

Richard Strauss: Four Last Songs A discographical survey by Ralph Moore

I consider forty-six recordings of the *Vier Letzte Lieder* here, which is a goodly number, but by no means the total of all of those released in the nearly seventy years since their premiere in 1950. A survey cannot hope – or even want – to encompass every version but I have tried to include the most notable and have deliberately missed out a few which I know to be less than premium quality but have also reviewed one or two in the “caveat emptor” category as best avoided ([see also MWI review index](#)).

These songs feature frequently in lists of personal nominations for favourite recordings, such as in the BBC radio programme “Desert Island Discs”. They are not a cycle as such, but all deal with the readiness for death and emanate a sense of calm, resignation and even transfiguration; I quote unashamedly from Wikipedia: “Towards the end of *Im Abendrot*, after the soprano's intonation of ‘Ist dies etwa der Tod?’ (‘Is this perhaps death?’), Strauss musically quotes his own tone poem *Death and Transfiguration*, written 60 years earlier. As in that piece, the quoted seven-note phrase (known as the ‘transfiguration theme’) has been seen as the fulfilment of the soul through death.”

They are amenable to successful performance by a range of soprano voice-types, from the mezzotimed *soprano falcon* of Jessye Norman to the light, lyric sopranos of Lucia Popp or Anneliese Rothenberger, and although one or two sopranos have come a cropper in attempting them, there are many more admirable and even superlative recordings than failures.

Factors dictating choice among all the recordings will include any preference for a specific category of soprano, the clarity and diction and inflection of text, and whether one favours broad, reflective tempi and phrasing on the part of the conductor or a more charged and dynamic interpretation. Timings range from 18:18 (Janowitz/Böhm) to 25:20 (Jessye Norman/Masur), giving some indication of the differences in approach here; most recordings settle around the twenty-minute mark. While such criteria are obviously vital, for me the intrinsic beauty, purity and steadiness of the voice is paramount; scooping, wobbling and curdled tone are anathema.

The recordings

1950 Kirsten Flagstad, Wilhelm Furtwängler/Philharmonia Orchestra; (live; mono/ Ambient Stereo*) Testament, Pristine* [20:09]

One thing is for sure: as bad as the technical quality of this world première recording of the *Four Last Songs* is, it is never going to sound any better than Andrew Rose's re-mastering for Pristine. The swish, scratch and drop-outs remain but both the glory of Flagstad's voice and the soaring solo violin emerge remarkably clearly considering the primitive provenance of the original recording, on worn acetate discs. Matters begin so unpromisingly that the listener might despair – but stick with it, and things improve; either that or you get used to it.

They are in a different order from the more logical and satisfying one that we have become used to; that order was devised by Ernst Roth, editor for musical publisher Boosey & Hawkes and Strauss's friend, although there is no indication that Strauss ever intended the songs to be seen as a coherent cycle. Furthermore, Flagstad opts for a lower G rather than the top B flat on “Wie ein Wunder von mir” in *Frühling*, here placed third in sequence rather than opening the four songs. Both the order and that transposition sound odd to those of us habituated to subsequent practice.

Some passing flatness notwithstanding, the ample beauty of Flagstad's sound is still a wonder and she sounds utterly absorbed in the textual meaning and mood of these songs. She was only 54 here and not yet in the bad health which plagued her through the last ten years of her life and ultimately

prematurely curtailed it. Through the surface noise we may hear the famous golden glow and sheer size of her sound. It was, after all, her voice that Strauss had in mind when he wrote these songs and this explains why larger-voiced singers such as Jessye Norman and Birgit Nilsson have tackled them.

I often favour their lighter, more silvery-voiced exponents, yet I would not be without this artistically and historically important account. As you would expect, Furtwängler provides passionate, yet rhythmically steady support and the Philharmonia, insofar as we can hear them, provides the kind of playing you would expect from an orchestra hand-picked by Walter Legge for EMI only five years earlier. The conclusion to *Im Abendrot* is especially serene and it makes a nice link that Strauss quotes in the postlude the "transfiguration theme" from the work written sixty years earlier which begins the recital programme on this disc.

1951 Sena Jurinac, Fritz Busch/Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra; (live; mono) EMI [20:43]

This was a voice that acknowledged few boundaries and could do so because it was so evenly and perfectly produced over its extended tessitura. It is invariably beautiful, without the blandness too often attendant on the singing of an artist too concerned with beauty of sound alone; there is always a hint of smokiness in the tone and she has the happy knack of injecting feeling into the notes without disrupting the line.

The Stockholm performance here gives us a fair idea, despite the limited mono sound, of the gleam and soaring power of Jurinac's voice. She reminds me somewhat of Lisa Della Casa (another great soprano born the year after Jurinac) in the aristocratic poise and purity of her sound; how I would have liked to have heard them sing *Der Rosenkavalier* together. When Jurinac spins out the great phrase on "Und die Seele, unbewacht" her artistry is enough to forget at least momentarily the inadequacies of the recorded sound. As a non-fan of a certain celebrated contemporary of Jurinac who made two famous studio recordings of these songs, I was amused by noted musical biographer Tully Potter's description of Jurinac's account as "proper, honest-to-goodness singing rather than the ghostly crooning affected by a much-touted rival." That should put a good few backs up...but I know what he means. If it were in better sound it would doubtless more often top the list of favourite recordings of these songs.

1953 Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Otto Ackermann/Philharmonia Orchestra; (studio; mono) Naxos [19:08]

This, the first of Schwarzkopf's two studio recordings, in mono, finds her in fresh voice but one man's shimmer in her tone will be another's tremulousness. These are brisk, no-nonsense readings from Ackermann and the orchestral playing is lovely; Schwarzkopf is similarly artless compared with her second version with Szell but there will still be too much caressing and finessing of phrases for some; I would like rather more singing out and phrases like "Augen zu" at the end of *September* sound quavery and unsupported to me. She sounds rapt and transported in *Beim Schlafgehen* but the febrile, unsteady quality creeps back in during *Im Abendrot*. If you like her you like her...

1953 Lisa Della Casa, Karl Böhm/Wiener Philharmoniker; (studio; mono) Decca, Naxos [18:40]

Della Casa here sings the *Four Last Songs* in the order preferred by the composer, although the modern listener might need some convincing that this sequence is really artistically preferable. Leaving that aside, it is refreshing to hear them sung so straightforwardly; the angelic radiance of her tone, the broad, arcing phrasing on a long breath and the refusal to swoon create spirituality without a trace of sentimentality. First-time listeners might be taken aback by the complementary directness of Böhm's brisk accompaniment; there is little use of ritardando or the courting of stasis so common in more reverential readings - but it suits Della Casa's mode perfectly and her interpretation forms a

welcome counterpoint to the more indulgent, romanticised versions we have become used to. Some find her cool in these songs; I suggest that she is simply subtle.

1958 Inge Borkh, Ferdinand Leitner/Orchestre Symphonique de Vichy; (live; mono) Ponto [20:05]

Lousy sound unfortunately compromises our appreciation of this vibrant performance by a great Strauss dramatic soprano who died only in August this year, aged 101. Her voice has a strong centre and comes through reasonably well but the orchestra is recessed in an echoing mush. An ignorant audience applauds in between the songs. This can be of interest only to fans and specialists, despite the singer's manifold gifts.

1961 Teresa Stich-Randall, Ernest Ansermet/Orchestre de la Suisse Romande; (live; stereo) RSR Cascavelle [20:49]

This recording has many attractive features, but also a few minor drawbacks.

The sound is live, vintage stereo. As such, it is very good: clean and undistorted, even if the strings are more than a trifle thin; only the odd cough disturbs the rapt concentration of the occasion. It cannot compete on sheer aural terms with modern, or even not-so-modern studio recording classics by the likes of Fleming, the earlier Te Kanawa and of course, the Karajan/Janowitz, but the performance is of such quality as to disarm niggling objections. Nor is Ansermet's orchestra as sumptuous in tone and sheen as the more illustrious bands on those recordings but there is no doubt that the conductor has found the spirit of the music which soars without dragging and the strings are responsive to his direction, making much of the gorgeous introduction to *Im Abendrot* which is artfully shaded and shaped. A shame about the moments of dodgy intonation along the way, such as at the beginning of the coda to that last song and half way through *Frühling*, and the horn blip at the end of *Beim Schlafengehen*.

Regarding Stich-Randall's performance, there is no doubt that is the kind of voice to do justice to the music, representing a kind of compromise between the purely instrumental quality of Janowitz and the more Lieder-like word-painting of Schwarzkopf. It seems to me that she sings herself in, as at the start of the first song she swoops too much, is a touch edgy and coping with a little nervous flutter which disrupts the line, but by the end of *Frühling* she is steadier and more generous of tone. She has a spicy, well integrated lower register, the ability to float a note and an idiomatic command of the text - which is unfortunately not provided in the tri-lingual booklet. All in all, a lovely version, worthy to stand alongside contemporary favourites by Della Casa and Jurinac and very much of their voice type.

1965 Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, George Szell/Radio-Symphonieorchester Berlin; (studio; stereo) EMI [22:55]

This second of Schwarzkopf's recordings finds her in more opulent voice than for Ackermann and, surprisingly, Szell lets the music breathe rather more, but there is not so much difference in interpretation – except, of course, she has stereo sound here which amplifies that richness. Her voice seems steadier here, too, although I find that she still intermittently sounds too artful when she swells and swoons on held notes and there is some evidence of husbanding resources. For many, this recording was their first exposure to the music so they are understandably imprinted with it, but for me there are better. I confess to finding her primping and coddling of the text irritating but Szell's accompaniment is a dream.

1967 Martina Arroyo, Günter Wand/Kölner Rundfunk-Sinfonie-Orchester; (studio; stereo) Profil [18:57]

When I first heard this, I knew immediately that it would go into my top few favourites list. The sheer beauty, amplitude and power of Arroyo's voice are a joy; she makes these murderously challenging songs sound effortless - yet that's what needs to happen if we are to soar with Eichendorff's larks into the ether and leave earthly trappings behind. She has been accused of being an artist who neglects text but apart from the fact that her diction is impeccable, that refulgent voice does it all simply by being capable of riding the surf into the sunset. Wand's direction is perfectly judged; he doesn't linger beatifically but pushes the songs on like Böhm, using rubato judiciously. His lead violinist does a good job and you don't think about the execution, only the splendour of the sound you are hearing. When Arroyo launches into "So tief im Abendrot" and "Und die Seele unbewacht" you die and go to heaven with her.

The sound is up-front, round and fruity, nicely approximating a concert hall acoustic.

1968 Gundula Janowitz, Bernard Haitink/Concertgebouworkest; (live; stereo) Philips [18:18]

Quite a difference in timings here, from the classic recording Janowitz made with Karajan five years later; Böhm is typically much leaner and more propulsive, shaving four minutes off Karajan's lush reading. In general, it doesn't feel rushed, because Böhm has such a feeling for phrasing and Janowitz is in superb voice, after a slightly shaky start in the lower reaches of her voice. This is both vocally and orchestrally a cleaner, leaner performance than the famous Berlin version; even the excellent live sound – there is no audience noise - is brighter to match and neither recording is necessarily "better" to my ears. The violin solo in *Beim Schlafengehen* is wonderfully pure and poised. I do, however, find the last song, *Im Abendrot*, to be taken too fast – and indeed, this where the biggest discrepancy in timings between Böhm and Karajan occurs: 5:26 versus 7:08, so I miss the sense of weightless, timeless suspension Karajan achieves.

1970 Birgit Nilsson, Leif Segerstam/Sveriges Radios Symfoniorkester; (live; stereo) Bluebell [20:12]

Of course, I am a huge fan of Birgit Nilsson – but in the right Fach, and this is not it. Her huge voice often sounds too clumsy and unwieldy to do justice to this delicate music. When she opens up on the big, soaring phrases, she sounds mightily impressive but in between she swoops and slides between notes and the voice defaults into a plaintive tone when the vibrato is not much in action. A few coughs along the way denote this to be a live performance. Despite my reservations, there are still moments in this performance when I find the sound she makes thrilling, but it does not satisfy throughout.

1970 Eleanor Steber, James Levine/Cleveland Orchestra; (live; stereo) VAI 19:41]

There is a live performance on YouTube of Eleanor Steber singing the *Four Last Songs* at the Brooklyn Academy in 1973, by which time, sadly, her voice had deteriorated markedly, with a wobble you could drive a truck through and unpleasantly acid tone. This recording, made three years earlier, is by no means perfect but is far preferable to the New York one. I much prefer to remember her as she was in her glorious prime before she was tempted to perform too late, but this at least preserves some of what made her such a great artist. Her vibrato is beginning to loosen and sometimes her tone becomes edgy but the voice still gleams and has that passionate, vibrant quality special to this singer. The sound is mediocre and recessed but quite bearable and it's good to have a memento of Steber in repertoire that suited her, albeit relatively late in her career. Levine conducts sensitively and the orchestral playing is mostly as fine as you would expect – except I find the violin solo to be rather weak-tea and there are a few horn bloopers.

1973 Gundula Janowitz, Herbert von Karajan/Berliner Philharmoniker; (studio; stereo) DG [22:23]

This recording is frequently cited as a favourite for obvious reasons: the silvery, soaring ecstasy of Janowitz' lirico-spinto soprano, the mastery of Karajan's control of phrasing and dynamics and the virtuosity of the Berlin Philharmonic at their peak. Janowitz' voice has an instrumental quality which blends beautifully with the orchestra. The rapt quality essential to these songs making the necessary impact us present throughout; the requisite trance-like atmosphere is generated without risking torpor or languor. For me, as for many others this is as close to a flawless recording of these masterpieces as can be achieved.

1973 Leontyne Price, Erich Leinsdorf/New Philharmonia Orchestra; (studio; stereo) RCA [19:11]

Leontyne Price's *Four Last Songs* are gloriously voiced although not as nuanced or pure-toned as versions by the more "instrumental" sopranos of Janowitz, Della Cass or Isokoski; Price goes for The Big Sing and gives a highly dramatic reading, with too many swoops and some near-screaming for some more refined tastes. She makes a big, lush sound but also achieves isolated moments of great poise mixed in with some passages where the very vibrancy of her vibrato disturbs the long, clean line. However, she sounds increasingly steady and secure as the four songs unfold and Leinsdorf's brisk and flexible accompaniment supports her reading admirably, with superb playing from the New Philharmonia.

1974 Anneliese Rothenberger, André Previn/London Symphony Orchestra; (studio; stereo) EMI [20:59]

The slightly metallic tinkle of Rothenberger's higher notes - reminiscent of Lucia Popp? - and the hint of huskiness in the middle might not fit the ideal of "purity" of tone that some desire in these songs, but for me they impart character to her sound, even if ultimately I do prefer the kind of fluty vocal timbre Janowitz, or Della Casa, or the young Kiri bring to them. Otherwise, what immediately struck me was the size and weight of her soprano - perhaps boosted a little by the recording balance - and the "grande dame" manner she brings to her singing, matching the sumptuousness of the LSO in top form under Previn's broad, leisurely tempi. The music really sighs and breathes - and talking of breathing, Rothenberger's is absolutely ideal, sustaining long arcs of sound without any audible strain or even effort. Her lower register is strong and the voice really blooms on the big, soaring phrases like "Und die Seele unbewacht" and "So tief im Abendrot". Rothenberger is not exactly ethereal but she is poised and powerful, gliding along with the LSO's luxurious sound.

1976 Montserrat Caballé, Alain Lombard/Orchestre Philharmonique de Strasbourg; (studio; stereo) Erato [23:18]

Even the greatest singers can make a miscalculation and Caballé does so here, presumably under the influence, or with the encouragement, of Lombard, who is known for favouring daringly broad tempi. Sometimes it works, but not here. Caballé resorts to a box of vocal tricks: mewling, swooning, crooning and pulling the tempi about. Loud notes go sour and harsh; words are often indistinct, lost in the orchestral soup. The excessive timing indicates that this recording is more somnambulistic than rapt; the last song in particular is just nerveless. Avoid.

1976 Elisabeth Söderström, Antal Doráti/Royal Philharmonic Orchestra (live; stereo); BBC [21:12]

Söderström deploys a strong lower register and quite a stentorian attack on these songs; not for her the "floaty-floaty" approach – she goes for it and the result is thrilling, if initially rather disconcerting. Dorati's polite accompaniment is rather side-lined by her prominence but perhaps the recording balance is somewhat to blame, too. The voice per se is glorious and I could not do better than quote my colleague John Quinn's original review back in 2004, as I completely agree:

“Söderström soars ecstatically, rapturously in ‘Frühling’ while the vocal melismas in ‘September’ are gloriously and effortlessly done. At the end of this song the wonderful horn-led epilogue is raptly played, typifying the distinguished support from Dorati and his orchestra. My personal favourite of the songs, ‘Beim Schlafengehen’ receives a deeply satisfying reading. A lovely, tender violin solo prefaces the unforgettable phrase “Und die Seele, unbewacht”, which is ardently and gloriously delivered as, indeed, is the whole of the final stanza. Finally, there’s a tremendously atmospheric and distinguished performance of ‘Im Abendrot’ to close a truly memorable reading of these marvellous songs. No wonder the audience cheered.”

[Full Review](#)

My only caveat is that the sound is not of the best but tolerable for a live recording from the pre-makeover Royal Festival Hall in the 70’s.

1976 Teresa Żylis-Gara, Franz-Paul Decker/Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Hannover; (live; stereo) Rodolphe [22:58]

Teresa Żylis-Gara is my personal candidate for the greatest overlooked soprano of the late 20C; I retain fond memories of hearing her sing an open-air recital one balmy night in a courtyard in Orange in the late 70s. Now retired in Monaco, she was a singer of rare gifts; everything she sang and recorded was of the highest quality. Conductor Franz-Paul Decker’s tempi are broad and her voice expands into the long phrases with powerful, creamy tone often reminiscent of Kiri Te Kanawa with richer lower notes. Her use of dynamics is especially telling and her German diction is crystalline. Unfortunately, I can only theoretically recommend this superb recording of the *Four Last Songs* as the original 1985 Japanese-pressed, French-issue CD is out-of-print and rare. It is of excellent quality, with minimal audience noise and applause only at the ends of track 4 and track 10, and you may still hear it on YouTube. It is lovely: technically, sonically and aesthetically deeply satisfying.

1979 Kiri Te Kanawa, Andrew Davis/London Symphony Orchestra; (studio; stereo) Sony [20:54]

This finds Kiri Te Kanawa in her young prime, very ably accompanied by Andrew Davis. The absolute purity of her tone and clarity of her diction effortlessly create the specific mood and sound-world for each of the songs, first conjuring up a vision of golden maple trees against cerulean skies, then gradually drifting into the more nebulous and shadowy world of sunset as a metaphor for aging. There is nothing to fault in the singing; I laughed wryly at a review accusing this of sounding like a “student exercise”; would that we had more such vocal students whose art conceals art. The voice for this music needs either to be clear, clean and pure or grand, sumptuous and noble, as per Jessye Norman and Renee Fleming; both work in that they suggest transcendence, release and the sense of a disembodied soul freed from its mortal cage and rejoining the Maker in paradise. There needs to be a kind of joy expressed in the act of singing itself and for that the singer has to be free of all technical limitations and sound utterly relaxed and released; Te Kanawa does that because she knows her voice will do whatever she needs it to.

Davis is not as brisk as Böhm or as indulgent as Masur and Karajan; I find his tempi to be perfectly judged to suit his singer in that simplicity of utterance is the key. The LSO of course plays wonderfully and the sound is excellent.

1981 Sylvia Sass, Ervin Lukács/Hungarian State Orchestra; (studio; stereo) Hungaroton [20:37]

Following my undertaking of a Sass retrospective, I realised that it is the element of risk-taking in her singing, her total commitment to whatever she is singing and her extraordinary versatility which constitute the elements of her art and which I find to be absent in too many modern singers. I readily admit that her technique is not perfect and that her voice can sometimes come across as an

unwieldy instrument but I am always absorbed by her artistry; she simply has so much voice coupled with a deep aesthetic sensibility.

These are the very qualities, of course, which occasioned frequent comparisons with her idol, Maria Callas and there are undoubtedly good reasons for comparing the two, vocal, temperamental and technical. They did meet and Sass was overawed by the aging diva but she certainly modelled her interpretations on Callas to great effect. I am always surprised by how many different tones, colours and dynamic gradations Sass had at her command: she had an ethereal pianissimo - used frequently to superb effect in these songs - and a really big sound when she let rip, which always skirted disaster but rarely let her down during her short career. She has the control to thrill the listener in soaring to climaxes such as that on the words "Und die Seele unbewacht" or "So tief im Abendrot" in "Beim Schlafengehen". If you like to hear these songs sung on a grand scale, this is for you.

1981 Heather Harper, Norman Del Mar/Royal Philharmonic Orchestra; (live; stereo) Carlton Classics (IMP), BBC [19:49]

Heather Harper was one of the best post-war British sopranos but both her recordings of these songs were made just a little late in her career when some of the ease and sheen had worn off her lovely voice. This one was a live Proms performance and she takes a while to warm up; in the first song, there are some laboured moments, top notes can be edgy and sometimes the vibrato loosens. However, she improves in the second song, mustering considerable power, evincing an intact lower register and for long stretches thereafter sustaining golden tone. Del Mar's accompaniment is strong and direct, matching the singer's forthright manner. She might not have the poise and delicacy of the best but I find much to enjoy here. There is a little coughing and a bit of odd extraneous noise – something rattling– towards the end of the last song, but nothing too distracting.

1982 Lucia Popp, Klaus Tennstedt/London Philharmonic Orchestra; (studio; digital) EMI [23:49]

I owned this recording many years ago on vinyl and did not prize it then as much as I should have and now do; I was under the spell of versions by Janowitz and Norman but now better appreciate Lucia Popp's gleaming, glittering soprano. It is true that her words are not always distinct, she occasionally indulges in the little "squeezing" mannerism that marred her attack on certain notes and her voice is at times just a shade light and fluttery for the biggest moments but the music lies well within her capabilities despite her being a lighter, lyric soprano - and the most important things in the singing of Strauss, a sustained legato and sense of line, are wholly intact.

Furthermore, we have the inestimable advantage of Klaus Tennstedt directing his own orchestra, the London Philharmonic, who play most sensitively, sharing Popp's feeling for the ebb and flow of this glorious music without indulging in any overt pulling about of its shape, despite the comparative leisureliness of his tempi.

1982 Jessye Norman, Kurt Masur/Gewandhausorchester Leipzig; (studio; stereo) Philips [25:20]

I thought it might be an experiment to re-visit this recording, the longest and grandest in the catalogue, immediately after having listened to the shortest – Janowitz with Böhm, at 18:18 - but I found myself equally captivated by both. Jessye Norman rolls out the Rolls Royce voice, voice and more voice and manages to make Masur's etiolated tempi sound wholly natural, without occluding her famously precise German diction or letting proceedings become soupy or indulgent. This is a justly famous account, surely the best thing either the singer or conductor has ever done; Norman's breath control and steadiness of tonal emission are things of wonder. The difference in *Im Abendrot* between Böhm (5:26) and Masur here (9:56) is to laugh; the only barrier to appreciating this recording is if you cannot abide such a leisurely approach and need more momentum but for me its

extreme slowness leaves us suspended between heaven and earth in transfigured ecstasy, as the skylarks serenade us.

1985 Anna Tomowa-Sintow, Herbert von Karajan/Berliner Philharmoniker; (studio; digital) DG [19:59]

In this, his second studio recording of the Four Last Songs here, Karajan was no doubt aware that his soloist, Anna Tomowa-Sintow could not emulate Gundula Janowitz for expansiveness of breath so the first three songs are almost brisk. As it is, she spoils her otherwise affecting rendition of *September* by taking a breath before "Augen" at the close of the song. For the last song, *Im Abendrot*, Karajan risks a more leisurely pace at a timing of 7:06 and Tomowa-Sintow copes admirably. He doesn't drag it out in the manner of Eschenbach (8:45) for Fleming in the first of her two recordings, or Masur for Jessye Norman (an extraordinary 9:56), where despite the glory of their singing, there is a suggestion of ponderousness. The slight tremulousness and lack of real deep-pile velvet in her tone mean for me that, good though Tomowa-Sintow is, Janowitz reigns supreme.

1985 Éva Marton, Andrew Davis/Toronto Symphony Orchestra; (studio; digital) CBS [18:34]

Andrew Davis sets off at a pace which suggests that he would like to get the whole business over with before closing time at the local hostelry – or perhaps he thought that hurrying proceedings along would help disguise the obtrusive beat in Éva Marton's hefty soprano. Davis has not – at least at this stage of his career – mastered Böhm's trick of combining fast speed with elegant phrasing, so the whole thing sounds lumpy, rushed and perfunctory. He did a much better job with Te Kanawa six years earlier.

Marton's vibrato was not always a problem, depending on what she was singing, but it certainly is in this music where a soaring line and a smooth legato are vital to its effect; at times she sounds as if she is gargling. The amplitude of the voice as sound per se is impressive but the repose isn't there; most of the time she just sounds as mad as hell. Another critic put it more diplomatically when the disc was first issued, remarking on how her performance is characterised by a "generalised vehemence". Nope.

1986 Felicity Lott, Neeme Järvi/Royal Scottish National Orchestra; (studio; digital) Chandos [20:22]

I usually hear a kind of "scratchiness" or impurity in Flott's tone but it is minimal here and it seems that others don't ever hear that. It is still not the richest, most velvety or creamy sound and there is still a "catch" on loudest, highest notes, but she has the breath to sustain the long, arching phrases and her diction is excellent. I am damning this with faint praise insofar as it is good but without the special, magical, mesmeric quality I find in the best recordings and I want more "body" in the voice. The conducting and playing are unimpeachable but it's not the version I reach for when I want to hear these songs.

1987 Heather Harper, Richard Hickox/London Symphony Orchestra; EMI (studio; digital) [20:05]

Heather Harper's second recording demonstrates that her technique is intact and that her voice is devoid of wobble even at this comparatively late stage of her career, when she was 57. The opportunity of recording in the studio permits her to import more refinement into her interpretation than she did in her larger-scale live performance at the Proms six years earlier, but unfortunately it is also evident that her voice has lost a good deal of its former lustre; top notes are thin, and at times she sounds tentative and in truth tonally even a little enfeebled. Hickox' accompaniment is very sensitive, dreamy and poetic, and the solo violin in *Beim Schlafengehen* is beautiful. Neither this nor the earlier recording presents this beloved artist in her prime but the first version is preferable.

1988 Arleen Auger, André Previn/Wiener Philharmoniker; Telarc (studio; digital) [22:07]

Arleen Augér had a lovely voice but was not always the most individual of singers, and for me this recording suffers from an element of blandness. She sounds a little tentative, as if holding back when I want her to expand in the long phrases and her diction is cloudy: vowels tend to be reduced the same generalised sound and consonants disappear, so it's all a bit wishy-washy. Perhaps her gentle lyric soprano was never the ideal vehicle for this music? The VPO is ideal and Previn's accompaniment broad and unexceptionable, similar to the job he did with Rothenberger in 1974. I need a bigger voice and rather more expansiveness than we get here, though.

1990 Kiri Te Kanawa, Georg Solti/Wiener Philharmoniker; Decca (studio; digital) [19:01]

I don't know why I have always assumed that this, Kiri Te Kanawa's second recording of the *Four Last Songs*, would be inferior to her first, made eleven years earlier with Andrew Davis, as, apart from the voice being a little fuller, heavier and heftier, it is still in 1990 a perfect Strauss instrument, soaring effortlessly on phrases like "und die Seele unbewacht" and "so tief im Abendrot". It and the solo violin are rather too spot-lit by the microphones so that the glorious VPO is somewhat recessed but otherwise the sound is excellent. Solti indulges in no unseemly lingering although Davis is more urgent in the 1979 recording and Te Kanawa is fresher voiced there, so I still prefer that miraculous, earlier recording.

1993 Cheryl Studer, Giuseppe Sinopoli/Staatskapelle Dresden; DG (studio; digital) [20:52]

This is by no means the best of either Studer's or Sinopoli's output; there is a lack of ease in her vocal production, which often results in her sounding marginally flat, a tendency to squeeze and force high notes and the start of a beat, or pulse, in the tone - but also, in compensation, an attractive vibrancy to offset the sense of her labouring somewhat. The conducting is odd too. The performance as a whole seems rather "flat" – although the temperature certainly rises in *Beim Schlafengehen*. Then, at the beginning of *Im Abendrot*, you hear a kind of crooning weariness in Studer's voice which is not emotional colouration but a lack of support and Sinopoli does not seem to do precisely what he can do - in his recording of *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, for example – and crank up the tension. This was recorded around the start of Studer's vocal problems and it shows; it is by no means bad but there are better to be had.

1993 Charlotte Margiono, Edo de Waart/Radio Filharmonisch Orkest Holland (studio, digital) Brilliant [22:45]

Dutch soprano Charlotte Margiono has a suitably large voice and opulent tone but also something of a pronounced vibrato which most of the time was not too obtrusive but, in this recording at least, occasionally becomes almost a beat. Her diction, projection, breath control and phrasing are fine but the pulse sometimes bothers me and I do not hear the variety of colour or dynamics I prize in favourite versions, although the last song is more beguilingly shaded. I really like Edo de Waart soulful conducting, but in the end, this is not a front-runner.

1994 Barbara Hendricks, Wolfgang Sawallisch/Philadelphia Orchestra; (studio; digital) EMI [19:09]

Barbara Hendricks has a most distinctive, instantly recognisable voice: a slivery yet slightly husky timbre in its upper regions and a slightly incongruous lower register which seems a tad disconnected from that top, being almost "shouty" with an element of "lowing" about it - if I may be allowed to use a word with disagreeably inappropriate bovine associations. I nonetheless like it very much; there is an ease of emission, a majesty and span of breath control and a pearly legato which seems to rival the qualities of much beefier voices who also succeed in this repertoire. In this regard, then, she is much more in the mode of singers such as Lucia Popp and Soile Isokoski, equally celebrated

exponents of the *Four Last Songs*. Certainly, as recorded here, there is no question of her lacking the heft or gravitas to bring off this music. She is unobtrusively supported by the pliant and very experienced Straussian Wolfgang Sawallisch.

Nothing is overdone or excessive here but the sense of ease is most winning: Hendricks floats along, borne on the current of Strauss's endless, seamless melodies without evincing any sense of stress or undue effort, encompassing just the languid ecstasy and poised intensity this music demands. Despite my having so many versions of the *Four Last Songs*, this goes on to the select list of my favourites alongside those in the same voice category such as Janowitz (with either Karajan or Haitink), Te Kanawa (with Andrew Davis), Della Casa, Jurinac and Popp. There is still room for the heavier sopranos like Norman, Fleming, Arroyo and Leontyne Price but for most listeners a Nordic purity is preferable. The Philadelphia Orchestra plays admirably although the violin solo in *Beim Schlafengehen* isn't as rapt as in the best accounts.

1995 Renée Fleming, Christoph Eschenbach/Houston Symphony Orchestra; (studio; digital) RCA [24:11]

This is the earlier of Renée Fleming's two recordings of the *Four Last Songs* and has received, amongst the plaudits, some scathing criticism of Eschenbach's conducting, the playing of the Houston SO and of Fleming's singing itself.

Well; sorry - I don't hear it. Taking those objections in reverse order, Fleming's voice is obviously in finest youthful estate and her German is equally obviously, as a result of her Fulbright Scholarship experience in Germany and her fluency in that language, as good as one could wish. Clearly she eschews the kind of word-pointing that irritates me in Schwarzkopf's fussy manner because she concentrates on the "voice, voice and more voice" approach - which to me is the first requirement and precisely where decent but essentially ordinary, or even flawed, vocalists like - oh, let's see now; who? - Arleen Auger, Christine Brewer, Janet Eaglen, Nina Stemme, Karita Mattila or Anna Harteros, say - simply do not shine. I am not saying that any of those aforementioned ladies is a bad singer but I have heard them all in this music and don't really prize any of them. For me, there has to be a special quality of effulgence and transcendence in the basic sound; Fleming has it.

Regarding the supposed inadequacies of the orchestra, it sounds superb to me and I would need specific chapter and verse examples to convince me otherwise. Now, I can understand objections to Eschenbach's conducting insofar as his tempi are slow and his emphasis upon the lush, even syrupy possibilities of the music; even I agree that he is close to over-egging the last song, But Fleming, like Norman with Masur, can sustain those long, arching lines and to my ears they conjure up sheer beauty. "So tief im Abendrot" brings out the molten gold element of her soprano and she transports the listener into the Beyond effortlessly.

I can understand some requiring a little more sinewy grip to strengthen the underlying pulse of the music, but Fleming channels Strauss' spirit by bringing out the soaring beauty of the female voice - and I don't mean at the expense of the sentiments they express; that beauty transmutes the emotion into "something rich and strange".

1996 Hellen Kwon, Adrian Leaper/Orquesta Filarmónica de Gran Canaria; (studio; digital) Arte Nova [19:26]

Hellen Kwon has a big, rather blowsy soprano for a singer who specialises in lyric roles; her line is a bit gusty and at times either the vibrato starts to loosen or she seems to lose tension in her vocal cords and "moon" and labour somewhat, very slightly under the note. The kind of poised steadiness apparent in the very finest accounts is lacking. This is a pity, as Leaper's accompaniment is absolutely

ideal. This is not a poor performance by any means but it cannot stand comparison with the best, especially given just how many great versions of these songs are now available in the catalogue.

1998 Karita Mattila, Claudio Abbado/Berliner Philharmoniker; (studio; digital) DG [22:32]

I have read with some surprise critiques in which reviewers dub this tasteful offering the best they had heard of these deathless songs. Yes; they are tolerably well sung; yes, the BPO plays beautifully - but no-one seems to be the slightest bit enraptured by or even especially interested in what they are performing. As another reviewer has remarked, the orchestra hardly gets out of first gear and there is nothing distinctive about Mattila's delivery of the text; she could be singing about almost anything while Abbado simply asks his band to play through the notes without bothering to point up anything. It's like being smothered in velvet.

The middle of Mattila's voice and her lower register are sometimes ugly or cloudy and there is a lack of ease in her reaching for top notes, especially in the six songs which precede the main event.

Almost any of the recordings reviewed in this survey offers more engagement than we find here. Never before have these songs bored me and it was only after writing thus far that I noticed other reviews expressing similar exasperation at the one-size-fits-all phrasing and dynamics (what dynamics?). Apparently, the health of both the singer and the conductor was not of the best when this recording was made; while I am sorry about that, the release itself should not then have been issued.

1998 Deborah Voigt, Kurt Masur/New York Philharmonic Orchestra; (live; digital) Teldec [20:20]

This is one of the most forthright and vibrantly sung renditions of this song cycle; not for Miss Voigt is the languorous, dreamy approach – she meets the songs head-on, singing out with glorious, open top notes ringing free. Masur's accompaniment is rather desultory but the vibrancy of Voigt's attack carries the day. Voigt's soprano has an individual, immediately recognisable quality which I like in a singer, especially when confronted with too many careful, anonymous renditions of these glorious songs. I love this recording and am baffled by some quite vituperative reviews I have encountered. It is live and just occasionally there is some audience coughing but it's not too intrusive. Masur does not linger but there is no sense of undue haste and the orchestral playing is splendid.

2001 Soile Isokoski, Marek Janowski/Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin; (studio; digital) Ondine [20:51]

There is little doubt that Isokoski has, alongside the very different versions by Renee Fleming and Dorothea Röschmann, provided the best account this century so far, although she must be stand comparison with the scores of recordings in the years following their first performance in 1950. Her voice comes from the same stable as the likes of Lucia Popp and Barbara Hendricks, in that it is silvery, shimmering and light in timbre but not without sufficient penetration to both cut through and soar over a big, sumptuous orchestral sound. To match that voice type, Janowski's speeds are on the brisk side but not superficial or perfunctory; these are more in the Böhm school of interpretation: taut and disinclined to linger but carrying a kind of nervous brilliance of its own. I could look for more of a sense of nostalgic, aching beauty in the concluding *Im Abendrot* and the strings of the Berlin Rundfunk could be more voluptuous - but again, it is refreshing to hear Strauss played with more immediacy and delicacy of touch than the three-pile velvety approach of Big Beast interpreters like Karajan and Masur with Jessye Norman, whose V-8 voice is to Isokoski's as the mighty ocean swell is to a sparkling Nordic stream.

The trembling immediacy of Isokoski's delivery is infectious; she sounds youthful and ecstatic with the kind of emotional simplicity and directness associated with Lisa Della Casa or Sena Jurinac.

Sometimes I want to hear these songs done by the likes of Fleming, Norman and on other occasions I prefer a lighter, less self-conscious touch of the kind delivered by Te Kanawa with Andrew Davis in her first and better recording.

Ondine's sound is a tad bright and brittle but this again suits the lighter style employed in this music. Isokoski's diction is occasionally sacrificed to maintaining smooth beauty of tone but that doesn't bother me; this is still a winner by any reckoning and could be your favourite if her style temperamentally matches yours.

**2002 Melanie Diener, David Zinman/Tonhalle Orchester Zürich (studio; digital)
Arte Nova [22:46]**

I find this performance to be rather laboured – surprisingly from a conductor who favours fast, period-skewed tempi – and Diener's voice, although big, is also rather blowsy, without the steady, shimmering quality I prize in these songs. There are times, too when she is shrill and sounds as if she is only just making it to the end of phrases, as Zinman's temp are broad. Her phrasing is oddly monochrome, without much emotional variation or personality. There is simply nothing here to make me favour this over better and favourite recordings.

2004 Anne Schwanewilms, Mark Elder/The Hallé (digital) BBC [23:31]

The live performance enjoys an exceptionally clear, clean recorded sound, conveying both the immediacy of the voice but also the acoustic of the concert hall – including a few, faint coughs. Schwanewilms has a powerful, slightly piercing voice and is prepared to hold back on the vibrato for expressive effect and to use a wide dynamic palette rather than just belt her way through it at mezzo forte, like so many. The voice blooms beautifully in the high-lying passages and its centre is solid. You can hear the intelligence behind the artistic choices Schwanewilms in shading and shaping her phrasing – they work without being mannered or affected. Elder proves to be a most sympathetic and sensitive accompanist; this performance is full of gentle subtleties, including subtly applied rubato and the highlighting of different instruments. His tempi are on the slow side but never drag. The violin solo in *Beim Schlafengehen* is dreamy and seductive This is what Anna Netrebko was trying and failing to sound like in her recording. This was the surprise hit of my survey.

**2006 Nina Stemme, Antonio Pappano/Orchestra of the Royal Opera House, London
(studio; digital) EMI [20:38]**

As with several recordings under consideration here, I find that this one is immediately disqualified by the excessive vibrato in Stemme's voice. She has the right amplitude and tonal heft but I cannot get on with the beat which was already becoming apparent in her 2004 recording of *Isolde* for Pappano and has only become more apparent since. Everything else is fine, but...

2008 Renée Fleming, Christian Thielemann/Münchner Philharmoniker; (live; digital) Decca [19:58]

This recording divides opinion. I know what is meant when some criticise the overt expressiveness of Fleming's interpretation but I do not agree that it is obtrusive or excessive. The voice is in wonderful condition and she is able to sustain the line with apparently effortless ease - except when she clearly chooses to disrupt it deliberately for emotive effect. The lower register is rich and characterful - you can hear its development just from the resonance of her speaking voice in the publicity interviews - and the top soars as creamily and amply as ever; I hear no strain anywhere. Her German is of course impeccable and her breath control a thing of wonder; her singing in *Im Abendrot*, is magical. She is perhaps delivering here on record more of what you might hear in a live performance (indeed, I believe these are live takes - although you'd never know), when your communicative gestures can be more emphatic than in a recording - but slightly idiosyncratic instances of vocal colouring and verbal

inflection can, on repeated listenings, become a little quirky and irritating. Nonetheless, this is an immediate, heartfelt interpretation of these inexhaustibly moving songs and very much a performance for the modern listener who needs and expects more individuality to distinguish one version from another. Furthermore, the recorded sound is technically marvellous; I have never heard so much detail in the orchestration.

2009 Anja Harteros, Mariss Jansons/Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks; (studio; digital) BR-Klassik [21:19]

I have already listened to this recording several times without quite being sure how much I like it, mainly because although I very much admire the conducting and playing, it is for me enjoyable but still problematic. The virtuosity one expects from this orchestra is intermittently on show but the descending string figure in the opening of *September* is somewhat creaky and deliberate and neither the solo violin in *Beim Schlafengehen* nor the orchestral ensemble in *Im Abendrot* quite "sings" as it should. I want a cushion of sound in my ideal *Four Last Songs* whereas some, including Jansons, evidently, prefer a more astringent and transparent texture.

About the singer, I also have some nagging doubts. Anja Harteros has a big, slightly raw and blowsy tone with a vibrato that becomes pronounced when she sings forte - which in fact, is most of the time. She has the breadth and amplitude of voice to tackle these songs head on and makes little time for the refinement which marks my favourite versions - although I am no fan of Schwarzkopf's fussier approach and certainly prefer something more robust. Her voice is not especially beautiful, having something of an edge; her forthright interpretation reminds me of Leontyne Price without her plushness of tone.

I like this disc but I don't think this is amongst my classic versions for all that I enjoy it.

2009 Aga Mikolaj, Karl Sollak/WDR Rundfunkorchester Köln; (studio; digital) CPO [21:16]

Having read enthusiastic reviews from other clearly very satisfied listeners, I must admit to considerable disappointment in this recording when I bought it, as it was soon destined for the give-away pile.

This is not a recording to compete with my top half dozen favourites or indeed any of those I retain on my shelves. My first problem lies with the essential quality of Aga Mikolaj's soprano timbre: in the middle of her voice she can at times sound a little like Lucia Popp, with a fast vibrato and a silvery, slightly tremulous character; she also has a serviceable, if rather "divorced" lower register but otherwise the voice thins out alarmingly as she moves up and anything above G sounds thin and strained - and even squawky, especially where she attempts to float a pianissimo but fails to maintain enough body in her tone. As result there is little of the sensuousness that the singing of Strauss demands and she fails to soar over those big, long melismata which so grace the *Four Last Songs*, and we may sometimes hear an edge - even a grittiness - in the vocal line.

Secondly, there are problems with her diction and distortion of vowels, in both German and Italian, especially in the upper tessitura of the music. Thus, the top A on "Du" in "Du kennst mich wieder" emerges as "Daw", "zu" is "zaw", "und die Seele" becomes "Und die Sahle" and so on. Too often vowels are plummy and gluey, lacking the crispness that a great singer brings to text; too often the words sound like "aw-aw-aw", which I find wearing and obtrusive.

The sound is excellent and orchestral playing and conducting are good, but not distinctive. I am sorry of this sounds grudging but I simply cannot accord this the same accolade as many others; to my ears this is competent but flawed singing and nothing like the paragon others claim to hear.

2010 Dorothea Röschmann, Yannick Nézet-Séguin/Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra; (live; digital) BIS [21:19]

This recording ranks with any, as long as you enjoy a lighter, more silvery soprano as opposed to the "fat", V8 lushness of a heavier-voiced singer such as Jessye Norman or Flagstad. My discovery and appreciation of Dorothea Röschmann is ongoing; I have already posted several rave reviews of others of her recordings and this one joins them as highly recommendable. She is of the Lucia Popp school of voice: a shimmering, vibrant, slender flame of a soprano which burns with bright intensity. Her soprano is not as warm as Te Kanawa's or Fleming's and might sound to some ears just occasionally a little shrill and thin but it is so steady and evenly registered through its range, that criticism is silenced. As always with this singer, her diction is superb and she rides the tricky melismatic passages in *September* with consummate ease. The orchestral accompaniment is sensitive and apt.

Texts of the songs are provided but annoyingly the sub-headings of the tone poem are not.

2011 Anne Schwanewilms, Markus Stenz/Gürzenich-Orchester Köln (studio; digital) Orfeo [23:00]

Having already been wowed by Schwanewilms' live 2004 recording with Mark Elder, I was interested to hear how and if her interpretation had changed over seven years. Despite the advantage of this being a studio recording, this is not as persuasive as that earlier performance; her vibrato is marginally looser here, her top notes slightly pinched and her tone less steady. Nor is her diction as clear as previously and I find Stenz' accompaniment a tad deliberate compared with Elder's flexibility. The power and intelligence of Schwanewilms' reading are still much in evidence, however. This is still a fine performance but the earlier recording is the better option.

2014 Anna Netrebko, Daniel Barenboim/Staatskapelle Berlin; (studio; digital) DG [21:55]

Anna Netrebko has been pushing and pushing her voice for the last few years from its original Fach where it was happiest in Donizetti, Bellini and the lighter Puccini and Verdi roles, until now when she bestrides the Met stage as a Lady Macbeth; she clearly thinks of herself as a dramatico-spinto soprano with the world of bel canto left far behind. This has sounded the death-knell of her voice, which was once formerly a quite small but beautiful instrument - and here she murders these songs with an intensity of purpose which is chilling. She has now caught the dreaded old Soviet Russian disease - which, ironically, most modern Russian singers are now avoiding - and is in permanent wobble mode, flapping her way through the long phrases, her voice sounding coarse, ugly and barely under control and ugly. Her tone is cloudy, she scoops up to notes and her lower register is gritty; it is painful to hear her struggle through these wonderful songs when she cannot sustain a proper legato or spin a seamless line. Nor is her German diction very crisp. Avoid.

2014 Erin Wall, Andrew Davis/Melbourne Symphony Orchestra (live; digital) ABC Classics [22:04]

Andrew Davis was at the helm for one of my favourite versions of these songs recorded an astonishing thirty-five years ago with Kiri Te Kanawa. Well, this one is unlikely to replace that: Erin Wall has a big voluptuous sound but the dreaded wobble has already taken over her voice – very worrying in one so young. How is it that young singers are allowed to progress in their careers without someone pointing out that no great voice has this defect? I am equally bemused when critics don't hear and remark upon it. It could be that the microphone exaggerates it, but I suspect not. A vibrato generally has an optimum pulse and this exceeds it. And that's that, as far as I am concerned, regardless of other, incidental virtues.

Recommendations: Janowitz 1973; Norman 1982; Te Kanawa 1979; Voigt 1998, Schwanewilms 2004.

As I said in the introduction, there are so many successful recordings, to make recommendations is to give hostages to fortune. In many ways, it is easier to suggest which recordings to avoid than to pick “the best”. My suggestions are thus very tentative, insofar as personal taste in voices is so subjective that I can only indicate which recordings I most favour and beat a hasty retreat, dodging missiles.

It is evident from my recommendations that I like a bigger, more voluptuous sound in these songs, but that is what I believe Strauss intended; after all, it was Flagstad who sang their premiere. I can, however, appreciate the attraction of a lighter, more silvery voice and my selection of Janowitz as my first choice balances – and even contradicts - my stated preference for more robust voices. Popp, Röschmann and Isokoski could just as easily be prime recommendations, depending on your taste and conception of how they should be sung.

My nominations are all stereo, as only a handful of mono recordings were made before the stereo LP era began a few years after the premiere and such music surely benefits immeasurably from the stereo medium, for all that there are several excellent mono recordings.

Appendix

I have long been dissatisfied with the English translations of the beautiful German texts provided by recording labels in their booklets, so have made my own which I hope better embody the spirit of the original language.

Frühling (Hermann Hesse)

In dämmrigen Grüften
träumte ich lang
von deinen Bäumen und blauen Lüften,
Von deinem Duft und Vogelsang.

Nun liegst du erschlossen
In Gleich und Zier
von Licht übergossen
wie ein Wunder vor mir.

Du kennst mich wieder,
du lockst mich zart,
es zittert durch all meine Glieder
deine selige Gegenwart!

September (Hermann Hesse)

Der Garten trauert,
kühl sinkt in die Blumen der Regen.
Der Sommer schauert
still seinem Ende entgegen.

Golden tropft Blatt um Blatt
nieder vom hohen Akazienbaum.
Sommer lächelt erstaunt und Matt
In den sterbenden Gartentraum.

Spring

In twilight tombs
I dreamed long
Of your trees and blue skies,
Of your fragrance and birdsong.

Now you lie revealed
In all your glittering array,
Overflowing with light,
Like a miracle before me.

You recognise me,
Tenderly you embrace me;
Through all my limbs
Thrills your blissful presence

September

The garden mourns,
The cool rain falls on the flowers;
Summer gently shivers
As his end draws near.

Leaf on golden leaf
Drops from the tall acacia;
Weary and bemused, Summer smiles
Upon the dying dream of the garden.

Lange noch bei den Rosen
bleibt er stehn, sehnt sich nach Ruh.
Langsam tut er
die müd'word'nen Augen zu.

**Beim Schlafengehen
(Hermann Hesse)**

Nun der Tag mich müd' gemacht,
soll mein sehnliches Verlangen
freundlich die gestirnte Nacht
wie ein müdes Kind empfangen.

Hände, laßt von allem Tun,
Stirn, vergiß du alles Denken.
Alle meine Sinne nun
wollen sich in Schlummer senken.

Und die Seele, unbewacht,
will in freien Flügen schweben,
um im Zauberkreis der Nacht
tief und tausendfach zu leben.

**Im Abendrot
(Joseph von Eichendorff)**

Wir sind durch Not und Freude
gegangen Hand in Hand;
vom Wandern ruhen wir
nun überm stillen Land.

Rings sich die Täler neigen,
es dunkelt schon die Luft.
Zwei Lerchen nur noch steigen
nachträumend in den Duft.

Tritt her und laß sie schwirren,
bald ist es Schlafenszeit.
Daß wir uns nicht verirren
in dieser Einsamkeit.

O weiter, stiller Friede!
So tief im Abendrot.
Wie sind wir wandermüde--
Ist dies etwa der Tod?

Still he lingers long by the roses
Yearning for rest.
Slowly he closes
His tired eyes.

Going to sleep

Now that the day has wearied me,
How I yearn for the starry night
Gently to enfold me
Like a tired child.

Hands, cease all your toiling,
Brow, forget all your cares,
Now all my senses
Long to sink themselves in slumber,

And my unguarded soul
Will soar freely in flight,
Till in the enchanted sphere of night
It lives deeply and a thousand-fold.

At sunset

We have journeyed hand in hand
Through joy and sorrow;
Now we rest from our travels,
The quiet countryside beneath us.

The valleys incline around us;
Already the skies darken.
Two larks still soar alone,
Dreaming in the darkling light.

Draw near and leave them whirling aloft;
Soon it will be time to sleep.
Let us not lose our way
In this our solitude.

O broad, still peace!
So deep here in the dusk;
How weary we are of wandering –
Can this perhaps be death?

(translations by Ralph Moore)

