

Hugo Wolf's *Der Feuerreiter*: Text Painting and Form

By John D. Miles

Der Feuerreiter is one of fifty-three songs composed by Hugo Wolf in 1888 on the *Maler Nolter*, a set of poems written by Eduard Mörike in 1832. Wolf has dealt with the problem of text setting by considering the various roles of individuals, actions and events and their interaction, and composing music which is representative of the plot of the poem. Wolf shifts the emphasis from melody and harmony towards rhythm and texture, and to a lesser degree, timbre; in this way he avoids the leitmotif idea in favor of rhythmic motives and textures which are more easily combined according to the dramatic interactive requirements of the text. The resulting harmonic structure maintains traditional tonal structure globally while a highly chromatic fabric is achieved locally.

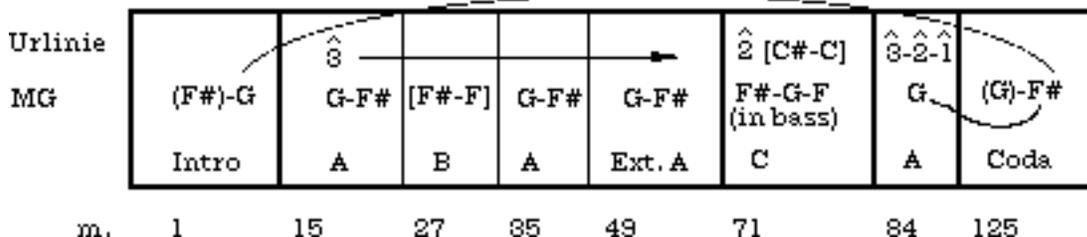
A problem of much 19th century music based upon extra-musical models such as literature, as in the case of this song, is musical discontinuity caused by many characters or a complex literary plot. In much of this music a referential point is needed in order to provide thematic or other types of musical unity. While there are limited characters in this song, the types of interaction in which the Fire-rider is involved are numerous and complex, requiring new music for each different type of encounter. In order to deal with this type of problem effectively while ensuring musical unity, Wolf has slightly altered the form of the poem by repeating one line of the text as a musical refrain (m. 23-26), resulting in a use of return which suggests a rondo-like structure; at the very least a much needed referential point is provided throughout the song after each strophe so that Wolf is free to deal with the text in a manner which follows the spirit of the poem. The solution is most effective; omitting the refrain and dealing with the poem strophes by composing similar strophes of music would unify the song musically at the expense of losing the sense of action implied by the text. While this might appear to be speculation, it also suggests Wolf was aware of the musical pitfalls of the 19th century aesthetic and was prepared to experiment with other elements such as a rhythm and texture in order to unify his compositions.

Analysis of the action in the poem reveals the interactive dramatic elements upon which Wolf has based the interaction of his musical material, which may be identified as follows:

1. **Crowd:** this is an idea of general bustling confusion and activity, represented musically throughout the piece by the triplets and dotted rhythms introduced at m. 15.
2. **Firebell:** this persistent ringing played by the piano on a B pedal which also functions to support the tonal plan, as it is used as a refrain throughout the piece as an element of return first introduced in mm. 23-26.
3. **Fire-rider/Devil:** also to be considered here are ideas of the supernatural and horror as well as the idea of the sounds of hoof-beats as the Fire-rider rides his horse, terrorizing the countryside. The music associated with these ideas varies throughout the piece, as this character has music associated with him personally as well as the consequences of his actions. His first appearance in the song at m. 27 is characterized by a rhythm which includes a sixteenth-note triplet; however, whenever references to the supernatural occur, most notably at mm. 55-70, as well as mm. 111-120, the harmonic progression is extremely chromatic. As the interaction described in the text concern these dramatic themes, the musical representations are as varied and problematic, as each type of encounter requires a different musical solution.

Wolf's use of text-painting is quite intriguing and sophisticated, and similar to his organization of tonal structure, operates at various levels. On one hand, there exists a very surface type of text-painting which is fairly obvious, such as the use of the ringing B-pedal in the piano for the firebell, using increasingly distorted and twisted chromaticism at references to the supernatural, the "bustling" and busy rhythmic idea associated with the crowd, having the piece end by having the music fade, like "ashes" (*Asche*) into nothingness, etc. However, at a deeper level, this usage of text-painting supplies thematic material (in the case of the crowd, firebell, and the firerider) and further emphasizes the musical structure by providing textural contrasts corresponding to major sections as well as significant musical arrivals and climaxes.¹ Also, as previously noted, textural amalgamations such as the one at mm. 35-42, where the Fire-rider rides through the countryside, interacting with the "folk" ("crowd" motive in piano left hand) serve to reflect in the musical structure the action of the text. In this particular instance, not only are literary ideas from the poem being represented, but two *musical* ideas are combined to obtain a new texture which is an integral part of the song's musical structure. Finally, text-painting serves to support the background tonal structure of the song. Wolf builds upon third relationships as a tonal framework which support B minor as the background tonality. It is simple to observe how the ringing B-pedal of the "firebell" of the refrain reinforces this. At the most obvious reference to a functional tonal framework and chord progression, at mm. 47-54 and again at mm. 103-110, the use of a markedly "folk-like" progression and melody refer to the common "folk" of the poem. These sections stand out particularly because of the textural contrast to the music which immediately precedes it; the homophonic repeated block chords repeat a simple four-bar harmonic progression which immediately is transformed into the contorted twisted chromaticism representative of the Fire-rider. However, while this type of text-painting is not quite as obvious as other types Wolf uses in this song, it is functional as well: the D-major tonality supports the overall B-minor in the aforementioned third relationship as well as being its relative major.

An examination of tonal structure loosely based upon Schenkerian principles reveals the following model, which is obtained from the first-level middle-ground structure in the attached graph of tonal structure:



I am supporting the argument that D is the "head tone" based on the third scale degree in that the fifth scale degree, F#, occurs as an inner voice supported by its upper neighbor G. This relationship is given a rather nebulous beginning in the opening motive (m. 1) where F# is implied and the piece opens on G, its upper neighbor. However, this relationship is finally confirmed quite strongly at m. 123-25, occurring with a 4-3 suspension on V in its obligatory

¹ While "climax" may seem to be a dated musical concept, irregardless of its sexual implications, this is, after all, a piece of 19th century music, and as such contains the baggage of 19th century aesthetics. This song has both "climaxes" (mm. 60-67, 91-102) and "arrivals" (mm. 15, 23, 35, etc.). Due to the extremely "volatile" nature of the text in this song, to refer to these "climaxes" as mere "points of highest tension" seems a bit tame.

register. In instances where F# above the “head tone” D, it should be considered as a cover tone misplaced from its obligatory register. It should also be noted that the resolution from G to F# is approached from the lower neighbor E; this interval of a minor third appears to be an significant middle-ground hidden repetition (also given in the first motive and continuing through the initial ascent to D) throughout the work which also occurs at more surface levels. While the work does not quite conform exactly to the Schenkerian model, in that root position triads² are sometimes substituted for the correct bass but reharmonized. Another curiosity concerning the G-F# neighboring motion occurs at the end of the piece. As I regard this as inner-voice activity, its resolution after the *urlinie* has come to rest upon the first degree is a stroke of genius! Even the harmonic activity supports this final resolution: while a “V” is implied at m. 120 in support of the resolution to B (given in the piano!), the “real” V7 occurs at 124. The entire eight-bar closing section reveals Wolf’s masterful handling of the *urlinie* with the inner-voice activity which are technically out of phase, but supported by harmonies which enable both parts to come to rest.

Finally, it should be noted that the tonal structure is deeply imbedded in the maze of chromatic activity that dominates most of the work. This sense of chromaticism is reflected in deeper levels of structure, where chromatic variants are substituted (F natural for F# at m. 29, 71-79, and C natural for C# at m. 76-79). This type of 19th century chromaticism also manifests itself as chromatic variants of repeated motives throughout the piece; the passage from m. 27-34 is a rather typical example of this gesture that is not unusual in this work.

Hugo Wolf’s *Der Feuerreiter* maintains traditional Germanic concepts of tonal structure which is deeply imbedded into an incredibly chromatic surface. While the *leitmotif* idea has been transformed into “*leit-rhythm*,” Wolf is easily able to juxtapose and combine contrasting materials according to requirements that are governed by text requirements. His willingness to explore using other musical elements, such as rhythm and texture thusly is achieves a brilliant solution in the problem of dealing with setting text which involves complex plot relationships. The song represents a sense of innovation, as it foreshadows 20th century compositional techniques such as the investigation into and use of musical elements which have been traditionally not a part of Western art-music development.

² This occurs most notably as a vi dim7 in first inversion substituting for i (m. 15, etc.) The first significant i chord with its correct harmony occurs at m. 49 with the third scale degree still active.