

“Best to have the opera house bombarded”

An unpublished letter by Hugo Wolf

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Abstract: In a hitherto unpublished letter to his father of 1 October 1878, Hugo Wolf scathingly reviews a performance of Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* directed by Hans Richter, concluding on the grim joke that the Vienna Court Opera, for the sake of music, should be demolished by the Austrian army. The letter also contains a metaphysically disillusioned view of consolation (“Trost”) – Wolf compares it to intoxication (“Rausch”) – rather significant given that idea’s rôle both in his early and his mature work.

Keywords: Hugo Wolf, unpublished letter, Vienna Court Opera, consolation

Hugo Wolf’s correspondence is engaging particularly on two counts, quite independent of each other, and in some ways not even easily to reconcile. The letters give us an idea what musical life in Vienna in the last quarter of the 19th century – an Eden in the eyes of its complacent protagonists – must have seemed to a devoted Wagnerian.¹ And they reveal a world-view of ingrained pessimism, agnosticism or skepticism *vis-à-vis* religion and metaphysics: intellectual trends spreading over Austria and Germany at the time, yet, in Wolf’s case, in fascinating tension to conservative leanings in matters of literary taste, the decidedly classicist poetic preferences (Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Eduard Mörike, Emanuel Geibel, Gottfried Keller, Paul Heyse) that guide many of his major works.

¹ Cf. Hugo Wolf: “Letter to his parents, 23 November 1875”, *Familienbriefe*, ed. Edmund Hellmer (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1912), pp. 8–10; pp. 9–10: “Ich bin durch die Musik dieses großen Meisters ganz außer mir gekommen und bin ein Wagnerianer geworden”.

The library of the University of Music and Dramatic Arts Graz (Austria) recently acquired a letter of the 18-year-old Hugo Wolf to his father that has been hitherto unpublished:

Herr Tomschegg [,] mit dem ich mich recht gut unterhalten [,] wird Ihnen das morgen erzählen.

Lieber Vater!

für die 20 fl danke ich bestens, es war mir wirklich sehr viel geholfen u. ich denke, daß ich diese kleine Schuld bald getilgt haben werde. Es ist wahrhaft schrecklich, daß der geschäftliche Gang noch immer so stockt u. dazu noch die Paßivität der Mutter, wodurch das Übel nur noch empfindlicher wirkt. Ja ich glaube gern u. begreife auch ganz gut, wenn Sie oft nicht wissen wo Ihnen der Kopf steht u. das Dummste dabei ist noch das, daß ich nicht einmal helfen kann u. als müßiger Zuschauer in der Ferne nur nach einem, – freilich sehr billigen u. wohlfeilen – Mittel greifen könnte – dem Trost. Klingt es doch komisch, daß ich, der selbst trostbedürftige nun meinem besten Tröster wieder mit Trostworten entgegenkommen soll, um – doch wozu der vielen Worte? Am Ende sieht einem der traurige Realismus doch schon wieder aus jeder Ecke entgegen u. ich werde nicht gar so unrecht haben, wenn ich den Trost mit einem Rausch vergleiche. So lange man in diesem halbbewußten Zustand sich befindet [,] vergießt man alles Leiden, man sieht alles viel rosenfarbener, man setzt sich über alles leichter hinweg; hat man sich aber ausgeschlafen u. steht wieder auf geraden Beinen, dann tritt einem um so unangenehmer die starre Wirklichkeit, nackt u. nüchtern entgegen und um so schwerer fühlt man dann den Druck des Übels. Doch ich verirre mich schon wieder u. heute gar in das Theoretisiren.

Neues habe ich nicht viel zu erzählen, außer daß ich bei Dr. Krobak die neue Lection übernommen u. Sonntag [sic] mit Dr. Breuer im Tannhäuser war u. z. [und zwar] in der Loge der [sic] Baron H. Y. Die Aufführung sowohl von Seite des Orchester, der Regie u. theilweise der Opersänger, war so scandalös, daß ich mit einem wahren Katzenjammer nach Hause gekommen u. geschworen sobald nicht in die Oper zu gehen, die jetzt wahrhaftig zu einer Bude herabgesunken ist. Labatt, der den Tannhäuser gesungen ist nicht einmal werth gesteinigt zu werden. Eine solche Indiscretion namentlich auch von Seite Richter's ist mir noch nie untergekommen u. ich kann nur lebhaft bedauern, daß der "Siegfried" von Wagner hier aufgeführt wird. Das wird eine schöne Vorstellung sein, kann mir's schon denken, besonders wenn Labatt den Siegfried singt. Das beste wäre, das Opernhaus durch die aus Bosnien zurückkehrenden Truppen beschießen zu lassen, wenigstens hätte man des Aergers ein Ende.

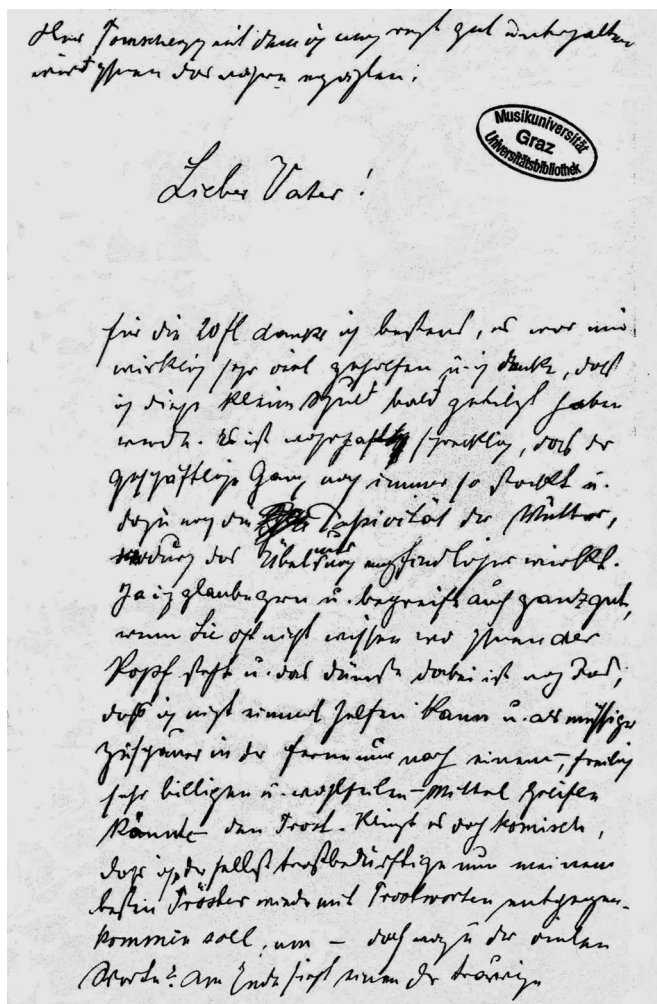
Wenn Sie mir die Manuscripte schicken[,] wäre mir wohl sehr lieb, daß auch ein Paar Schuhe mitgepackt werden möchten[,] ich bitte aber um gutes Leder u. ziemlich bequem, doch ja nicht zu plump.

Lebt alle recht wohl u. seid herzlich begrüßt

Wien am 1. Oktb. Nachts 1878.

Euer Hugo.

Gilbert für seine Mühe in St. Leonhard danke ich schönstens, denn in 2ter Linie habe ich doch ihm das Geld zu verdanken.



Facsimile 1: The first page of the letter

The letter can be rendered into English as follows.

Mr. Tomschegg with whom I had quite a good conversation will tell you about it tomorrow.

Dear father!

thank you very much for the 20 gulden, they were of great help to me and I think I will have cancelled this little debt soon. It is truly terrible that trade is still so slack and in addition mother's passivity, as a result of which the evil only has an even more severe effect. Yes, I do believe readily and understand

quite well that you often do not know whether you are standing on your head or your heels. It is too bad I cannot even help and, as an idle spectator from afar, can only take recourse to one – yet very cheap and inexpensive – means: consolation. After all, it does sound peculiar that I, being in need of consolation myself, should now in turn approach my best consoler with words of consolation, in order to – but why use so many words? At the end sad realism faces us from every angle already, and I will not be altogether wrong to compare consolation to intoxication. As long as you find yourself in this half-conscious state, you forget all your sorrows, see everything much more in rosy colours, and disregard everything more easily; but after you have slept it off and stood upright, then stark reality confronts you so much more disagreeably, plain and unadorned, and you feel all the more heavily the pressure of evil. But I am getting lost yet again, and today even in theorizing.

There is not much new to tell except that I now teach Dr Krobak and that on Sunday I attended *Tannhäuser* with Dr Breuer; we sat in the box of baron H.Y. The performance on part of the orchestra, the director and some of the singers was so scandalous that I went home with a true hangover and vowed not to visit the opera too soon again. Labatt who sung *Tannhäuser* is not even worth to be lapidated. I have never in my life experienced such indiscretion, especially on Richter's part, and I can only deplore strongly that Wagner's *Siegfried* will be performed here. That, I can imagine, will be a fine production, especially if Labatt will perform *Siegfried*. It would be best to have the opera house bombarded by the troupes returning from Serbia; at least this would bring the nuisance to an end.

If you send me the manuscripts, I would like you to enclose a pair of shoes as well; they should be of good leather and rather comfortable, but in any case not too plump.

May you all be well – yours cordially

Vienna, 1 October 1878, by nighttime

Hugo

Many thanks to Gilbert for his efforts in St Leonhard, for after all it is to him in the second line I owe the money.

A number of the names mentioned in this letter are familiar from other Wolf documents. Gilbert was Hugo's younger brother; this is about the only time in the Wolf family correspondence he is mentioned to have been helpful with money, rather than demanding. Tomschegg, otherwise rendered Tomschek – such unsure spelling was common at the time – was an acquaintance or even friend of the Wolf family in or near Windischgraz, Hugo's birthplace in Southern Styria. He might have been a music enthusiast; at least, father Wolf in a letter of 1878 mentions him as owner of a piano that Hugo could use when in his hometown.² Dr Josef Breuer (1842–1925), medical doctor in Vienna, of later fame for his cooperation with Sigmund Freud in *Studien über Hysterie*

² Frank Walker: *Hugo Wolf: A Biography* [1951]. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 73.

(1895), had become a friend of Wolf in 1878. Hans Richter (1843–1916) is still remembered as the first to conduct the *Ring* at Bayreuth. The Swedish tenor Leonhard Labatt (1838–1897) performed at the Vienna Imperial Court Opera between 1869 and 1883. To make him come up to the rôle of Tannhäuser, both as singer and as actor, Wagner during his Vienna stay in November 1875 went to great pains (the performance on 22 November 1875 was attended by Wolf);³ however Wagner seems to have been satisfied with Labatt's performance in the end.⁴

Neither could the abbreviation "H. Y." for the baron's name decoded, nor is "Dr. Krobak" otherwise known from sources pertinent to Wolf's biography. Yet Wolf's access to both members of the Austrian nobility and to Vienna's bourgeois academics is a far from insignificant feature of his career as critic and artist. Wolf's social background was that of an impoverished artisan family. His father's letter mentioned above reveals that his parents could not even afford to travel to Vienna together to meet their son.⁵ In the Austro-Hungarian empire, however, art in general, music in particular, and advanced music such as Wagner's perhaps most prominently functioned not so much as a symbol to demarcate economic status, but rather as a bond apt to make considerable economic differences seem at least temporarily irrelevant. Separate by money, united in beauty: this ideology informed the flourishing cultural atmosphere of the late Habsburg empire even among its secessionists and partisans. Along this line, Wolf's ever so scathing remarks on that most costly of Vienna's cultural institutions, the Imperial Court Opera, implicitly confirmed that aesthetic value was independent of economic value. Thus also confirming the tie between the artist and the upper classes (who not only then tended to claim that 'money does not matter'), Wolf's indictments were, in this respect at least, relished by the latter. (That it was not supplying itself with artists must have been obvious enough to Austria's aristocracy: Beethoven, Schubert, Bruckner, Brahms, Wolf, Mahler are all cases in point.)

When in 1887 Wolf stopped to publish his polemics, this was due to his preference for artistic production over secondary discourse, not to lack of demand. Among his raillery, the suggestion to blast the Opera House as made in his letter of 1 October 1878 certainly manifests an apex. Perhaps it is not by chance that it shows up in his family correspondence rather than in anything

³ Cf. Ernst Decsey: *Hugo Wolf*, four vols., vol. I: *Hugo Wolfs Leben, 1860–1887*, 2nd ed. Leipzig–Berlin: Schuster & Loeffler, 1903, pp. 39–41.

⁴ Cf. Max Morold: *Wagners Kampf und Sieg*, two vols. Zürich–Leipzig–Wien: Amalthea-Verlag, 1930, vol. II, pp. 165–166. In an article for the *Vienna Salonblatt*, 1 November 1885, Wolf mentions Labatt in a similar vein as in the 1878 letter; see *Hugo Wolfs Kritiken im Wiener Salonblatt*, ed. Leopold Spitzer and Isabella Sommer, vol. 1. Wien: Musikwissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2002, pp. 118–119.

⁵ Walker: *Hugo Wolf* (see note 2), p. 74.

addressed to his patrons or his Viennese readership; their liberality notwithstanding, they might not have been amused. Considering the reactions Boulez earned for his blow up proposal, in a century indefinitely more used to debunking than the 19th, this may in fact be a rather safe guess.

The other aspect that makes Wolf's letter of 1 October 1878 a remarkable one relates to the social and, in particular, intellectual climate of the Habsburg empire as well, in its relation to developments in Germany and Europe generally. The keyword is "consolation". "Consolation" tends to be seen as a basic issue of the human condition and, consequently, as a perennial philosophical and/or religious topic. Yet it is charged with history. The traditional European idea of consolation was bound up with the belief in an ideal sphere in which suffering here and now were to find compensation. From the Enlightenment onwards, this belief underwent a fundamental crisis. German classical and romantic literature was in part an attempt to disclose non-dogmatic "poetic" truth in the religious dogma that appeared shattered.

In this context, consolation was a matter of central importance, as Wolf the composer was well aware. His "Gretchen vor dem Andachtsbild der Mater dolorosa" from Goethe's *Faust*, an insistent bequest for consolation, rather outstanding among the early songs, dates from August/September 1878, just a few weeks before the above letter.⁶ "Komm, Trost der Welt, du stille Nacht!", the third of the young composer's masterly *Sechs geistliche Lieder nach Gedichten von Eichendorff für gemischten Chor ohne Klavierbegleitung* (1881),⁷ invokes the night as consolation to the recluse weary of the day; but this resignative comfort is transfigured by the glistening light of auroral eternity. Musically, Wolf makes the call for consolation ("Komm, Trost der Welt, du stille Nacht!") a uniquely memorable moment in these settings as the alto's melismatic line (bars 1–2) stands out against his stylistic norm of syllabic declamation. Wolf realizes this poem's mode to be incantation rather than representation; it does not describe mountains, clouds or the sea, but conjures them, performing an act of white magic that culminates in ecstatic paradox (for as to common sense, what could be less eternal than sunrise and dawn?). Of contrasting imagery, "Wo find' ich Trost", no. 31 in Wolf's *Gedichte von Eduard Mörike für eine Singstimme und Klavier* (1888),⁸ articulates longing for deliverance from night, death, and sin, and contrasts the

⁶ Hugo Wolf: *Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 10, ed. Hans Jancik. Wien: Musikwissenschaftlicher Verlag, 1974, pp. 74–77.

⁷ Wolf: *Sämtliche Werke* (see note 6), vol. 7/2, ed. Hans Jancik, 1969, pp. 30–34. Cf. also Wolf's sketch printed *ibid.*, vol. 19/1, ed. Hans Jancik and Isabella Sommer, 1992, pp. 28–29.

⁸ Wolf: *Sämtliche Werke* (see note 6), vol. 1, ed. Hans Jancik, 1963, pp. 108–112; the 1890 orchestral version: *ibid.*, vol. 9, ed. Hans Jancik, 1983, pp. 60–73.

weakness of the heart to the Lord's holy love. The song composed on 6 October 1888 is (bars 1 and 2) melodically related to "An den Schlaf" (bars 3–4) and to "Neue Liebe" (bars 1 and 3), both composed two days earlier; the latter in different ways answer the title question of the former, thus offering solace. But there is also a non-verbal answer to that question in the last bars (57–60) of the piano or, respectively, orchestral postlude of "Wo find' ich Trost" itself.

The discourses of consolation the poems by Goethe, Eichendorff and Mörike belong to (separated by about half a century from Wolf) do not exclude doubt and even despair. Rather, against a backdrop of possible doubt and despair, these classical and romantic texts – together with their literary contexts, the *Faust*-drama's first part (1808) for 'Gretchen', the short novel *Eine Meerfahrt* (1835/36) for "Komm, Trost der Welt", the novel *Maler Nolten* (1832) for "Wo find' ich Trost" – attempt to sort out a distinction between true and false, substantial and hollow consolations. In this attempt, they draw on sources of greater religious assurance: Eichendorff's "Komm, Trost der Welt, du stille Nacht!" is a variation on a song from the masterpiece of German baroque literature, Grimmelshausen's *Der Abentheuerliche Simplicissimus Teutsch* (1669) (bk. I, ch. 7: "Komm, Trost der Nacht, o Nachtigal!"), Goethe and Mörike quote or, respectively, paraphrase the Scriptures (Luke 2:35; Isaiah 21:11; Paul, Epistle to the Romans 7:24). Within this web of writings, the idea is spun out that both "true" and "false consolation" respond to states of suffering, disappointment and saddity, but while the former supposedly really transcends those states, the latter is believed to merely drown the pain, escaping into illusion. What makes Wolf's letter quite a significant document is the fact that its author no longer entertains that venerable distinction. He likens consolation as such, not merely idle comfort, to intoxication ("Rausch"). What used to be in the domain of philosophy or theology, even if presented in the medium of poetry, becomes a matter of sheer psychology and, indeed, comparable to phenomena of physiology. Wolf thus anticipates a tenet of the philosopher who later was to become his favourite, Friedrich Nietzsche, viz., that consolation is a drug bound to "narcotize" ("[n]arkotisiren").⁹

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche: *Zur Genealogie der Moral* [1887], "Dritte Abhandlung: was bedeuten asketische Ideale?" § 17, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, 3rd. ed. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag – Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1993, pp. 245–412, p. 377: "Die Milderung des Leidens, das 'Trösten' jeder Art, – das erweist sich als sein Genie selbst: wie erfinderisch hat er [the ascetic priest] seine Tröster-Aufgabe verstanden, wie unbedenklich und kühn hat er zu ihr die Mittel gewählt! Das Christenthum in Sonderheit dürfte man eine große Schatzkammer geistreichster Trostmittel nennen, so viel Erquickliches, Milderndes, Narkotisirendes ist in ihm gehäuft."

Yet, with the possible exception of the Eichendorff choir's middle section (bars 19–25, “sehr zart”, *pp*) where the turn to G^b major (the key of the setting is F major) hints at a hallucinatory vision, traces of that radical scepticism can hardly be found tainting Wolf's musical consolations. The escapism Wolf's letter diagnoses in comfort is not exposed by his compositions. “When it comes to Christendom”, Wolf later wrote to the librettist of his only finished opera, Rosa Mayreder – whom he calls a “Nietzschean of the purest brand” (“Nietzscheanerin vom reinsten Wasser”) –, “as you will be aware, I completely share your views; this, however, does not hinder me at all to wrest artistic charms from it. Yet in this I enjoy a privilege not to be underestimated, *viz.*, that I may take a rather “objective” stance towards it.”¹⁰ With regard to all of Wolf's religious music (widely conceived) we get the picture of an observer who is able to observe so keenly very much because he is detached from the sphere he observes. The “objective” stance is meant to remove the air of contradiction from Wolf's faithfulness to a poetry the implicit persuasions of which he no longer believed in.¹¹

¹⁰ Hugo Wolf: “Letter to Rosa Mayreder, 7 September 1897”, *Briefe an Rosa Mayreder*, ed. Heinrich Werner. Wien–Berlin–Leipzig: Nikola Verlag, 1921, pp. 90–92; p. 90: “Wie Sie ja wissen, teile ich *in puncto* Christentum völlig Ihre Anschauungen, was mich aber gar nicht hindert, demselben seine künstlerischen Seiten abzugewinnen. Allerdings kommt mir dabei der nicht zu unterschätzende Vorteil zustatten, daß ich der Sache ziemlich ‘objektiv’ gegenüberstehen darf.” The phrase “Nietzscheanerin vom reinsten Wasser” is on p. 91.

¹¹ I am grateful to Maria Klinger, Doris Leitinger, Karin Marsoner, and Robert Schiller for help in deciphering Wolf's letter. I would also like to thank Robert Schiller, director of the Library of University of Music and Dramatic Arts Graz (Austria), for his kind permission to publish the letter.