, however, are expansive songs which are now most commonly performed with orchestra, it is arguable that they do not neatly fit into the Parlour tradition. These songs are designed to be performed in the public sphere - primarily the domain of men. Wagner himself orchestrated these pieces and there are good reasons for suggesting that while they are designed for the concert hall, this does not preclude them being performed by women or being gendered as female. Wagner wrote main roles for heroic female voice, either the dramatic soprano or mezzo, in all of his operas. His building of the theatre in Bayreuth with an expanded orchestra pit that extended well under the stage allowed him to increase the size of the orchestra

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<sup>12</sup> Lucy Green, *Music, Gender, Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 58.

and encouraged him to hire singers, both male and female, whose voices had the size and heft to ride this increased orchestral sound.

My listening observation is that the dramatic female voice, when singing these songs, can bring out the composer's intentions of phrases which are gentle and strong, floated, and clarion bright. These qualities lead me to assert that Wagner is saying something about the nature of his ideal woman. Biographers of Wesendonck and Wagner would agree as much has been written about Wagner's admiration for Mathilde's strength and that she had the qualities of his ideal woman. Wagner and Mathilde regularly discussed philosophies such as Schopenhauer's "Renunciation of Will",<sup>13</sup> this has not only been cited as evidence that their relationship was an unconsummated relationship, but also as evidence that Wagner admired both his and Mathilde's strength to resist their passion. As a performer, these insights encourage me to bring out all the colours available to the dramatic female voice, those that are seen as traditionally feminine colours, and other more strident, strong, and chesty colours which might traditionally be viewed as masculine colours. In doing so, I believe I am best representing Wagner's conception of his ideal woman and perhaps giving voice to many facets of the character of Mathilde Wesendonck.

Wagner himself had ideas about Music and Gender, he argued that music was feminine – in his essay *Opera und Drama* "Wagner describes music as a woman, and man the poet. His analogy is very vivid, with descriptions of French, Italian and German melody as the Coquette, Harlot and Prude: "what kind of woman should true music be?...one who truly loves, whose virtue is in her pride, whose pride is in her sacrifice, and whose sacrifice is one to which, not a part, but the

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<sup>13</sup> Baldwin, "Richard Wagner's "Wesendonck Lieder" The perfect synthesis between the master and his Muse," 1.

whole, of her being in the richest fullness of its capacity, is devoted – in conception.” He goes on to add, “We stop, however, purposely at this place, in order to put the fundamental inquiry, as to who the man ought to be, whom the woman must so unconditionally love?...We shall therefore closely consider – the Poet”<sup>14</sup>. Wagner’s theories are certainly interesting when we consider the gender bending roles, he and Mathilde engaged in to create the *Wesendonck Lieder*.

Additionally, Wagner’s treatise has led musicologists to discuss that some of his music is feminine in nature. Two of the motifs which occur in the opera *Tristan and Isolde* that were first written as studies in two of the *Wesendonck Lieder* have been described as feminine. Monelle (1995) describes the opening of the *Tristan* prelude, also seen in the opening of the third of the *Wesendonck Lieder* “*Im Treibhaus*”, as proceeding by “feminine quavers and dotted rhythm,”<sup>15</sup> and Clément proposes that the chromaticism of this motif and others, such as those heard in the opening of the fifth song “*Träume*”, “as reflecting “seductive, deadly feminine sexuality.”<sup>16</sup>

This discussion leads me to discuss two recent studies on music and gender conducted by Sergeant and Himonides<sup>17</sup> where expert listeners were charged with listening to a number of excerpts of classical music to determine if they could ascribe the correct gender to either the composer or the performer of the piece. Sergeant and Himonides conclude that “although gendering of music is

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, trans. Edwin Evans (London: New Temple Press, 1913), 191.

<sup>15</sup> D. C. Sergeant and E. Himonides, "Gender and the performance of music," *Front Psychol* 5 (2014): 3, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00276>, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24795663>.

<sup>16</sup> Sergeant and Himonides, "Gender and the performance of music," 3.

<sup>17</sup> Sergeant and Himonides, "Gender and the performance of music."; D. C. Sergeant and E. Himonides, "Gender and Music Composition: A Study of Music, and the Gendering of Meanings," *Front Psychol* 7 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00411>, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/27065903>.

certainly a reality it is not a property of music, but of its listener"<sup>18</sup> they assert that their results "do not support claims that music structures are inherently gendered, nor proposals that performers impart their own sex-specific qualities to the music".<sup>19</sup> They believe their study leads them to justify that "study of gendering of music is a legitimate field of inquiry within the discipline of Psychology, but not of Musicology".<sup>20</sup>

Their work would seem to suggest, therefore, that there would not be gestures or semiotics that I could rely on to determine that Wagner intended to write the *Wesendonck Lieder* in a "female voice" to "give voice" to Mathilde Wesendonck. Firstly, it is worth noting that they did not assay any vocal music, as they quite rightly said "For obvious reasons, no vocal music was included." as the voice of the singer would somewhat point to the gender of the "I" of the song. Secondly, I refute their claims that the study of gendering of music is only a legitimate field of inquiry within the discipline of Psychology. For the Performer-Researcher, our creative practice is enhanced by investigating whether we are performing a male or female character and whether the words or music that express that character have a gender. While this does not mean only women can sing words or music that are arguably female or feminine in nature, investigations of this nature inform the interpretation of the performer, adding layers and nuance to their performance.

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<sup>18</sup> Sergeant and Himonides, "Gender and Music Composition: A Study of Music, and the Gendering of Meanings," 13.

<sup>19</sup> Sergeant and Himonides, "Gender and the performance of music," 1.

<sup>20</sup> Sergeant and Himonides, "Gender and the performance of music," 13.

## 7. CONCLUSION

My findings from my listening project establish that the Wesendonck lieder, while sung by other voicetypes, is most successfully navigated by the dramatic female voice.

These findings are substantiated by discoveries in voice science about the differences in the function of men and women's voices and the differences between women with larger more dramatic voices and larger vocal chords as compared with women with lighter voices and smaller vocal chords.

Due to the efforts of biographers of Mathilde Wesendonck we now have much detail about the creation of the songs and know that the words of the poems were written by Mathilde. When interpreting my findings against current scholarship in music regarding voice and gender it is impossible to know whether Wagner was trying to embody the thoughts of Mathilde Wesendonck in his composition or if in trying to do so he wanted the music to express feminine qualities. However, it is productive for me to hear these songs in this way and to respond in my creative practice of these pieces to the love affair symbolised in Mathilde's lyrics, the seductive, deadly feminine sexuality of Wagner's motifs and explore all the vocal colours of the dramatic female voice in order to give voice to Mathilde and a nuanced and expressive performance of the Wesendonck Lieder.

## 8. APPENDIX 1

All music sourced from Richard Wagner's "Wesendonck Lieder".<sup>21</sup>

2. Stehe still!  
Stay Still

↓ 2/10  
Bewegt

Voice: *Bursting, rushing*  
Siu - sen - des, brau - sen - des

Piano: *p mf p mf p cresc*

Wheel of time measurer you of eternity gleaming spheres in  
Rad der Zeit, Mes - ser du der E - wig - keit leuch - ten - de Sphä - ren im

Piano: *ff p cresc*

Detailed description: This is a musical score for the second song, 'Stehe still!'. It features a voice line and a piano accompaniment. The voice part begins with a rest, followed by the lyrics 'Siu - sen - des, brau - sen - des' with the instruction 'Bursting, rushing'. The piano accompaniment consists of a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes in the right hand and chords in the left hand, with dynamics ranging from piano (p) to crescendo (cresc). The score is in 8/8 time and B-flat major.

Figure 1

4. Schmerzen

↓ 4/12  
Langsam und breit

Voice: Son - ne, wei - nest je - den Ab - end dir die

Piano: *f dim p f p*

schö - nen Au - gen rot, wenn im Mee - res - spie - gel ba - dend dich er - reicht der fri - he

Tod: doch er - stehst in al - ter Pracht, Clo - ri - e der düst - ren Welt, du am

Piano: *p cresc*

Detailed description: This is a musical score for the fourth song, 'Schmerzen'. It features a voice line and a piano accompaniment. The voice part begins with a rest, followed by the lyrics 'Son - ne, wei - nest je - den Ab - end dir die'. The piano accompaniment consists of chords and moving lines in both hands, with dynamics ranging from forte (f) to piano (p). The score is in 4/4 time and B-flat major.

Figure 2

<sup>21</sup> Wagner, "Wesendonck Lieder Fünf Gedichte von Mathilde Wesendonck (Five Poems of Mathilde Wesendonck)."

13

12

klagt? — Schweig - end nei - get ihr die Zwei - ge, ma - let Zei - chen in die

*p* *più p*

16

*p* *pp* *pp*

Luft, und der Lei - den stum - mer Zeu - ge, stei - get auf - wärts sü - ßer Duft.

*pp* *pp*

21

Figure 3

3. Im Treibhaus  
(Studie zu Tristan und Isolde)

3 11

Langsam und schwer

*p* *più p*

Figure 4

# 5. Träume (Studie zu Tristan und Isolde)

↓ 5 13

Sehr mäßig bewegt, aber nie schleppend

Piano

*pp*

5

10

Voice

Sag',  
welch  
wun - der - ba - re

Piano

*pp*

Figure 5



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