

Chapter 9

(Re)claiming Space for Ingeborg von Bronsart's Wildenbruch Lieder, op. 16

Melinda Boyd

Introduction

The repertoire of nineteenth-century Lieder composed by women is a treasure-trove of hidden gems waiting to be rediscovered. Lieder by Clara Schumann, Fanny Hensel, Josephine Lang and Pauline Viardot are gradually making their way onto recital programmes and recordings. A handful of their works have already achieved what might be described as canonical status. For these composers, Lieder fulfilled two important functions, one of them artistic and the other social. On the one hand, these so-called small forms were deemed an appropriate outlet for feminine artistic pursuits. In contrast to the public, masculine spheres of opera and symphony, Lieder demanded only modest performance resources and therefore were staples of salons and domestic music making. On the other hand, some composers and critics also recognized a crucial distinction between collections of independent songs and song cycles. The distinction is neither arbitrary nor capricious, since the designation 'song cycle' implies a host of claims to greater artistic merit and aesthetic value. Even when published in collections of six, twelve, or twenty songs that might have a claim to the title, women's Lieder were denied the prized designation of 'song cycle'.

A particularly intriguing case in point is that of the Swedish-German composer Ingeborg von Bronsart (1840–1913). Bronsart was a prolific song composer: between the years 1878 and 1891, she published no fewer than ten *Liederhefte*. James Deaville claims that Bronsart's song collections are 'frequently united by the poetry', but that 'none of the collections have unifying features that would warrant the designation of song cycle'.¹ The composer's gender certainly plays a crucial role in this commentary. However, there are several other factors at play here as well. First and foremost, our twenty-first-century understanding of the song cycle may be very different from the ways in which the nineteenth-century composer approached this genre. The standards that we tend to impose for cyclic coherence and organic unity become problematic when we discover just how few

¹ James Deaville, 'Ingeborg von Bronsart', in *Women Composers: Music Through the Ages*, ed. Martha Furman Schleifer and Sylvia Glickman, vol. 7 (New York: G.K. Hall, 2003), p. 249.