

CHAPTER II

GRIFFES AND HIS TEXTS

It is true that Charles T. Griffes did not leave us any treatise concerning his opinions on the nature of song. Clues to his philosophy of song composing are given sporadically in Griffes's diaries and letters, but the greatest source of this philosophy must come from study of his songs themselves.

It becomes apparent immediately that selection of an appropriate text was of primary importance. Griffes demanded no less from the poet than from himself. No matter the particular period or topic of the poem, it had to maintain a high degree of integrity. No trite rhymes or empty phrases could stir his creative talent. Griffes was not one of those composers who would choose a mediocre poem and attempt to immortalize it with his musical setting.

From the beginning of his song composing career, then, Griffes relied almost without exception on poems of high literary merit. This fact remains true despite the statement by Edward Maisel that Griffes often insisted "the value of a poem did not determine its suitability to musical setting."¹ In general, if a less than first-rate poet were chosen, Griffes had the ability to select those of his poems which rose above mediocrity in their sentiment and expression.

With his earlier works, Griffes depended mostly on the estab-

¹Edward M. Maisel, Charles T. Griffes: The Life of an American Composer (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1943), p. 111.

lished romantic poets and that body of literature which had proved fruitful for Lieder and mélodie composers before him. Thus his first song, "Si mes vers avaient des ailes," was composed to the poetry of Victor Hugo. Eight of the German songs of this period use Heinrich Heine texts. The other poets used are equally or hardly less renowned: Nikolaus Lenau, Emmanuel Geibel, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Joseph von Eichendorf.

As George Conrey has stated, of the German poets inspiring Griffes's songs, only "Julius Mosen is a minor light in the field of nineteenth century German literature."² And yet Griffes's choice of particular poems written by Mosen "shows that Griffes had a full appreciation of the poetry and chose the poems for their intrinsic value instead of on the basis of the popularity of the poet."³

It is in Griffes's divergent songs that the literary status of the poet involved is of least consequence. Perhaps the statement concerning value and suitability of a poem applied most clearly to these songs. With the exception of Sidney Lanier's "Evening Song" and Walter Crane's "This Book of Hours", the texts chosen in this group are either folksongs of no known authorship (e.g., "Two Birds Flew into the Sunset Glow," the three Javanese songs) or by minor or oriental poets (e.g., Five Poems of Ancient China and Japan).

With his mainstream songs, however, Griffes turned away from the long-established poetry, as well as more exotic texts, and began to seek poets more his own contemporaries. Though usually "lesser known,"⁴

²George Arnold Conrey, "The Published Songs of Charles Tomlinson Griffes: A Stylistic Examination" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Chicago Musical College, 1955), p. 12.

³Ibid., p. 14.

⁴Ibid., p. 87.

these were poets who are beginning to become recognized in the early twentieth century as promising poets. Although "Griffes was much interested in the new American poetry movement,"⁵ as his selection of Sara Teasdale's "Pierrot" illustrates, he was not oblivious to major developments in English poetry as well. The works of Oscar Wilde are of even more importance for the mainstream period than are those of Heine for the formative period. His last songs drew inspiration from John Masefield and William Sharp, who wrote under the pseudonym of Fiona MacLeod. Throughout this period of song-composing Griffes sought poets whose search for a new artistic expression paralleled his own.

With such an auspicious list of poets, it is difficult to understand why Griffes might insist against the value of a poem as criteria for its choice for musical portrayal. His indisputably accurate judgment in selecting quality texts cannot be mere coincidence.

Despite any debate concerning the literary status of the poet or the intrinsic value of the poem, one factor in Griffes's selection of text was almost universal throughout his career. Few would argue with the statement that the coloristic possibilities of the poem were the chief determining factor in its selection.

Much has been said about Griffes's attraction to color per se. Marion Bauer remarks that "he was attracted to anything yellow or orange."⁶ Some have added that this attraction later led to an association of particular colors with certain tonalities.⁷ Still others have

⁵Maisel, Charles T. Griffes, p. 111.

⁶Marion Bauer, "Charles T. Griffes As I Remember Him," Musical Quarterly, 29:356 (1943).

⁷Virginia Raad, "L'influence de Debussy: Amérique," in Debussy et l'évolution de la musique au XX^e siècle, ed. Edith Weber (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1965), p. 219.

pointed to the fact that even the literature Griffes enjoyed the most was full of coloristic imagery, as in this selection from Niels Lyhne:

Through the tracery of shadow, each color rose to meet the light: white from Edele's dress, blood-red from crimson lips, amber from yellow-blond hair, and a hundred other tints around about, blue and gold, oak-brown, glitter of glass, red and green.⁸

Such comments, true as they may be, tend to force limitations on the relationship of Griffes to color, however, and are so involved in specific detail that the necessary perspective is lost. It is rather in its broadest sense that color became the universal criterion for Griffes's choice of promising poetry. For Griffes, color in poetry encompassed the qualities of: intense human emotion, imagery within the natural world, and ultimately an other worldly mystical force transcending human experience. Rather than focusing on individual aspects of a particular poem that he was considering, Griffes envisioned the opportunities within that poem as a whole for the best possible use of his palette of musical colors.

Yet this importance of color, even in its broadest sense, should not be used as a rationale for categorizing Griffes's work in one particular style. As will be seen, his interest in color permeates his entire career.

Although Griffes's choice of poems with coloristic traits transcends all three categories of his songs, there are tendencies within each category which reveal differing directions. Maintaining trends of the romantic style, the texts of the formative period abound in both natural imagery and compelling emotional phrases.

⁸Jens Peter Jacobsen, Niels Lyhne (New York: P. F. Collier, 1940), p. 43.

"Der träumende See" consists almost entirely of images describing nature, from the opening line:

Der See ruht tief in blauen Traum,
von Wasserblumen zugedeckt;

to the final phrase:

ein blauer Falter aber fliegt darüber einsam hin!

As the title betrays, in "Wohl lag ich einst in Gram und Schmerz" we find an exuberance of emotion seldom encountered so overtly in Griffes's songs. Again the closing phrase illustrates this coloristic trait, emotional this time, extremely well:

o höchstes Leid, o höchste Lust,
wie seid ihr euch so gleich!

Indeed, so great is the emotional intensity in this poem that it has led one commentator to refer to it as "exalted religious expression."⁹

Most of the songs of the formative category are more subtle in their imagery. Usually they combine both emotional intensity and natural imagery, as in the final phrases of "Könnt'ich mit dir dort oben gehn":

Zu glücklich ist die Nachtigall,
Die in dem Lindenbaum
Vor ihrem Haus mit süßem Schall
Durchklinget ihren Traum!

With "Zwei Könige sassen auf Orkadal" we find the only real exception in this formative category to Griffes's text choices. Though there are occasional coloristic images, it is obvious that this poem is predominantly narrative in character and any emotional or natural images encountered are subordinate to the story itself. Intense emotion may be important to this story of two kings and their conflict, but the

⁹"Recital of American Songs," record jacket, Nancy Tatum, soprano and Geoffrey Parsons, pianist (London record no. 26053, 1968).

depiction of activity is more crucial in this poem:

Es sprühten die Fackeln, es blitzte der Stahl--
zwei Könige sanken auf Orkadal.

For the most part, the imagery encountered in the divergent song texts is straightforward and simple; both subtlety and extreme exuberance are mutually avoided. This may be attributed to the fact that so many of the texts are folk-like in character.

Though definitely not of folk origin, "Evening Song" illustrates well the straightforward imagery of this category. Thus we hear soon after the opening:

Now in the sea's red vintage melts the sun,
As Egypt's pearl dissolved in rosy wine,

Some of the most obviously colorful images are found in "This Book of Hours," wherein the book itself is described as having "burnished letters gold" and "colours manifold". Neither are emotional images ignored: "This priceless book is bought with sighs and tears untold." It must be understood that simplicity of expression does not imply simplicity of intention or lack of substance, as the significance of this outwardly simple text has escaped more than one commentator.

Nothing could be more straightforward than the oriental texts chosen by Griffes for his Five Poems of Ancient China and Japan. Yet their preponderance of colorful and emotional images relates them closely to the other poems chosen by Griffes. Of the oriental songs, "Tears" best illustrates the type of emotional imagery common to the divergent songs:

But that which makes my grief more deep,
Is that you know not when I weep.

Of the folk songs, "Two Birds" could almost be considered an exception to Griffes's tendency to choose coloristic texts, as it is

basically a narrative. Yet there is an emotional intensity built up by the successive images from one verse to the next:

Two birds flew into the sunset glow. . .

Two maidens down to the harvest go. . .

Two stars remembered the long ago. . .

Two children die in the hut below. . .

The contrast between the imagery of the preceding two categories and the mainstream category is one of kind as well as degree. Not only is the imagery more intense and more prevalent but it also takes on a different character. Coloristic images, though often still from nature, are more abstract in tendency, and the emotional atmosphere has psychological and, in the last songs, mystical implications.

With regard to coloristic imagery, Griffes found his most inspiring texts among the poetry of Oscar Wilde. Such a fact should not be "surprising in a man like Griffes to whom the very sound of words, as to Wilde, was a music in itself."¹⁰ Most obvious of these texts is, as the title itself even suggests, the "Symphony in Yellow." The song consists almost entirely of colorful images, with several novel word combinations and similes:

And like a yellow silken scarf,
The thick fog hangs along the quay. . . .

And at my feet the pale green Thames
Lies like a rod of rippled jade.

Such colorful images abound also in the Four Impressions based on Wilde texts. "Le Réveillon" begins with such a phrase: "The sky is

¹⁰ Donna K. Anderson, "The Works of Charles T. Griffes: A Descriptive Catalogue" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Indiana University, 1966), p. 129.

laced with fitful red." Besides the ever-present emphasis on color itself imagery is created through unusual juxtaposition of words and through more abstract or unusual illustrations of a natural phenomenon:

And jagged brazen arrows fall
Athwart the feathers of the night. . .

This increased complexity of the character of the imagery is shown also in "Impression du Matin," which begins with a not so striking phrase, though very colorful:

The Thames nocturne of blue and gold
Changed to a Harmony in grey. . .

while the final image, though still colorful in character, turns also towards a more complicated, almost psychological, statement:

But one pale woman, all alone,
The daylight kissing her wan hair
Loitered beneath the gas lamps' flare,
With lips of flame and heart of stone.

Whereas the imagery used by Wilde is often sensed as cold or rather detached, the Rupert Brooke poem "Waikiki," though no less complicated in its imagery, is felt as warm and sensuous. There is a stark contrast between the previous examples and the opening phrase of "Waikiki":

Warm perfumes like a breath from vine and tree
Drift down the darkness.

Yet here, as in the Wilde poems, there is a hint of the most psychological side of human emotions:

Of two that loved or did not love, and one
Whose perplexed heart did evil, foolishly. . .

Again, interpretation of the significance of the text is becoming increasingly more difficult.

No longer merely a suggestion, in John Masefield's "Sorrow of Mydath" a psychological intensity of emotion prevails throughout the entire song. Gone are the subtle innuendoes of the formative songs or the

simplistic but straightforward images of the divergent songs. Here finally is the confession of the tormented soul: "Weary the heart and the mind and the body of me." This leads to an impassioned outburst of total desperation:

Would that the waves and the long white hair of the spray
Would gather in splendid terror and blot me away. . .

By his last three songs, Griffes again sought texts with intense emotional imagery, yet the tendency now is toward mysticism, or the inaccessible otherworld. His final song, "The Rose of the Night," bears the following introductory note:

There is an old mystical legend that when a soul among the dead woos a soul among the living, so that both may be reborn as one, the sign is a dark rose, or a rose of flame, in the heart of the night.

Intensity builds towards the climax of the song as this mystical process is described:

As a wind eddying flame
Leaping higher and higher,
Thy soul, thy secret name,
Leaps through Death's blazing pry!

One critic, attempting to prove that "Griffes's musical expression was completely unoriginal," has found fault with Griffes's selection of texts. Of the poems already discussed, Mr. Robinson derides "the mincing gait and forced metaphor of things like Oscar Wilde's "Symphony in Yellow" and "the synthetic South Sea nostalgia of Rupert Brookes's 'Waikiki'."¹¹ Many others would dispute such remarks. However, to reiterate an earlier point, the importance lies not with the purported literary merit of the texts chosen, but with their ability to inspire the composer with their

¹¹Edward Robinson, "The Life and Death of an American Composer," American Mercury, 30:346 (November, 1933).

colorful imagery or emotional intensity.

Musical expression was, therefore, the ultimate determining factor in Griffes's selection of a poem. With the text chosen, it was then the composer's intention and task to parallel the poetic expression as closely as possible in his musical setting. Through careful choice of melody, harmony, form, and rhythm Griffes had an exceptional ability to capture the essence of his chosen texts. When a true balance was maintained between all the elements, and the validity of one was not sacrificed for emphasis upon another, Griffes attained an excellent fusion of text and music.

In this fusion, the emphasis is on the overall scheme. The task is to balance all the elements involved in order to depict the text in a unified manner. The unique psychological perspective of the poem is the vital core for the creation of each song. On the other hand, Griffes let few opportunities to express textual nuances escape him. He had the ability to carefully weave commentary on such nuances into the general scheme. Thus a continuity of expression was maintained by not interrupting the flow for illustration of every minute detail of the text. Those poetic phrases which he believed required closer attention to nuance were not ignored, yet he remained faithful to the individual spirit of each text. This may be attributed to his keen sense of the necessity of balance.

Universal as this trait is for Griffes, the character it assumes differs between the divisions. Within the formative songs, Griffes tended to concentrate very closely on every detail or slight variation in the text. At times this resulted in a lack of unity. In contrast, in the divergent songs he remained mostly on a general level of expression, with less attention to nuance. It is with the mainstream songs that, while

nuances are closely attended, the continuity is almost always maintained. The following discussion of the elements of Griffes's song style will elaborate more specifically on the composer's search for a vital and genuine expression of his texts.