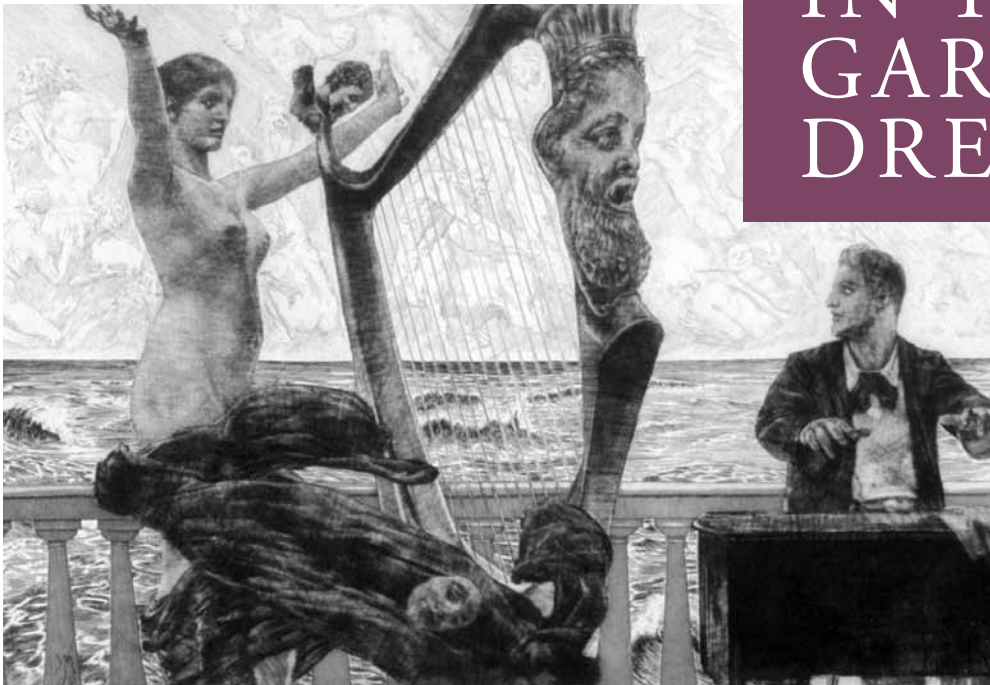


IN THE GARDEN OF DREAMS

by Sarah Rothenberg

On May 3 and 4, concurrently with HGO's final performances of *Tristan and Isolde*, *Da Camera* will present the world premiere of *In the Garden of Dreams* in the Wortham Center's Cullen Theater. Conceived and directed by Sarah Rothenberg, *Da Camera*'s artistic and general director, the production features Swedish mezzo-soprano Charlotte Hellekant and bass-baritone Michael Sumuel, and interweaves music, text, and images.



Brahms-Phantasie illustration by Max Klinger

“For a long time a form had been in my mind which I believed to be the only one in which a musician might express himself in the theater. I called it, in my own private language, making music with the media of the stage...”

—Arnold Schoenberg

Sigmund Freud completed his groundbreaking work *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1899, and its strategically timed publication in 1900 launched the new century. In this daring exploration of our unconscious desires and waking life, dreams are revealed as the window to self-knowledge and understanding.

Looking back on the explosive creativity of this *fin-de-siècle* moment, we now see remarkable similarities among the science, visual art, literature, theater, and music of the time. Almost simultaneously, as Dr. Sigmund Freud publishes *The Interpretation of Dreams*, August Strindberg writes *A Dream Play*; the poet Stefan George pens hauntingly dreamlike verse and Arthur Schnitzler's novellas are cast as interior monologues; Gustav Klimt paints his sensually luminescent *The Kiss* as Arnold Schoenberg composes in an intuitive, uncharted, expressive musical language. The world of the unconscious emerges onto the public stage.

But in Vienna circa 1900, the new music that is being invented has deep roots in the past. The seeds of experimentation can be traced to two towering figures in German music often viewed as opposites: Johannes Brahms and Richard Wagner.

Johannes Brahms, the leading composer of his day when he died in Vienna in 1897, composed orchestral works, lieder, piano and chamber music—but no opera. Regarded as the classicist of his time, working in the musical tradition and forms inherited from Beethoven, his aesthetic was far removed from the theatricality and revolutionary ways of Wagner, although, as we shall see, highly innovative in its compositional approach. But, contrary

to common assumptions, Brahms held Wagner in high esteem, and among his valued personal possessions were several pages of manuscript from *Tristan and Isolde*.

Wagner's music broke away from classical forms. It stretched the harmonic language of Western art music and tonality—based upon the building of harmonic tension and its release—to new limits. The intense chromaticism of Wagner's musical language allowed music to increase and prolong the harmonic tension that builds, moving further and further from the “home key” and then incrementally towards the resolution that he delayed to such dramatic effect. The most compelling example of this

HGO Studio alumnus
Michael Sumuel



Charlotte Hellekant





Sarah Rothenberg

can be heard in Isolde's mesmerizing and erotically charged *Liebesträume*, one of the most famous pieces of music ever to be composed—and one that would change the course of music history. No other composer would have as great an influence on the next generation. Just as the romantic generation of composers had toiled in the shadow of Beethoven, the generation that followed

Richard Wagner struggled to find a new path out from his overwhelming influence: where could music go from here?

The young Arnold Schoenberg had the inner passion and fierce independence of spirit to grapple with these questions and synthesize what he learned from the music of both Brahms and Wagner, counting them, with Bach, as his greatest influences. And the breakthrough work was *The Book of the Hanging Gardens*, his dramatic song cycle for mezzo-soprano and piano, composed in 1908, to the evocative, dream-like texts of Stefan George:

With the George Lieder I have for the first time succeeded in approaching an ideal of expression and form which has been in my mind for years. Until now, I lacked the strength and confidence to make it a reality. But now that I have set out along this path once and for all, I am conscious of having broken through every restriction of a bygone aesthetic. ... I am obeying an inner compulsion, which is stronger than any up-bringing; that I am obeying the formative process which, being the one natural to me, is stronger than my artistic education.

This fertile cultural landscape of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna provides the inspiration for Da Camera's new production, *In the Garden of Dreams*. The evolution from the music of Wagner and Brahms to Schoenberg's breakthrough experimentalism is paralleled in visual art with the progression from the evocative graphic works of Max Klinger to the paintings of Gustav Klimt and the Viennese avant-garde.

In 1894, Johannes Brahms unexpectedly received in the mail a package from the artist Max Klinger. Inside was a bound album entitled *Brahms-Phantasie* that contained engraved illustrations by Klinger for a song cycle by Brahms that the artist had essentially invented by assembling five previously unrelated lieder. The innovative side of Brahms, recognized and championed by Arnold Schoenberg, is evident here in Brahms's unreserved enthusiasm for Klinger's surprisingly surreal and daring visions. He wrote back to the younger artist:

Your splendid engravings carry me away unawares. Beholding them, it is as if the music resounds farther into the infinite and everything expresses what I wanted to say more clearly than would be possible in music...I must conclude that **all art is the same and speaks the same language.**

Creating a staged narrative out of Brahms's last piano works, the *Brahms-Phantasie* song cycle assembled by Klinger, and Schoenberg's passionate *The Book of the Hanging Gardens*, *In the Garden of Dreams* is the latest in a long series of Da Camera productions that explore new ways of presenting vocal works, solo piano, and chamber music in a staged setting; in a sense, creating a musical performance that is much more like an opera than a conventional concert.

The germ for such a project springs from the music itself, and a desire to bring alive for the audience the deep connections that the music shares with corresponding visual art, literature, and ideas. The goal is a more intense artistic experience. Wagner invented the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*—a “total art work” in which the arts of music, poetry, and visual art are intertwined, with each art form supporting the other. Perhaps more appropriate to the scale of our “chamber” *Gesamtkunstwerk* is the quote from Schoenberg at the beginning of this article, in which he encourages musicians to “make music with the media of the stage.”

To bring *In the Garden of Dreams* to the stage, I work closely with my creative collaborators, set and lighting designer Marcus Doshi, and projection and video designer Sven Ortel. Expanding upon the visual language that we developed together in our last multimedia production, *The Blue Rider in Performance*, light and projections animate a set designed as both sculpture and surface. An imagined Viennese music room where a solitary pianist plays Brahms's last works gradually transforms into the symbol-rich garden of Schoenberg's *The Book of the Hanging Gardens*. Drawing on Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Strindberg's *A Dream Play*, Max Klinger's *Brahms-Phantasie* and the sensual paintings of Gustav Klimt, *In the Garden of Dreams* moves from dawn (late nineteenth-century) to the dark of night (1910), from a protected Viennese interior to a decaying landscape where Schoenberg's haunting monodrama, *The Book of the Hanging Gardens*, reaches its shattering conclusion as reality, dream, memory, and hallucination merge in the mind of an obsessed lover. (🌀)

Brahms-Phantasie illustration by Max Klinger

