
Two Songs, op. 1



Title	Two Songs for Baritone and Piano, op. 1
Time of origin	1898
Premiere	1 December 1900, Wien, Bösendorfer-Saal
Duration	ca. 16 min.

1. Dank
2. Abschied

Arnold Schönberg met the author Karl Michael Freiherr von Levetzow (1871–1945), who wrote the texts used by Schönberg for his opus 1 in 1898 – presumably at Café Glattauer (formerly Griensteidl), where the “Jung-Wien” [Young Vienna] writers met on a regular basis. In the same year, Levetzow gave the composer a copy of his recently published book “Höhenlieder. Gedichte und Aphorismen” with the following dedication: “Kindly dedicated to Mr Arnold Schönberg with the best wishes for success | Vienna July 98 | Freiherr Karl v Levetzow”. Apparently Schönberg had already planned to set the texts to music by that time, and it is possible that Levetzow had made a good impression on Schönberg by reading excerpts from his new volume in the café. “Abschied” [Farewell], “Dank” [Thanks], and also “Auf den Knien” [On My Knees] – of which only a fragment exists –, are found in this order in Levetzow’s book; they appear one after the other in direct succession. In his essay “Das Verhältnis zum Text” [The Relationship to the Text], published in 1912, Schönberg acknowledged that in general his choice of texts could have resulted from his being “intoxicated by the initial sound of the first words.” It is therefore probable that he selected the texts while leafing through the book. On 1 December 1900 both settings were premiered by the baritone Eduard Gärtner accompanied by Alexander Zemlinsky on the piano in Bösendorfer Hall, not far from Café Glattauer. The review in the daily newspaper “Das Vaterland” suggests a hostile reaction by the audience; in a letter to Schönberg dated 22 July 1901, Levetzow speaks of a “failure”, and David Josef Bach, in his apologetic article entitled “Arnold Schönberg” in the “Arbeiter-Zeitung” of 17 February 1905, even writes: “There was yelling and laughing, and the audience jeered at the composer as if he were a fool.” According to the biography of Schönberg written by Egon Wellesz in 1921, the composer commented on the concert retrospectively: “And from then on [...] the scandal has never ceased.” It may be illuminating for the evaluation of the authenticity of this statement as well as for its interpretation that Schönberg proofread the biography and found nothing wrong with the quotation.

It was only in the year 1903 that a second version of the two compositions in different keys was published as opus 1 by Dreililien Verlag in Berlin, at a time when Schönberg had also already completed the four songs opus 2 – of which three are set to texts by Richard Dehmel – which would be produced soon after by the same publisher. The fact that

Schönberg reverted to his earlier settings by the lesser-known writer Levezow has often been interpreted programmatically with regard to the dedication "My friend and teacher | Alexander von Zemlinsky": the student has completed his training and is now publishing his first "work", putting the titles in a dramaturgically meaningful sequence – "Dank" [Thanks] is followed by "Abschied" [Farewell]. This perspective seems plausible, although there is some reason to believe that Schönberg owed a lot not only to Zemlinsky, who became his brother-in-law in the fall of 1901, but to Levezow as well. The latter worked at Ernst von Wolzogen's cabaret "Überbrettli" in Berlin and, as reported by Zemlinsky, may well have helped Schönberg, whose wife was expecting their first child at the time, gain his position as kapellmeister there in December 1901. The fact that Levezow was the godfather of Schönberg's daughter Gertrude, who was born early in 1902, testifies to a trusting relationship that both wanted to revive after a long period without contact in the early 1920s. Schönberg himself considered the two settings to be anything but great compositions, as is revealed in the letter of dedication dated 14 October 1903: "Dear Alex, [...] Even though it has not become the work that I had hoped it would become when I decided to dedicate my first printed score to you – perhaps it will become this later: | The reward for the teacher from a friend!" It is possible that "later" means the songs in opus 2 which he also dedicated to Zemlinsky with an identical inscription (both opus numbers were published in rapid succession, with consecutive plate numbers). If nothing else, the publication of the Levezow songs prior to the Dehmel songs brought the composer additional and urgently needed income.

Viewed retrospectively, the title of his opus 1, "Zwei Gesänge," sets the work apart musically from Schönberg's later compositions for accompanied solo voice. The entry in Alma Schindler's diary – Gustav Mahler's future wife was also Zemlinsky's pupil at the time and attended the premiere – is interesting in this respect, although it remains unclear whether this title was written on the program at the time or whether Alma Schindler herself was inspired to use the term "Gesänge" on the basis of what she had just heard: "2 lieder – they should be called 'Gesänge' [a more substantial composition], lavished with incredible pomp but without any concession to the ear that is accustomed to gentle melodies. Nightmarishly paralyzing in its disjointed[ness]. It is not a crescendo that reaches its climax tenderly. The experience was certainly not uninteresting – but beautiful ..." The dichotomy of versed song and formally unattached, declamatory singing which emerged at the beginning of the 19th century in connection with Franz Schubert's vocal compositions and intensified with Richard Wagner's treatment of the voice, on no account results from a clear catalog of criteria, but is rather to be understood as a – mostly subjective – differentiation between inclinations. It should therefore be pointed out that Schönberg's omission of "Gesang" as a title in his remaining compositional oeuvre can by no means be explained from a purely analytical perspective. In particular with regard to the atonal and dodecaphonic opp. 22 and 48, the extent to which the differentiation is at all viable would need to be examined, and whether the use of the term "Lied" as a general genre must therefore seem consequential. It is probable that the decision to compose Gesänge should be understood above all as an expression of a commitment to tradition by the young Schönberg – his models Brahms and Zemlinsky used the title "Gesang" several times –,

and both settings are already imbued with a late Romantic feeling that is already expressed in the original texts: while "Dank" delivers an oxymoronic expression of "beautiful pain" perceived as something "great," "Abschied" centers on "profound pain" rising "out of the wreckage of incredible beauty" – the lyric self becomes "night and beauty," the background against which its recipient continues on its way as a "bright star among the stars". Within an identical, large formal arc, Schönberg traces the dramaturgical essence of the texts in his settings: striking motifs open and close each "Gesang," while the harmonic center brightens from the minor tonic to the parallel major key (B minor/D major and D minor/F major) during continual tempo changes. In "Dank" the final verses are given the marking "Sehr breit" [Very slow] in a 4/2 bar and are played quadruple forte on the piano, thus rendering the emphasis of the "thanks" audible, which is now expressed for the third time and with three exclamation marks. "Abschied," on the other hand, is not based on an act of affirmation as an inner action, but instead on the metaphorical transformation of the lyric self, which seems to take place in the tremolando piano interlude played "Sehr breit, mit großem Ausdruck" [Very slowly, with great expression]. The "Zwei Gesänge" do justice to their title with a solemn voice part that is devoid of any fast, short notes, and with downward leaps of fifth or octave intervals at the end of verses or phrases – as frequently found in Wagner's works.

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