

## **The Ambiguity in Richard Dehmel's Poem "Erwartung" and Its Influence on the Interpretation of Arnold Schoenberg's *Vier Lieder*, op 2**

Richard Dehmel (1863-1920) was a German poet and writer who was known for his expressionist and naturalistic works. His collection of poems called "Weib und Welt" (Woman and World) is a significant work in the German literature of the early 20th century. Published in 1896, this collection of poems is dedicated entirely to the different aspects of the female experience. Following the publication, Dehmel was sued and convicted of blasphemy and obscenity. Moral outrage was especially directed towards the poem "Venus Consolatrix." Dehmel dared to compare Mary Magdalene with the roman Goddess of Beauty, life, and sexuality.

The poems in "Weib und Welt" are written in Dehmel's signature style of lyrical and evocative language, capturing the intensity of emotion and experience. Many of the poems are highly introspective, exploring the inner lives of his female characters and their complex psychological motivations. Dehmel's poems often feature powerful and vivid imagery, and his use of metaphor and symbolism helps to convey the complex emotions and experiences of his characters. Dehmel's poetry conveyed a philosophy of transformation that aimed to resolve contradictions such as male-female, subject-object, god-nature, or light-darkness by unifying poetic forms. This unity, Dehmel believed, would ultimately facilitate a reconciliation between the individual and the universal. Through his poems, Dehmel challenged traditional modes of expression, advocating for modernity and innovation as crucial elements in cultural evolution. His work emphasized the importance of cultural change and the need to embrace new ideas to move forward (Lacoste, 2023).

Dehmel's poetry played a significant role in bridging Arnold Schoenberg's (1874-1951) initial neo-Brahmsian phase and his subsequent pseudo-Wagnerian phase. In a letter to Dehmel on December 13, 1912, Schoenberg expressed his gratitude for the poet's influence on his musical development, stating that Dehmel's work inspired him to explore new tonalities and forms of expression. Schoenberg found that Dehmel's poetry stirred something within him that led him to create music that sought to capture an organic unity that had not yet been realized in his earlier works (Dismukes, 2006).

Schoenberg used poetry not only as a source of inspiration for his music but also as a structural element, incorporating the text into the music in a way that created a complex interplay between words and music. The result is a work that demands close attention from both performers and listeners, as the music and the poetry are constantly interacting and commenting on each other.

Schoenberg set the first three songs from his song-cycle *Vier Lieder*, op. 2 to Dehmel's poems "Erwartung", "Schenk mir deinen goldenen Kamm (Jesus bettelt)", and "Erhebung" from

*Weib und Welt*. The last song, “Waldsonne” was written by Johannes Schlaf (1862 – 1941) in 1899 and published in his volume of poems *Helldunkel*. The translation of the title of the first song “Erwartung” is “Anticipation”. Traditionally interpreted as the scene of a secret rendezvous, the story is told by a narrator overlooking the scene of a man standing next to a lake illuminated by moonlight. The narrator’s fragmented description adds to the ambiguity of the described situation, e. g., the man removes a ring from his finger; the ring sinks to the bottom of the lake; they kiss; she waves good buy. However, the rich use of adjectives in the language and the musical harmonic process invite ambiguity: Why is the oak tree “dead”? What does it mean that the shadow is “dark” and the choice of stones in the is “opal”? Why does the lover take his ring off his finger? Why is it that the ring “glistens green and red” sinking to the bottom of the lake? Why is there a “villa “and why is it “red”, yet the female hand waving good-bye from its window is “pale”?

The use of color in “Erwartung” is an expert example of how poetry can use sensory imagery to convey complex emotions and ideas. Frisch (1995, p. 93) remarks that the use of color words in “Erwartung” goes beyond mere description of the setting, as Dehmel achieves a painterly effect through stylized and abstract treatment. Each line of the first stanza presents or implies a different color, with the pond described as “sea green,” the villa as “red,” the oak as “dead,” and the moonlight as pale white. These colors are then repeated and transformed in subsequent stanzas, with opals described as “pale” and sparks as “red and green” in stanza 3, and the “Grund (ground”, referring to the bottom of the pond and stones, described once again as “sea green” in stanza 4. The final stanza serves as a recapitulation, with “red” and “dead” reappearing and the color value of “pale” transferred to the woman’s hand. Frisch links his understanding of colour to Kandinsky’s readings who describes white as “a silence . . . pregnant with possibilities” (Kandinsky 1977, 36–41 as read in Frisch 1993, p. 94). Taking the colour value of “bleich (pale)” as white, Frisch’s point of view about the secret rendezvous is optimistic (1993, p. 94). However, colour associations are ambiguous. The Germans use the word “bleich (pale)” to describe the colour of deceased people akin to bloodless. Schoenberg’s complex chromaticism, his choice of poetry and the rich use of adjectives not only allows interpreting artists to immerse themselves in the emotional world of the poems, but it also demands the artists to do so, to invest themselves and to develop their own points of view. Jeanell and I demonstrate how the interpretation of poetry set to music leads to subtle differences in music performance outcomes.

Jeanell and I first perform op. 2 based on the reading of the poetry from a point of grief interpreting the setting and color scheme of the first poem “Erwartung” as that of a grieving lover. We then repeat the performance of the cycle, but this time from a perspective of “hope” leaning on Frisch’s (1993) more optimistic reading of Dehmel’s colour scheme. Both perspectives consequently flow on through the remaining three songs of the cycle. We establish that the different moods of interpretation lead to recognizable—if subtle— performance outcomes with altered tonal colours and natural facial expressions.

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