A Setting of Schiller’s ‘Dignity of Women’

In 1810, Friedrich Reichardt published a book of solo settings of poems by Friedrich Schiller. With the exception of the much younger Franz Schubert, Reichardt was the most prolific author of lieder based on Schiller’s poems.

His music for “Dignity of Women,” a poem which expresses many of the ideas of Schiller’s essay “On Grace and Dignity,” seems to be the only setting ever attempted. As usual in the earliest lieder writing, Reichardt did not distinguish the vocal line from the top line of the piano accompaniment.

Schiller’s poem is in nine stanzas which convey a strong contrast between feminine and masculine principles, reflecting his conviction that “[o]n the whole, one will find more grace in the female sex... Bodily frame, as well as character, must contribute to grace; the former by its suppleness, to receive impressions and set them in play, and the latter by moral harmony of feelings.” Yet, Schiller continued, “seldom will the female character elevate itself to the highest idea of moral purity....” This moral will, Schiller says, is more apt to the male.

Schiller’s essay was especially aimed against Immanuel Kant, but it also indicts the ideology of modern feminism and “gay rights,” which flattens the moral and emotional implications of the biological differences between sexes. Schiller did not say that an individual could not partake of both grace and dignity. Rather he was attacking the concept so cherished by feminists, that any individual of either sex is self-sufficient in these qualities.

The fact that the poem is entitled the “Dignity” and not the “Grace” of woman, points to the idea that there is a dignity, based on grace, which is a higher ideal than either grace without dignity or dignity without grace; just as justice based on mercy is greater than either alone.

Metrical Procedures

Schiller set up two different metrics for the five “feminine” stanzas against the four “masculine” ones. In the six-line “women’s” stanzas, with rhyme scheme aabcbc, the rhythmic structure of the eleven-syllable line flows along in threes. Each tercet contains two feminine rhymes, followed by a closing one-syllable masculine rhyme.

The “men’s” verses are each eight lines, with an ababcdcd rhyme scheme. The meter shifts to a march-like one-two, one-two, and the lines alternate between eight and seven syllables. Every other line stops on a masculine rhyme.

These metrical procedures are perfectly joined to the imagery. The opening lines of the first (“women’s”) stanza, for instance, end with the words weben, Leben, Band, or “weave, life, and band,” suggesting the idea of joining. The second (“men’s”) stanza starts with the rhyme-words, Schranken, Kraft, Leben, Leidenschaft, or “boundaries, power, life, passion,” which suggest sharp intervention.

Reichardt’s Setting

Reichardt’s strophic solution is very simple in principle: different music is required for the two kinds of strophes. The “women’s” strophes are in E major and in triple meter, the instruction tells the performers to use “grace and dignity,” while p calls for an overall soft dynamic. The “men’s” stanzas are marked “strong,” are in duple meter, and the dynamic marking is f. The key changes to the relative minor, C-minor.

A telling difference between the two strophes is the accompaniment. The falling vocal line of the first is met by a rising E arpeggio in the bass, and the two lines “weave” sinuously across each other in a graceful dialogue.

In the “masculine” strophe, the accompaniment is simply the octave doubling of the vocal line, suggesting an unequivocal will. While the “women’s” strophe is filled with stepwise flowing motion, the “men’s” strophe is very angular, relying on big jumps of octaves and tritones, until only on the last two notes is there a calm, “normal” interval of a fifth.

At the conclusion, the “feminine” strophe unites in peace what masculine pride had divided in war. Thus grace and dignity are brought together, and women afforded a supreme role which feminism would deny them.

—Nora Hamerman

The study of classical settings of poetry is perhaps the most efficient way to learn the principles of poetic composition. Selections offered here are either previously unpublished, or no longer available in print.
Würde der Frauen
Dignity of Women
(Friedrich Schiller)

Mut Würde und Anmut. (With dignity and grace)

1 Ehre die Frauen! sie flechten und weben himmelsche Rosen inirdische
Leben, flechten der Liebe beglückendes Band, und in der Grazie

2 züchtigem Schleier, nähren sie wachsam das ewige Feuer schöner Ge-

3 Aber mit zauberisch fesselndem Blicke
Winken die Frauen den Flüchtling zurück,
Warnend zurück in der Gegenwart Spur.
In der Mutter bescheidener Hütte
Sind sie geblieben mit schamhafter Sitte,
Treue Töchter der frommen Natur.

4 Feindlich ist des Mannes Streben,
Mit Zermalmender Gewalt
Geh der wilde durch das Leben,
Ohne Rast und Aufenthalt.
Was er schuf, zerstört er wieder,
Nimmer ruht der Wunsche Streit,
Nimmer, wie das Haupt der Hyder
Ewig fällt und sich erneut.

5 Aber, zufrieden mit stillerem Ruhme,
Brechen die Frauen des Augenblicks Blume,
Nähren sie sorgsam mit liebendem Fleiß,
Freier in ihrem gebundenen Wirken,
Reicher als er in des Wissens Bezirken
Und in der Dichtung unendlichem Kreis.

6 Streng und stolz sich selbst genügend,
Kennt des Mannes kalte Brust,
Herzlich an ein Herz sich schmiegender,
Nicht der Liebe Götterlust,

3 But with their glances so magic'ly chainin g,
Beckon the women the fug'tive restraining,
Warning him back in their presence anew.
In the mother's most moderate quarters
They have remained yet with modesty's manners,
Nature's daughters, with piety true.

4 Hostile e'er the man is strivin g,
With a crushing force doth roam,
Wildly through his life survivin g,
Without rest and without home.
What he builds, he ruins later,
Never rests the wishes' strif e,
Never, as the head of Hydra
Falls and e'er renews its life.

5 But they, contented with quieter honor,
Pluck now the women the moment's fine flower,
Nourish it loving and diligently,
They have in their bounded work greater freedom,
Richer than man, too, in districts of wisdom
And in the unending sphere, poetry.

6 Stern and proudly self-dep ending,
Knoweth man's cool breast thereof,
Heartily to heart though bending,
Not the godly joy of love,
Stark. (Strong)

1. fühle mit heiliger Hand.  
2. Ewig aus der Wahrheit Schranken schweift des Mannes wilde Kraft, unstet
   To truth's limits ever endless man with wild force doth flee, thoughts do

   treiben die Gedanken auf dem Meer der Leidenschaft.  
   Greift er die Ferne, immer
   drive him ever restless on to passion's stormy sea.  
   Grasps he the eternal, silent

   wird sein Herz gestillt, rastlos durch entfernte Sterne jagt er sein Traumes Bild.  
   Will his heart be never, restless through the stars' superlative hunts he his dream's image e'er.

Kennet nicht den Tausch der Seelen,  
Not in tears melts he e'er hence,
Selbst des Lebens Kämpfe stählen  
Steels he in life's battles raging
Härter seinen harten Sinn.  
Harder yet his hardened sense.

7 Aber, wie leise vom Zephir erschüttet  
7 But, just as softly from zephyr doth shiver,
Schnell die äolische Harfe erzittert,  
Quick as Aeolian harp-string doth quiver,
Also diefühlende Seele der Frau.  
Thus so the feeling-full woman's soul, too.
Zärtlich geneigtstigt vom Bilde der Qualen,  
Image of pain makes her tenderly fearful,
Wallet der liebende Busen, es strahlen  
Heaves then the e'er-loving bosom, and tearful,
Perlend die Augen von himmlischem Tau.  
Beaming the eyes are from heavenly dew.

8 In der Männer Herrschgebiete  
8 In the realm where men are ruling
Gilt der Stärke trotzig Recht,  
Might defiant right doth have,
Mit dem Schwert beweist der Scythe,  
With his sword the Scyth'an's proving,
Und der Perser wird zum Knecht.  
And the Persian will enslave.
Es befehlen sich im Grimme  
War be they in fury waging,
Die Begierden wild und roh,  
The desires both wild and rude,
Und der Eris raube Stimme  
Eris' voice is hoarsely raging,
Waltet, wo die Charis floh.  
Governing, where Charis fled.

9 Aber mit sanft überredender Bitte  
9 But now, so softly, persuasively pleading,
Führen die Frauen den Zepter der Sitte,  
Women with scepter of morals are leading,
Löschließen die Ziwickt, die tobend entglüht,  
Smother they discord, all raging enlight,
Lehren die Kräfte, die feindlich sich hassen,  
Teach they the powers, that hateful develop,
Sich in der lieblichen Form zu umfassen,  
Each in a more loving form to envelop,
Und vereinen, was ewig sich flieht.  
And what forever would flee, they unite.

—translated by Marianna Wertz