

# Competing Analyses as Pedagogical Strategy and Hugo Wolf's *Das verlassene Mägdlein*

Gordon Sly

As a young graduate student I was fortunate to have worked with Christopher Lewis, whose untimely death in the fall of 1992 took from us a gifted scholar and a devoted and imaginative teacher. One particularly effective classroom technique that he developed involved teaching a piece from very different—even opposing—perspectives in successive class meetings. On Monday he would work through an analysis of a piece, challenging students and drawing them into the process in his usual way. The analysis itself may have been his own, or it may have been taken from the professional literature, in which case the class would have been given a preparatory reading assignment. On Wednesday he would enter the classroom wondering aloud just what may have lead him to develop, or to accept, the misguided views with which he had burdened us on Monday. In any case, he was happy to report that sometime early Tuesday morning he had come to his senses, and that the next hour would be given over to setting things right. He would then carefully lay out the argument for an entirely different analytical stance, and proceed with the new analysis. Friday's class, the final stage in a three-class process, would provide for a discussion of the events of the previous two meetings, and a clarification and examination of the issues raised. Importantly, while Wednesday's class would always have begun by pointing out the serious shortcomings of the views presented on Monday—these shortcomings were, after all, what necessitated the second account to follow—Friday's review would not necessarily hold to this judg-

ment. With one piece it may have, but with another the class may have concluded that the indictment of the first analysis had been hasty, and that the second account, being largely a reaction to that inaccurate judgment, was actually more flawed than the first. Or, more typically, it may have been decided that both analyses contributed valuable insights.<sup>1</sup>

A favorite piece for this treatment was Chopin's Prelude in E minor, op. 28, no. 4, which he would teach to spring-semester sophomores. The first class would concentrate on its thoroughly chromatic surface, and on the wealth of sonorities produced by the descending lines. Was the piece really "tonal," as we had come to understand that term? E minor asserted itself at cadences, but surely the real interest in the piece—what the music was really "about"—lay in the great variety of chords it presents, and in the relationships among the various tonal centers implied by these chords. Would an analysis not best reflect this striking feature of the work by regarding the role of E minor as secondary, if not peripheral? A convenient means of articulating the work's form, perhaps; even a simple concession to tradition.

The second class (following the early-hour enlightenment) focused on the basic voice-leading of the piece, uncovering the simple harmonic progression that is embellished by the chromatic descent of each voice. Now the various sonorities whose harmonic implication had occupied center stage on Monday were understood to result from the coincidence of chromatic passing tones; and if these

---

<sup>1</sup>A variation of this procedure involved a second teacher—another faculty member sitting in on the class as a guest, or his teaching assistant, who would be "provoked" by Professor Lewis's analysis into presenting the second viewpoint on the piece. During the last minutes of Monday's class, the co-conspirator would express strong dissatisfaction with Lewis's whole take on the piece. Lewis would demand to know what might be proposed in its place. His colleague would, of course, require a little time to put a few ideas together, but would be prepared to set forth an alternate view on Wednesday. Lewis would agree and dismiss the now quite startled class without another word. On Wednesday the contrasting interpretation of the piece—which the two of them had rehearsed on Tuesday—would be given. Lewis would sit stoically through the presentation, noting ideas to be addressed at Friday's postmortem.

were passing tones, then their combination formed passing chords. The function of each tone and chord was examined, as the basic harmonic motion that supports the opening section of the piece was brought into focus: the initial progression from  $i^6$  to  $iv^{\frac{3}{4}}$  in m. 5, the motion within the subdominant harmony that leads to  $iv^6$  in m. 9, and the arrival in m. 10, and extension through m. 12, of V. Example 1a provides the opening twelve measures of the piece;<sup>2</sup> Ex. 1b gives my own illustration of this voice-leading and harmonic organization.

Professor Lewis's success with this pedagogical strategy owed much to the passion and remarkable powers of persuasion he brought to his teaching. His classes, like anyone's, were comprised of the usual array of students: several bumps on logs from whom no teacher could pry anything; the gang in the middle who enjoyed his enthusiasm to varying degrees and picked up on some of what he said; and the keen few at the top who hung on every word. This group would leave Monday's class excited, imbued with a zeal to explain to anyone who would listen how Chopin was an unappreciated forward-looking composer—even the first post-tonal composer. Wednesday's class hit these students hard, and taught them a number of important lessons. Most obviously, it became clear that two convincing and yet contradictory analytical accounts of a piece were possible. The experience also taught them to approach analytical explanations with a measure of skepticism, and to consider carefully the assumptions upon which an analysis rests. For their own work, they learned that any analytical approach carries specific implications and constraints—that analytical claims have consequences. Each of these lessons is valuable, but none more so than that noted last, since the work of young students is troubled most persistently (beyond the pervasive and lamentable inability to express their ideas, that is) by arbitrary and unsupported—and usually insupportable—analytical decisions.

---

<sup>2</sup>The complete piece can be found in Charles Burkhart, *Anthology for Musical Analysis*, 5th ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College publishers, 1994): 329. It is also available in *Complete Preludes and Etudes for Solo Piano, Frederic Chopin* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1980): 5.

Example 1a: Chopin, Prelude, op. 28, no. 4, mm. 1-12

Largo

*p* *espressivo*

Example 1b: Chopin, Prelude, op. 28, no. 4, mm. 1-12, Voice-Leading and Harmonic Structure

Each time I was privileged to observe Professor Lewis's implementation of this pedagogical technique, and its subsequent effect on students' own analytical work, my resolve to borrow the idea for my own teaching deepened. In the years since, I have used it with sophomores, juniors, and even graduate students. I have also found my own favorite piece for this approach, which is the subject of the balance of this essay.

Hugo Wolf's setting of Eduard Mörike's *Das verlassene Mägdlein*<sup>3</sup> is a beautiful and fascinating work, and has received a good deal of analytical attention, particularly in the classroom, but also in the professional literature. The song amply repays this study: its modest scale and marked simplicity of gesture do not diminish its richness—even its daring novelty—in the use of the extended tonal practices that characterize late-19th-century music. It is chiefly the remarkable central part of the piece, and its role within the larger context, that invites different interpretations, and, therefore, the pedagogical treatment described in the foregoing pages.

The following overview of the music's organization sets that larger context. The song is cast in a straightforward ABA design with principal divisions at mm. 13 and 38. The music's tonal center is also clear: despite the avoidance of a complete or unalloyed tonic triad to begin any of the opening section's three phrases, the dominant harmonies that punctuate each phrase, and the stepwise descent that shapes the vocal line, establish A minor as tonic. The closing section, which is built from the second and third phrases of the opening music followed by a cadential gesture, reconfirms A minor.

The relatively large central section, however, very much stands apart tonally, being essentially controlled by a series of augmented triads. The passage is ushered in by the A-major triad in m. 13, which simultaneously responds to the dominant harmony of the previous measure, and introduces the new sound of the "B" sec-

---

<sup>3</sup>Like the Chopin prelude, this piece can be found both in Burkhart (pp. 394-396) and in a Dover edition (*The Complete Mörike Songs, Hugo Wolf* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1982): 20-21).

tion. Paradoxically, this first chord of the new section represents the complete tonic triad for which the opening music had been searching, albeit a modally altered one. The A-major triad alternates through mm. 13-18 with a  $Mm\frac{4}{2}$  chord built on C $\sharp$ , that is, with B as its bass tone. In mm. 19-22 an A $\flat$ -major chord alternates with the first of our augmented triads, built above this same B in the bass. The next twelve measures are ruled by the augmented triad: the only relief from this sonority is provided by the B $\flat$  major chord that alternates with the augmented triad above an A bass through mm. 27-30. These bars are framed by four-measure passages, both of which move between two augmented triads, built, respectively, above bass tones of D and F, and A $\flat$  and B. The augmented triads from first to last, then, are supported by bass tones that proceed through the chain of minor thirds: B ascends through D and F and then continues through A $\flat$  and B (I have ignored A $\sharp$  in this progression, since it represents a continuation of the augmented triad built on F). This motion carries the augmented triads through their complete transposition cycle in descending semitones. This is illustrated in Example 2 with the labels T0 (or "transposition 0"), T-1 ("transposition minus one"), T-2, T-3, and on to T-4, which, of course, is the same triad as the T0 point of departure. Only here, at mm. 35 ff., does the augmented triad loosen its grip on the music.

The augmented triad is a relatively rare event in tonal music. When it does appear, its function, like that of any chord, is determined contextually. Three occurrences are shown below in Example 3. Most frequently, the chord is produced by an ascending chromatic passing motion that issues from the fifth of a major triad. This alteration destabilizes the triad and urges resolution, normally to a major chord whose root lies a fifth below the root of the augmented triad, with the chromatic ascent leading into the chordal third (Example 3a). Resolution to a triad up a major 2nd is also possible, though less common. Here the chord of resolution is usually minor, and invariably in first inversion to avoid the parallel fifths that would otherwise result (Example 3b). The augmented triad also arises through chromatic embellishment of a single major or minor chord, as in the opening of Brahms's *Alto Rhapsody* (Example 3c), where an *appoggiatura* to the root of the initial C-minor tonic harmony creates a striking effect. Other specific voice-leading con-

**Example 2:** Wolf, *Das verlassene Mägdlein*: Series of Augmented Triads in the Central Section

The musical score illustrates a series of augmented triads in the central section of Wolf's *Das verlassene Mägdlein*. The score is written for piano, with a treble and bass staff. The measures are grouped into five sets: 19-22, 23-26, 27-30, 31-34, and 35. Below the staff, the triads are labeled: M, T0, T-1, T-2, (T-2), T-3, T-4 (=T0), and m. The notation includes a series of plus signs indicating the sequence of triads.

texts are possible, but all share the same basic features: the augmented triad arises as an elaboration of a major or minor triad; it is highly unstable and resolves locally.

Wolf's use of the chord in *Das verlassene Mägdlein* departs substantially from this usual function. Here augmented triads do not appear to arise as alterations of major or minor triads. Nor do they resolve to consonant sonorities. In fact, they seem not to resolve at all; for the most part, as we have seen, augmented triads move into other augmented triads.

This most unusual feature of the work, then, gives rise to our analytical fork in the road. The first reading, while acknowledging the odd behavior of the augmented chords, nevertheless holds firm to the implications for interpretation of this passage carried by the song's being "in A minor." If the piece is tonal, then the workings of these augmented chords must be understood within that larger tonal context. As a dissonant sonority, the augmented triad necessarily arises from, and therefore embellishes, some consonant element. This line of reasoning forms the analytical point of departure for the initial class. In recent years, I have asked students to read James Baker's brief essay on the piece, taking advantage not only of Baker's thoughtful account of the music, but, in preparation for

Example 3: Typical Contexts for Augmented Triads in Tonal Music

a) Beethoven: Bagatelle op. 119, no. 8

musical score for Beethoven's Bagatelle op. 119, no. 8. The score is in 3/4 time and features a piano accompaniment. The bass line contains an augmented triad (F, A, C) marked with a plus sign (+). The treble line is marked *molto legato*.

b) Beethoven: Six Easy Variations on an Original Theme, WoO 77, Tema

musical score for Beethoven's Six Easy Variations on an Original Theme, WoO 77, Tema. The score is in 2/4 time and features a piano accompaniment. The bass line contains an augmented triad (F, A, C) marked with a plus sign (+). The treble line is marked *p*.

c) Brahms: Rhapsodie, Op. 53

Adagio

musical score for Brahms' Rhapsodie, Op. 53, Adagio. The score is in 4/4 time and features a piano accompaniment. The bass line contains an augmented triad (F, A, C) marked with a plus sign (+). The treble line is marked *sf* and *p*.



Wednesday's contrasting approach to the piece, the authority that for most students attaches to a published analysis.<sup>4</sup> Baker's interpretation, illustrated below in example 4,<sup>5</sup> proceeds from the assumptions we have described. The crux of it, shown clearly in the bass and harmonic analysis, hears the A $\flat$ -major triad of m. 19 and the B $\flat$ -major triad of m. 27 as locally stable events. Specifically, the B $\flat$  triad is a root-position Neapolitan that connects the opening tonic to the structural dominant of the closing measures. Baker suggests in the commentary that the A $\flat$ - and B $\flat$ -major chords act as a kind of composed-out chromatic-neighbor motion to tonic A. This observation must be qualified in class, since, as just noted, the example shows the dominant, not the tonic, as the goal of the B $\flat$  harmony. The characterization of a double-neighbor around the tonic, then, with its implication of a large A-A $\flat$ -B $\flat$ -A bass motion, would be misleading. One may perhaps say that the Neapolitan arises as the upper member of an *incomplete* chromatic double-neighbor motion flowing out of the song's opening tonic harmony.

In any case, what is chiefly important for us is that the augmented triads, marked "+3" in the example, are heard as subordinate, as elaborations of these major triads; essentially, they are understood to arise as part of the connective voice-leading tissue within the structural frame of the song's broad bass motion. While the augmented triads do not act, then, just as they do in the passages given in Example 3, still, that view of their origin and function—as embellishments of local consonant triads—remains a basic assumption of Baker's analytical position. This interpretation of the augmented triads as dissonant—that is, unstable—elaborations of the stable major triads that anchor the passage is the centerpiece of this analytical conception of the music.

The second class is set in motion by my expressed nagging dissatisfaction with the thorough de-emphasis of the augmented triads that characterized the first analysis. The augmented chords are

---

<sup>4</sup>See James Baker, "Post-Tonal Voice-Leading," in *Early Twentieth-Century Music, Models of Musical Analysis*, ed. Jonathan Dunsby (Oxford UK: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1993): 20-41. Baker's discussion of *Das verlassene Mägdlein* is found on pp. 21-25.

<sup>5</sup>Baker's sketch is given in Example 2.1 as *Ibid*, p. 23. Example 4 follows Baker's reading, but does not reproduce all of the details of his sketch.

**Example 4:** After James Baker's Sketch of *Das verlassene Mägdlein* in "Post-Tonal VoiceLeading," *Early Twentieth-Century Music: Models of Music Analysis*

The image displays a musical score for two staves, likely representing a piano and a voice part. The score is divided into measures, with measure numbers 1, 5, 9, 13-15, 19, 27-29, 31-33, 34, and 37 indicated above the staves. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and accidentals. A large bracket spans measures 13-15, and another bracket spans measures 27-29. Annotations include a double bar line with a right-pointing arrow in measure 13, a double bar line with a left-pointing arrow in measure 19, and a double bar line with a right-pointing arrow in measure 34. Roman numerals (I, V, VII) are placed below the staves, indicating chord functions. A key signature change is marked with a double bar line and a sharp sign in measure 13. The score is presented in a standard musical notation style, with a treble clef on the upper staff and a bass clef on the lower staff.

so prominent that dismissing them as incidental byproducts of the voice-leading seems musically unconvincing. If, as one could argue, their sound largely defines the song, an analysis should accord them a status that reflects that quality. At the same time, that A minor is the cohering tonal force of the piece is undeniable, and the origin and dissonant function of the augmented triad in tonal music is clear, as we have seen. The dilemma, then, is plain: reconciling these two seemingly incompatible ideas, a consonant, or stable, augmented triad within a tonal context, is an inescapable requirement of any seriously competing interpretation.<sup>6</sup>

Mörike's poem describes a scene: we see a young girl, early in the morning, stand before a fireplace and light a fire; we see her staring into the flames. What we see next are tears. Between the gazing into the fire and the appearance of the tears has occurred her recollection of a lover who, it would seem, has abandoned her.

---

<sup>6</sup>A number of studies have addressed this idea of normally dissonant constructs being rendered consonant by context in certain nineteenth-century works. Robert P. Morgan's "Dissonant Prolongation: Theoretical and Compositional Precedents," *Journal of Music Theory* 20 (1976): 49-91, and Howard Cinnamon's "Tonic Arpeggiation and Successive Equal Third Relations as Elements of Tonal Evolution in the Music of Franz Liszt," *Music Theory Spectrum* 8 (1986): 1-24 examine the issue thoroughly, and present a number of excellent examples. Both authors show the opening section of Liszt's well-known *Faust* symphony to be based on the prolongation of the augmented triad A-C-E. Cinnamon goes on to examine in detail the relationship between the introduction and the tonal architecture of the rest of the work. The issue is explored in the context of three songs by Wolf (*Das verlassene Mägdlein* is not among them) in John Williamson, "Wolf's Dissonant Prolongations," in *The Second Practice of Nineteenth-Century Tonality*, ed. William Kinderman and Harald Krebs (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996): 215-236. Three articles from a recent issue of *Music Analysis* also speak to this general question. See Richard Cohn, "Maximally Smooth Cycles, Hexatonic Systems, and the Analysis of Late-Romantic Triadic Progressions," *Music Analysis* 15 (1996): 9-40, Linda Popovic, "Liszt's Harmonic Polymorphism: Tonal and Non-Tonal Aspects in *Héroïde Funèbre*," *Music Analysis* 15 (1996): 41-55, and Mark Anson-Cartwright, "Chord as Motive: The Augmented-Triad Matrix in Wagner's *Siegfried Idyll*," *Music Analysis* 15 (1996): 57-71. For a broader discussion of Wolf's harmonic practice, see Deborah J. Stein, *Hugo Wolf's "Lieder" and Extensions of Tonality* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985).

The poem, then, moves between two distinct planes of action: her observable, physical action; and the unobservable action of her mind. The underlying idea of this second interpretation is that the augmented triads are the central feature of Wolf's musical interpretation of the poem. In brief, Wolf uses the augmented triads to depict the poem's chronological disruption—to suspend tonal process itself, in order to reflect the suspension of the poem's observable, in-time action, and to set the out-of-time action that takes place in the girl's mind.

In Example 5, the opening and closing passages of the "B" section are characterized as "transition" and "retransition," respectively. What these terms denote here are transitions into and out of this state of suspended tonal process. The opening measures of the section set the poem's second stanza, as the girl gazes into the flames. The next line of text is from the poem's second plane, the unobservable action of her mind. How does Wolf move *musically* from one plane to the next? The initial harmonic progression of the "B" section, as we have observed, is from an A-major triad to a Mm7th chord on C#. In a sense, it is meaningless to view this latter chord as V<sup>7</sup>/#VI since F# nowhere asserts itself as a point of tonal focus, neither locally nor in any more global sense. However, it is precisely this that underlies its presence here. A dominant-seventh chord is strongly suggestive of a specific tonic. Wolf exploits this quality to begin a process of loosening the sense of tonal center. The chord pulls away from A as tonic, but suggests a tonal potential that is not realized, thereby causing the tonal center to begin to go out of focus.

The C#<sup>7</sup> chord also supports the tone G# in the highest sounding voice. This brings out the chromatic descent from tonic A, the bass tone of the preceding A-major triad. This interval, the falling half-step, is really the defining idea of the section. It guides virtually all harmonic motion: the A-G# of the initial progression; at a slightly broader level, the fall from the A-major chord of m. 13 to the A♭-major chord of m. 19; another halfstep descent from that A♭ triad to the first of the augmented triads; and finally the progression of augmented triads through the section (these motions are summarized using arrows in the staff appended above the three-staff system in the lower section of example 5). The falling semitone portrays mu-

### Example 5: Wolf, *Das verlassene Mägdlein*: Tonal and Formal Organization

[illegible]

sically the descent into the trance-like state induced by the gazing into the flames. The hypnotizing effect of the fire carries the girl from the reality of the world to that of her memory. Musically, the A minor of the opening section is made hazy by the series of harmonic events beginning in m. 13, and a new reality of parallel augmented triads emerges. Each of these events is arrived at by chromatic descent. The passageway from one reality to the other, then, is the descending semitone. One might say that the trance-state is assigned a metaphorical location a halfstep below that of the observable world.

This interpretation illuminates the B $\flat$ -major chord of m. 27, revealing a moment of rare poignancy. This is the chord that appears in the midst of the series of augmented triads. The motion into the root of this chord is *up* a semitone. The B $\flat$  triad sets the word *plötzlich*, suddenly, indicating the moment of recollection. Here, then, we have reality—as represented by the metaphorical location up a halfstep, and by a *major* triad—encroaching on the daydream, for it is this memory of a real event that is the source of her sorrow. Musically, rather than functioning as a stable point of resolution or object of prolongation by the surrounding augmented triads, this major triad is subsumed within the span *controlled* by the augmented chords, and derives its meaning from that context. Viewed in this way, Wolf's detailed mirroring of the poem's levels of action in his manipulation of tonal materials is quite remarkable: the girl's trance-state interrupts the unfolding of her day, but internal to the trance is reality once again, the recollection of a real experience. Simply put, reality subsumes dream, which in turn subsumes reality. In Wolf's setting, the tonally disorienting augmented chords of the central section interrupt the unfolding of a piece in A minor, but internal to this section is a tonal event once again, the B $\flat$ -major triad. Simply, tonal process subsumes tonal disorientation, which in turn subsumes tonal process.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>This apparent paradox of a normally consonant event (a major or minor triad) serving as a prolongational agent of a normally dissonant event (the augmented triad) was noted by Morgan in the context of the *Faust* symphony introduction ("Dissonant Prolongations," pp. 60-61):

Wolf is able to use the augmented triad to arrest tonal process because, used in this way, it carries no diatonic function and, therefore, provides no sense of tonal priority. In other words, the relative contextual autonomy that results from this extended motion among augmented triads erodes the dissonance—the instability—that normally attaches to the chord. In its place, the symmetry of the triad itself is asserted, resulting in a passage that is singularly resistant to tonal allegiance. Further, that Wolf carries the music through the chord's complete transposition cycle—that its terminal points are the same augmented triad above bass-tone B—underlines the chronological disruption, the state of suspension, that the passage portrays. Wolf has managed musically to put the listener through an analogous experience to that which the poem's character endures. As we listen to the poem's third stanza, we are in a dream right along with this girl, utterly adrift tonally in this wash of augmented chords. Our disorientation sets us up for the remarkable retransition of mm. 35-37. This is truly a wonderful moment in the song, as Wolf restores tonal process—and our bearings—only gradually. First, the symmetry of the augmented triads is broken by the minor  $\sharp$ chord; then G becomes G $\sharp$ , providing a major triad on E; and finally D is introduced, which, with G $\sharp$ , produces the unequivocal dominant function that revives our tonal focus. The girl, meanwhile, has broken through the flame's hypnotizing grip, and reemerged into the misery that is her reality.

---

"C-E- A $\flat$  is always present as a referential sonority. But within this basic framework there are both passing chords (e.g., mm. 1-2) and neighbor chords (mm. 4-5), as well as a number of non-harmonic tones. The latter are interesting in that they occasionally create the appearance of stable harmonies. Within the context of this section, however, they are neither stable nor even true harmonies, since they result from secondary voice-leading motions. For example, the "minor chord" in m. 5 results from the suspension of the C-sharp in the top voice. Although the real meaning of these "chords" is perhaps clear enough within the relatively simple closed system established by Liszt, such *Scheinharmonien* [apparent harmonies] often occasion misreadings. Their structural meaning is here determined entirely by contextual means unrelated to (in fact, running directly counter to) the conventions of the tonal system."

Each time I have used this technique to teach the piece, I have found in Friday's class that students are most interested in discussing which reading, Monday's or Wednesday's, is the better one. The first time I experienced this, feeling that this was really not the important question, and that the students were not equipped to make that judgment, in any case, I tried to shift their focus to other issues, with very limited success. More recently, I have accepted that this is what engages them, and tried to inject into that discussion some of the issues noted earlier, those of maintaining a degree of skepticism and considering carefully the assumptions upon which an analysis rests, of recognizing the implications carried by analytical claims and approaches, and the importance of remaining consistent to those implications. Another idea that always emerges is the acknowledgment that an analysis, among other things, suggests a way of hearing a piece. As self-evident as this may seem, it nonetheless comes as a revelation to many students. And rarely does the opportunity exist to demonstrate this idea so dramatically as it does here. For to listen to this song alternately from the perspectives described by the two analyses is almost to experience two different works. In the end, perhaps this idea, that analysis of a piece—that *thought* about a piece—influences our experience of music, is the most important lesson students will take away with them.