

Preview

Dean Southern and colleagues to present multi-media recital of Hugo Wolf's Italian songs at CIM on October 2

by Daniel Hathaway



“An entire evening of Hugo Wolf songs might strike fear in the hearts of an audience,” says CIM voice professor and baritone Dean Southern. So Southern has chosen to present the songs of Wolf's *Italienisches Liederbuch* in a multimedia context for his faculty recital in Mixon Hall on Wednesday, October 2 at 8:00 pm.

The multimedia idea arose while Southern was teaching opera at the Frost School of the University of Miami and watched a designer from New York put together the projections for a production he was directing. “It speaks to a creative side I enjoy exploring and gives a different angle on the music,” Southern told us by phone from Macomb, IL, where he was rehearsing with pianist Jeffrey Brown at Western Illinois University.

The recital, presented with the assistance of Brown and soprano Susan Williams of the University of Alabama, will place Wolf's “Italian” songs in the context of his 19-year affair with Melanie Köchert, ironically the wife of Wolf's patron, who was the official Viennese Court Jeweler. “We'll present these songs as if this were the kind of life they wanted to have together.” Projections of song translations, photographs and translations of Wolf's surviving letters to Köchert (she burned many of them) will be woven into the program as well as three of Wolf's early piano works.

Wolf (1860-1903), a contemporary of Gustav Mahler (they once shared a flat in Vienna) was a complex figure who bounced back and forth between the warring Wagnerian (progressive) and Brahmsian (conservative) camps. “He loved Brahms until he told Wolf that he had to study counterpoint,” Southern said. Wolf spent a number of years as a controversial music critic, and left a small but important collection of compositions to posterity, most of them songs. Having contracted syphilis at the age of 17, Wolf's life was a chronic battle with that illness, which sent him to a mental hospital toward the end.





Dean Southern became fascinated with Wolf while teaching during the summers at the American Institute of Musical Studies at Graz in Austria, where he was surrounded by physical reminders of the composer. “Wolf was born and grew up south of the city in a town that's now in Slovenia. He went to elementary school in Graz — he flunked out because all he cared about was music — and his family then sent him to a monastery west of the city. There's a street named for him — the Hugo-Wolf-Gasse — near the Institute. So I began to take a personal inter-

est as well as a musical one.” Southern has taken a number of the photos the audience will see. “I bought a new camera last summer and went wild!

But the baritone admits he wasn't immediately attracted to Wolf's compositions. “It took me a while to warm up to him. He was a tormented person — like many composers — with demons that come out in his music. His expressive harmonies and tonal language are sometimes challenging for listeners, but I think that the Italian songs are the lightest and freshest. Some are very short — only two pages long. They came late in his career, and as one biographer put it, his songs had been put through a refiner's fire.” The three piano pieces, written earlier when he was under the influence of Schumann, will provide a contrast to Wolf's later harmonic language.

Southern's colleagues for the October 2 performance are old friends. Susan Williams was also in the doctoral program at CIM, and the two taught together in Miami. He met Jeffrey Brown at Graz, and baritone and pianist have collaborated on a number of projects.

Southern is delighted to be back teaching at CIM. “It feels like being home and I love being back in Cleveland. Of course I miss Miami in January, but the cultural aspects of Cleveland are really exceptional. And I'm very excited about how the restaurant scene has changed.”

The October 2 recital is free, but seating passes are required. Call 216.795.3211.

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