
Gurre-Lieder



Title	Gurre-Lieder for Soli, Chorus and Orchestra
Time of origin	1900–1911
Premiere	23 February 1913 Wien, Großer Musikvereins-Saal
Duration	ca. 110 min.

Arnold Schönberg spent an unusually long time on the “Gurre-Lieder.” He began in 1901 and did not complete the work until 1911; his work process was, however, repeatedly interrupted by longer pauses. The most intensive compositional phase occurred between March 1900 and March 1901, when, according to his own account, he first “completed” the composition as such. Between 1901 and 1903 he worked on the instrumentation, after which he left the “Gurre-Lieder” untouched for a full seven years.

During those years he ranged far away from the late-Romantic style which had influenced his earlier work on the “Gurre-Lieder”; when he finished the orchestration in 1910/1911, he considered the piece a document of a style of composition and an intellectual attitude which already seemed alien to him – although that did not detract from the work’s importance: “The work is the key to my entire development. It shows sides of me which I do not reveal later on, or, from a different approach. It explains how everything had to happen as it did later on, and that is enormously important for my work – that one can follow the man and his development from that point on.”

The story of King Waldemar and his beloved Tove, who is eventually murdered by the jealous Queen, can be traced back in various versions to the Middle Ages and Denmark’s trove of national sagas. The material underwent many changes over the course of time, including the addition of specific place names and the idea of the restlessly wandering king. Eventually, the story was projected onto King Waldemar IV, who died at Gurre Castle in 1375. Jens Peter Jacobsen used this version as the basis for his poem “Gurresange,” written in 1868, which strongly attracted Schönberg. In his work, the poet dealt intensively with religious questions and eventually turned his back to Christianity and moved towards Darwinism, which comes to bear in the “Gurre-Lieder,” especially in the constellations nature vs. God and love vs. death.

A competition inviting the submission of a Lieder cycle for voice and piano announced by the Vienna Tonkünstlerverein provided Schönberg with the direct impetus to compose the piece. His teacher and friend Alexander Zemlinsky recalls: “Wanting to compete for the prize, Schönberg composed a few Lieder to texts by Jacobsen. I played them for him (as we know, Schönberg did not play the piano); the Lieder were very beautiful and truly novel – but we both had the impression that they would have little chance of winning a prize for that very reason.” Accordingly, Schönberg did not submit the composition, deciding instead to rework it for voices and orchestra, an ensemble which ultimately grew to a

colossal size: five soloists, three four-voice male choruses, an eight-voice mixed chorus and an enormous orchestra.

The first part of the "Gurre-Lieder" is comprised of a prelude, nine songs for Waldemar and Tove, a long orchestral interlude and the Lied der Waldtaube (song of the wood dove). Unlike Gustav Mahler, who in "Das Lied von der Erde" combines a sequence of six orchestral songs into a lied symphony, Schönberg did not seek corresponding equivalences. However, the independent individual songs are connected by thematic relationships to form a broadly spanned form. The inner cohesion is determined by the reappearance of a number of thematic elements that are closely interwoven in their respective context. Motifs that span a number of songs are always derived from new thoughts characteristic of the individual piece. In his "Gurre-Lieder-Führer," Alban Berg speaks of the "rebirth [...] of a theme from new motifs" and of an "artistic device that is typical of Schönberg."

Transitional passages provide further links between the self-contained songs. In his analysis of Tove's song "O, wenn des Mondes Strahlen ruhig gleiten" (Oh, when the moon's beams softly glide), Berg demonstrates "how one song merges into the other, how offshoots and motivic components form a transitional model that already contains important components of the new song."

These techniques manifest the principle of "thematic development," which occurs on two levels: that of each song and that of the entire work. The sequence of the songs 1–9 forms a thematic process revealing a quasi-symphonic conception determined by the categories of premonition and fulfillment. The melodic gestalt bringing this process to its conclusion ("So laß uns die goldene Schale leeren" – So let us empty the golden goblet) is the intensification of an unprepossessing idea from the first song, "Nun dämpft die Dämmerung jeden Ton" (Now the dusk mutes every tone).

In the songs of Tove and Waldemar, a distinction is always made between the main voice and the accompaniment, whereby the main voice is not always in the vocal part.

Nevertheless, the first part of the cycle is characterized by singing throughout; here, themes and motifs that will return in the third part are not so much "orchestral motifs" as they are "vocal motifs." They do not form a "texture spanning the entire work" (Richard Wagner) but rather remain attached to the verse from which they derive, while the orchestra transforms the harmonic structure into a tonally rich differentiated accompaniment. Thematic-motivic work appears above all in the interludes, where the orchestra "comments" on the songs. Thus, in the large-scale exposition in the first part, the orchestra makes up for what the vocal parts alone cannot achieve: a consistent symphonic linking of the themes.

The "idea of singing a song" as manifested in the sections of alternating songs between Tove and Waldemar is destroyed by the instrumental transition to the Lied der Waldtaube in bar 944. The tutti blow in measure 950 and the cor anglaise solo that follows reflect what the poem conceals: the attack on Tove and her death. Schönberg portrays the turning point in the poetic-musical categories of "remembrance" and "anticipation." The wood dove, the speaker and Waldemar himself recall the past (Waldemar and Tove's

togetherness) and the song of Klaus Narr dwells on Waldemar's arrest in the long-gone time of happy love.

The anticipations nurtured in Part I stand in opposition to those moments of remembrance; during his time of togetherness with Tove, Waldemar anticipates the reality that is to come in Part III. There, the memories are vocal melodies from the first part that have been transformed into orchestral motifs. This movement that is not song-like reflects upon the lost happiness of love by contradicting the song-singing that first gave voice to the music.

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