Richard Strauss and John Henry Mackay

by Hubert Kennedy

When Richard Strauss married the singer Pauline de Ahna in Weimar on 10 September 1894, his wedding gift to her was, appropriately, a set of songs. Dedicated "to my beloved Pauline," they were his Op. 27, "four of his greatest *Lieder*" according to Strauss scholar Michael Kennedy (1976, 28). One was written only the day before the wedding, but two of them, "Heimliche Aufforderung" and "Morgen!"—set to lyrics of the poet John Henry Mackay—were completed on successive days the preceding May and must have already been familiar to the new Frau Strauss. They continue to be familiar to the musical public, especially the second of these, for, as Kennedy noted: "the last of the group is the wondrous *Morgen*, which custom can never stale, if the singer is an artist" (210)—a judgment confirmed in recent years by Jessye Norman in her all-Strauss recitals. But while information on the composer is readily available, concertgoers who have wished to know more about the lyricist have usually been frustrated, for neither the "old Grove" nor the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* has an entry on Mackay, and the entries on him in reference works of German literature are few and often misleading. A brief sketch of Mackay's life will be given here, including his contact with Strauss, along with an indication of how this can help us better appreciate these lyrics. (Two biographies of Mackay have been published: Riley 1972, Solneman 1979).

John Henry Mackay was born in Greenock, Scotland, on 6 February 1864, but was only nineteen months old when his Scottish father, a marine insurance broker, died. His mother then returned with her son to her native Germany, where she later remarried. After completing his schooling, Mackay was briefly an apprentice in a publishing house and then attended several universities, but only as an auditor. An allowance from his mother, who was of a well-off merchant family, gave him enough money to live modestly, so that he was able to choose the career of writer without worrying about eventual sales of his books. This situation changed in later years, especially after the First World War when the runaway inflation in Germany wiped out the value of the annuity he had purchased with money inherited from his mother. In his last years he was barely able to support himself from the sale of his books. He died in Berlin on 16 May 1933.

Mackay's first publication was in 1885 when, following a brief visit to Scotland, he wrote a narrative poem in imitation of Walter Scott's *The Lady of the Lake* (Mornin 1986). Instant fame came to him, however, with the publication in 1891 of *Die Anarchisten* (The Anarchists), which also appeared in English that same year (see now Mackay 1999) and by 1910 had been translated into six other languages. Having announced already in 1889 his intention to prepare a biography of Max Stirner (1806–1856), Mackay was known as the rediscoverer of that philosopher of egoism long before the biography actually appeared in 1898. In the meantime, he had published several volumes of lyric poetry. (The collected edition of his poetry in 1898 has over 600 pages.) And in 1901 his novel *Der Schwimmer* (The Swimmer) — which Mackay later tried, unsuccessfully, to have made into a film — was one of the first literary sports novels; it remains important for the history of competitive swimming and, especially, diving.

Thus Mackay's interests were varied, and it was probably not his lyric poetry that first attracted Strauss, but rather Mackay's anarchist philosophy and his connection with Stirner. Strauss wrote his father, the horn virtuoso Franz Strauss, on 7 April 1892: "In Berlin I made the charming acquaintance of a Scottish poet John Henry Mackay, a great anarchist and biographer of the Berlin philosopher Max Stirner" (Schuh 1976, 261). And Arthur Siedl has

related that only three hours before the premiere of Strauss's *Guntram* in Weimar on 10 May 1894 the two of them "passionately" discussed Mackay's book *Die Anarchisten* (Schuh 1976, 261). Less than two weeks after that discussion, Strauss set to music the two love lyrics of Mackay mentioned above.

These poems were first published in 1890 in *Das starke Jahr,* Mackay's third volume of lyric poetry, and both were singled out by critics. Ernst Kreowski (1891) wrote that "Morgen!" was "the most beautiful of the whole collection" and quoted it in his review; in a later study of Mackay's work, Paul Friedrich (1908-09) wrote that "the high point of his lyric poetry was reached by Mackay in 1890 with *Das starke Jahr,"* and he chose "Heimliche Aufforderung" for quotation. Strauss scholars, too, have written warmly of these lyrics. In discussing Strauss's Op. 27, Norman Del Mar wrote of "Heimliche Aufforderung" (Secret Invitation): "Anything further from Mackay's anarchistic mission than this fervent love song it would be hard to find and the whole conception of the lovers' secret tryst amidst a group of merry-makers is happy in the extreme" (1973, 3: 286). And he concluded: "The last song in the group is the ever popular *Morgen!* again to a love poem by Mackay, though this time in a mood of deep rapture" (3: 287).

The composition of these songs must have helped to bring Strauss and Mackay closer. Max Halbe reported that he met Strauss at a party at Mackay's house, where the songs were sung (Solneman 1979, 96); and it was through Mackay's mediation that Strauss and his wife gave a concert at the Neue Freie Volksbühne in Berlin (Solneman 1979, 102). That was before Strauss's call to Berlin as conductor of the Royal Court Opera in 1898. The high point of their contact came on 28 November 1899 when the Volksbühne gave a "Mackay evening" at which Frau Strauss sang the Mackay songs, accompanied by her husband at the piano. The evening was introduced by an appreciation of Mackay's work by Rudolf Steiner, the later anthroposophist, but then editor of a literary journal and a particularly close friend of Mackay. A. A. Rudolph wrote of the evening: "The poet himself kept back shyly, although the affair, with 2000 attending, was an enthusiastic manifestation for the poet, the musician, and the speaker" (Schellenberg 1982, 16).

Contact between the two men had probably ceased by the time Mackay's mother died in 1902; their careers certainly diverged thereafter. Although very nearly the same age—four months separated them—Strauss's fame as conductor and composer rapidly increased, while for Mackay the following time was as period when, as he later wrote, "people thought my artistic power had disappeared." For eight years beginning in 1905 and using a pseudonym, Mackay gave his time and energy—and much of his money—to a new cause, the struggle to free homosexuals (and boy-lovers in particular—Mackay himself was attracted to boys between the ages of fourteen and seventeen) from social prejudice and legal persecution. This aspect of Mackay's life is missing from all standard reference works, but some knowledge of it is necessary for an understanding of the lyrics of the Strauss song. This was suggested by Mackay himself in a passage of the autobiographical novel *Fenny Skaller,* which he wrote at that time under his pseudonym Sagitta (the Latin word for "arrow"). In one of the chapters, the title character, Fenny Skaller, has just finished a light supper with wine:

> While he still held the glass in his hand his glance fell on the back of a book and he read a beloved name—the name of a poet whom only they could *entirely* understand who knew who and what he was, and whom, therefore, the majority did not understand at all. (Mackay 1988, 68)

Whether or not Mackay intended the "beloved name" of this passage as his own, it clearly applied to him, and there is no doubt that the homosexuality of the author is implied.

Dedication to this cause helped lift Mackay from the depression that followed the death of his mother. His plan was to use his ability as a writer to rally others to the cause before "going public" with it, and he projected two publications a year to be sold by subscription only. (Their length varied; the novel *Fenny Skaller*, whose purpose was to "deepen psychologically" the concept he called "the nameless love," and a book of poems, in which he meant to "sing its praises," were the longest.) The project was conceived in 1905 and the first booklets published in 1906, but four of the Sagitta poems had already appeared in 1905 in the Berlin magazine *Der Eigene* (The Self-Owner), which began in 1896 as an anarchist journal in the direction of Max Stirner, but from 1898 was openly homosexual. That Mackay was very concerned to keep his identity secret is shown by the care he took in his contact with the journal's editor Adolf Brand: although Mackay was living in Berlin and personally acquainted with Brand, the poems and all correspondence concerning them came from Dresden in the handwriting of Mackay's friend, the Dresden actress Luise Firle (1865–1942) (Adolf Brand to Martin Fiedler, 21 August 1939. Bibliothek). Despite Mackay's caution his booklets were confiscated by the police in 1908 and, after a court battle that dragged on for nineteen months, were finally

declared immoral and ordered destroyed and forbidden, while their publisher, Bernard Zack, was given a stiff fine (which was, in fact, paid by Mackay). His care to keep his identity secret had been the right strategy, however, for, as he wrote to his American anarchist friend Benjamin R. Tucker in his rather faulty, but still understandable English: "If they had known who Sagitta was, they had to sentence me logically for prison" (Mackay 1991, no. 42).

Despite this setback, Mackay completed his *Books of the Nameless Love,* which were published in a one-volume edition in 1913, ostensibly in Paris, but sold underground by him in Berlin. Afterwards he wrote under his real name, but he returned once again as Sagitta in 1926 with the novel *Der Puppenjunge,* which is set in the milieu of boy prostitutes in Berlin in the 1920s (Mackay 1985). By then Mackay's identity as Sagitta was an open secret, though this was never acknowledged by him. He stated in his will, however, that whenever the Sagitta works were reprinted they should bear his true name.

It must be clear from this discussion that the love lyrics of Mackay were inspired by boys. Although some of them are written as if addressed to women, most leave the gender of the beloved unstated, and this is so of the two Strauss songs mentioned. Since it is brief, "Morgen!" may be quoted as an example:

Morgen!

Und morgen wird die Sonne wieder scheinen,
und auf dem Wege, den ich gehen werde,
wird uns, die Seligen, sie wieder einen,
immitten dieser sonnenatmenden Erde...

Und zu dem Strand, dem weiten, wogenblauen,
werden wir still und langsam niedersteigen.
Stumm werden wir uns in die Augen schauen,
und auf uns sinkt des Glückes stummes Schweigen.
(Mackay 1984, 56)

Tomorrow

Tomorrow again will shine the sun
And on my sunlit path of earth
Unite us again, as it has done,
And give our bliss another birth.

The spacious beach under wave-blue skies
We'll reach by descending soft and slow,
And mutely gaze in each other's eyes,
As over us rapture's great hush will flow.

Mackay later revised the last line of this poem, replacing "stummes" with "grosses" ("great"—as given in the above translation), presumably to avoid the close repetition of "stumm" in the line before.

For Mackay's early love epic *Helene* it can be shown that the title character was patterned after a boy he knew (Kennedy 1986). This strategy is not uncommon in literature, though it is perhaps significant that in the next Mackay poem that Strauss set, "Verführung" (Seduction, 1896, Op. 33, No. 1), the object of the seduction was clearly identified as female ("du Schöne!). Even so, as Norman Del Mar notes, "it was sternly received by the critics at the first performance and the wretched singer accused of immodest behaviour" (3: 301). The last of the Mackay songs of Strauss was "In der Campagna" (1899, Op. 41, No. 2), a hymn to nature and not a love song.

Besides Richard Strauss, several other composers also wrote settings for poems of Mackay. In 1902 Max Reger also set "Morgen!" (Op. 66, No. 10) and three years later Arnold Schönberg set Mackay's "Am Wegrand" (By the Wayside, Op. 6, No. 6). This last is particularly interesting since the object of the poet's longing is unexpectedly, for a poem with Mackay's real name, clearly male. It begins: "A thousand people are passing by/ The one I long for, he is not among them!"

At least four other poems of Mackay have been set to music: "Auf dem Meer" (Op. 54) by Hugo Kaun, "Aus unserer Zeit" (Op. 2) by Gustav Brecher, "Wild schäumen auf" by Leo Michielsen, and "Ich ging an deinem Haus vorüber" by Eugen d'Albert (also born in Scotland, two months after Mackay). This last song was mentioned in the report of Mackay's funeral that Walther Heinrich wrote (in English) to Mackay's longtime friend Benjamin R. Tucker:

> On the evening of Saturday the 20th May we had a little funeral at Wilmersdorf near Berlin. As he had wished, no word was spoken, we were only five persons. But the organ played pieces of Bach and Händel, a female singer sung his "Ich ging an deinem Haus vorüber..." with accompaniment of organ and violin after the composition of d'Albert. Some other compositions, an adagio of a violin sonata of Händel and a fugue of Bach made the finale. The ashes are deposited on a churchyard at Stahnsdorf, a stone with the name will there be laid on the place. (Mackay 1991, no. 196)

This description of the "little funeral" of Mackay points up the diverse destinies of Strauss and Mackay, for while the former survived the Nazi era, all of the "Sagitta" writings of Mackay, which had been left unmolested during the Weimar Republic, were put on the Nazi list of forbidden books and his anarchist writings likewise disappeared from

view. Mackay was a many-sided thinker, but only since about 1974, with the founding of a new Mackay Gesellschaft, has a concerted effort been made to recall this unjustly forgotten writer to the attention of a larger public. The beauty of his lyrics, however, has been constantly recalled through the songs of Strauss. Love is indeed a universal sentiment, as is shown by the fact that the lyric poetry of John Henry Mackay, inspired by boys, could in turn inspire the musical genius of Richard Strauss.

References

Bibliothek der Abteilung für Sexual Forschung der Universität Hamburg.

Del Mar, Norman. 1973. *Richard Strauss: A Critical Commentary of His Life and Works.* 3 vols. Philadelphia: Chilton Book Co.

Friedrich, Paul. 1908–09. John Henry Mackay. *Das literarische Echo* 11: 321–326.

Kennedy, Hubert. 1986. No good deed goes unpunished: John Henry Mackay's *Helene. Germanic Notes* 17: 6–8.

Kennedy, Michael. 1976. *Richard Strauss.* London: J. M. Dent & Sons.

Kreowski, Ernst. 1891. Review of *Das starke Jahr* by John Henry Mackay. *Die Gesellschaft* 7: 696–698.

Mackay, John Henry. 1984. *Ausgewählte Gedichte,* 1884–1926. Freiburg/Br.: Mackay-Gesellschaft.

——. 1985. *The Hustler.* Translated by Hubert Kennedy. Boston: Alyson Publications.

——. 1988. *Fenny Skaller and Other Prose Writings from the Books of the Nameless Love.* Amsterdam: Southernwood Press.

——. 1991. *Dear Tucker: The Letters from John Henry Mackay to Benjamin R.Tucker.* Edited by Hubert Kennedy. San Francisco: Peremptory Publications.

——. 1999. *The Anarchists: A Picture of Civilization at the Close of the Nineteenth Century.* Translated by George Schumm. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia.

Mornin, Edward. 1986. A Late German Imitation of Walter Scott. *Germanic Notes* 17: 49–51.

Riley, Thomas A. 1972. *Germany's Poet-Anarchist John Henry Mackay: A Contribution to the History of German Literature at the Turn of the Century, 1880–1920.* New York: Revisionist Press.

Schellenberg, Jakob. 1982. *Rudolf Steiner und Silvio Gesell.* Boll: Trithemius-Institut.

Schuh, Willi. 1976. *Richard Strauss: Jugend und frühe Meisterjahre, Lebenschronik 1864–1898.* Zurich: Atlantis Musikbuch.

Solneman, K. H. Z. [Kurt Helmut Zube]. 1979. *Der Bahnbrecher John Henry Mackay: Sein Leben und sein Werk.* Freiburg/Br.: Mackay-Gesellschaft.

Appendix I:

Poems by John Henry Mackay that have been set to music

Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951)

Op. 6, No. 6: Am Wegrand [At the road's edge]

Richard Strauss (1864–1949)

Op. 27, No. 3: Heimliche Aufforderung (1894) [Secret invitation]
Op. 27, No. 4: Morgen! (1894) [Tomorrow!]
Op. 33, No. 1: Verführung (1896) [Seduction]
Op. 41, No. 2: In der Campagna (1899) [In the Campagna]

Max Reger (1873–1916)

Op. 66, No. 10: Morgen! (1902) [Tomorrow!]

Leo Michielsen

Wild schäumen auf [Wildly foams up]

Eugen d'Albert (1864–1932)

Ich ging an deinem Haus vorüber [I walked by your house]

Hugo Kaun (1863–1932)

Auf dem Meer. Symphonische Dichtung für gemischstem Chor, Bariton-Solo und grosses Orchester, Op. 54 [At sea]

Gustav Brecher (1879–1940)

Aus unserer Zeit (Op. 2), eine symphonische Fantasie nach Versen von John Henry Mackay für grosses Orchester. [From our time]

Appendix II:

Translations

by Hubert Kennedy of

John Henry Mackay poems set to music by

Richard Strauss (1864–1949)

Heimliche Aufforderung

Auf, hebe die funkelnde Schale
Empor zum Mund,
Und trinke beim Freudenmahle
Dein Herz gesund!

Und wenn du sie hebst, so winke
Mir heimlich zu,
Dann lächle ich und dann trinke
Ich still wie du...

Und still gleich mir betrachte
Um uns das Heer
Der trunknen Schwätzer—verachte
Sie nicht zu sehr:

Nein, hebe die blinkende Schale,
Gefüllt mit Wein,
Und laß beim lärmenden Mahle
Sie glücklich sein.

—Doch hast du das Mahl genossen,
Den Durst gestillt,
Dann verlasse der lauten Genossen
festfreudiges Bild

Und wandle hinaus in den Garten
Zum Rosenstrauch—
Dort will ich dich dann erwarten
Nach altem Brauch...

Und will an die Brust dir sinken,
Eh du's erhofft,
Und deine Küsse trinken,
Wie ehmals oft,

Und flechten in deine Haare
Der Rose Pracht—
O komme, du wunderbare,
Ersehnte Nacht!

[From: John Henry Mackay, *Ausgewählte Gedichte* (1984), pp. 64–65]

Secret Invitation

Lift up, lift up the shining cup
Up to your lips,
With pleasure do we dine and sup,
And toast, no sips!

And when you drink give me a wink
So secretly—
Then I will smile and also drink
To you and me...

And like me calmly look again
About the crowd
Of drunken chatter, do not disdain
Them all out loud:

No, lift the gleaming cup once more
That's filled with wine,
And let them happily drink and roar
And noisily dine.

Yet when you have enjoyed your meal
And stilled your thirst,
Then leave your loud companions' peal
And as the first

Go out into the garden lot
The rose bush find
Where I am waiting at the spot
That customs bind.

And I will sink upon your breast
Before it's shown,
And then I'll drink your kisses best
As oft you've known,

Entwine the splendor in your hair
Of roses bright.
Oh come, you wonderful and fair
And longed-for night!

Morgen!

Und morgen wird die Sonne wieder scheinen,
und auf dem Wege, den ich gehen werde,
wird uns, die Seligen, sie wieder einen,
immitten dieser sonnenatmenden Erde...

Und zu dem Strand, dem weiten, wogenblauen,
werden wir still und langsam niedersteigen.
Stumm werden wir uns in die Augen schauen,
und auf uns sinkt des Glückes stummes Schweigen.

Tomorrow

Tomorrow again will shine the sun
And on my sunlit path of earth
Unite us again, as it has done,
And give our bliss another birth.

The spacious beach under wave-blue skies
We'll reach by descending soft and slow,
And mutely gaze in each other's eyes,
As over us rapture's great hush will flow.

[From: John Henry Mackay, *Ausgewählte Gedichte* (1984), p. 56]

Verführung

Der Tag, der schwüle,
Verblaßt, und nun
In dieser Kühle
Begehrt zu ruhn,
Was sich ergeben
Dein Fest der Lust:
Nun schmiegt mit Beben
Sich Brust an Brust...

Es hebt der Nachthauch
Die Schwingen weit:
"Wer liebt, der wacht auch
Zu dieser Zeit..."
Er küßt die Welle
Und sie ergibt
Sich ihm zur Stelle,
Weil sie ihn liebt...

O großes Feiern!
O schönste Nacht!
Nun wird entschleiern.
Sich alle Pracht,
Die tags verborgen
In Zweifeln lag,
In Angst und Sorgen—
Jetzt wird es Tag!

Still stößt vom Strande
Ein schwankes Boot—
Verläßt die Lande
Der Mörder Tod?
Er ward vergebens
Hierher bestellt:
Der Gott des Lebens
Beherrscht die Welt!...

Seduction

The sultry day is fading, and now
Desires to rest in this coolness,
What results from your festival of pleasure:
Now snuggles with trembling, breast on breast...

The breath of night raises its wide sway:
"Whoever loves also awakens at this time..."
It kisses the wave and it yields
On the spot, because it loves him...

O great festival! O most beautiful night!
All its splendor now unveiled,
Which during the day lay hidden in doubts,
In fear and care—now is the day!

Silently shoves from the shore a slender boat—
Is the murderer death leaving the land?
He was ordered here in vain:
The god of life rules the world!...

Welch stürmisch' Flüstern
Den Weg entlang?
Was fleht so lüstern?
Was seufst so bang?
Ein Nie-Gehörtes
Hört nun dein Ohr—
Wie Gift betört es:
Was geht hier vor?!

What stormy whispers along the way?
What implores so eagerly? What sighs so fearfully?
Now hears your ear something never-heard—
It deludes like poison: What is happening here?!

Der Sinn der Töne
Ist mir bekannt,
Drum gib, du Schöne,
Mir deine Hand:
Der ich zu rühren
Dein Herz verstand,
Ich will dich führen
Ins Wunderland...

The meaning of the sound is known to me,
Therefore, you beauty, give me your hand:
I who know how to touch your heart,
I will lead you into wonderland...

Mit süßem Schaudern
Reißt du dich los.
Was hilft dein Zaudern?
Dir fiel dein Los!
Die Stimmen schweigen.
Es liebt, wer wacht—
Du wirst mein eigen
Noch diese Nacht!

With sweet shudders you tear away.
What does your delay help? It is your fate!
The voices hush. Whoever is awake, loves—
You will be mine yet this night!

[From: John Henry Mackay, *Ausgewählte Gedichte* (1984), pp. 58–60]

In der Campagna

Ich grüße die Sonne, die dort versinkt,
Ich grüße des Meeres schweigende Fluten,
Das durstig, durstig die Gluten trinkt,
Die lautlos an seinem Herzen verbluten.

Ich grüße die Ebene—wie liegt sie still,
Des Abends geheimnisvoll-dämmernde Weite,
Durch die ich—der ich nach Hause will—
Nun schneller und immer schneller schreite!

Wie ist die Brust von Glück geschwellt!
Mich umgaukelt die lustige Schaar meiner Lieder,
Und ich grüße die Welt, diese herrliche Welt!
Ich grüße die—morgen seh ich sie wieder!

[From: John Henry Mackay, *Gesammelte Werke* (1911) 1: 75]

In the Campagna

I greet the sun that's sinking there,
I greet the silent waves of the sea,
That thirsty, thirsty drink the flames
That silently bleed on its heart.

I greet the plain—how still it lies,
The mysterious-twilight breadth of evening,
Through which I—who wish to go home—
Now ever more quickly stride!

How my breast swells with happiness!
The merry crowd of my songs dance around me,
And I greet the world, this splendid world!
I greet it—tomorrow I'll see it again!

[N.B. The Campagna is a low plain surrounding the city of Rome]

▼