The songs of Hugo Wolf (1860 -- 1903) combine great attention to textual detail with closely intertwined writing for the voice and the piano. In this small form, Wolf was a master and took song in a different direction from that of Schubert, Schumann and Brahms. He wrote most of his songs in bursts of activity in five large collections, devoted to the poetry of Morike, Eichendorff, Goethe, and to collections of Spanish and Italian texts. He also composed a number of songs in shorter sets. In the early 1930s, a young Walter Legge began a project of recording Wolf songs on a subscription basis to be limited to 500 sets. The recording industry was relatively new, and Wolf, then as now, too little appreciated. The result was an extensive series of recordings of issued between 1931 and 1938 consisting of 145 songs, about one-half Wolf’s output, performed by fourteen singers. The Hugo Wolf Society recordings remain a high moment in the recording of song. They were remastered on LPs and, in 1998, in this 5 CD collection which includes previously unreleased selections. The Wolf Society collection offers an unparalleled opportunity to get to know Wolf’s songs performed by artists of the past that might otherwise be unfamiliar to many listeners. The performers include mezzo-soprano Elena Gerhardt, who recorded the initial volume for the society, baritones Herbert Janssen, Gerhard Husch, tenors John McCormack, Karl Erb, and Helge Roswaenge, the basses Alexander Kipnis, Friedrich Schorr, and Ludwig Weber, and sopranos Alexandra Trianti, Elizabeth Rethberg, Ria Ginster, Marta Fuchs, and Tiana Lemnitz. The pianists include Conrad Bos, Gerald Moore, Michael Rauchiesen, Hans Udo Muller, and Ernest Victor Wolff. The singers perform in a variety of styles from the highly operatic to the quietly lyrical. There is a Wagnerian performance of Goethe’s "Prometheus" by Friedrich Schorr with the London Symphony Orchestra -- the only track using an orchestral accompaniment. The Irish tenor John McCormack shows a more lyrical approach
in his renowned performance of Goethe's poem "Ganymed". The sopranos, Alexandra Trianti, Ria Ginster, and Tiana Lemitz have light, clear, bell-like voices. I find the singers on this compilation take a much more individualized, idiosyncratic, and romantic approach to song than do their modern counterparts, who sometimes seem restrained and chaste by comparison. Each of Wolf's great collections of songs is well-represented. Elena Gerhardt performs songs from each of Wolf's five books, with the exception of the Goethe songs. The young Alexander Kipnis gives a powerful reading of Wolf's three songs from Michaelangelo. The third CD in this collection features many songs from the Italian songbook performed by soprano Ginster, baritone Husch, and bass Kipnis together with recordings from the Spanish songbook by sopranos Rethberg and Ginster and baritone Husch. There are lovely performances by soprano Tiana Lemnitz in the previously uncollected supplementary material, which also includes several Eichendorff songs and a performance of the Goethe-song "Phanomen" by Alexander Kipnis. There is a great amount of material in this collection, with each of the 5 CDs including in excess of 70 minutes of music. Most of Wolf's songs are highly concentrated and intense. They may prove difficult to the listener coming to them knowing only the lyricism of Schubert. I would not recommend trying to rush through this set at one or two hearings. It is best to take this music in small sections and to listen with text in hand. The compilation includes texts and translations for each of the songs together with good notes about the Wolf Society recording project. There is little discussion about Wolf or about the songs themselves. This is an essential collection for those who love song, historical recordings, and the music of Hugo Wolf. Robin Friedman

This is an extraordinary collection of Wolf songs. It is frustrating that the project was not completed, as the quality of what was recorded is so extraordinarily revelatory. My personal favourites are the Michaelangelo settings sung by the bass Alexander Kipnis, although he uncharacteristically makes some textual errors. The contributions of Hüsch are numerous and thoughtfully sung, and Karl Erb, Herbert Janssen, Ludwig Weber, Rita Ginster and Marta Fuchs are all caught on extraordinary form, with accompanists of admittedly variable quality, ranging from the sublime Gerald Moore to some very interesting contributions from some accompanists who did not really capture the true essence of Lieder accompanying, which surely cannot permit the piano to be subservient to the voice! These precious recordings offer us so much. They are a document of a golden age of Lieder singing,
and they are superb recitals, sung by a variety of voices, never allowing the listener to tire of listening to a single voice for too long. They are also, of course, examples of some of the most wonderful Lieder writing of any time. These 5 CDs are a must for a Liederspecialist, and can open new doors to the novice. Buy them, and never regret having this treasure trove which will give you pleasure all your life.

If these six words give an approximate translation of the song titled "Auch kleine Dinge", then they might also describe a music lover's reaction as he makes a journey of exploration through the hundreds of little songs composed by Hugo Wolf. Walter Legge, a very young EMI record producer in the 1930s, first made such a journey possible when he pioneered the Hugo Wolf Society and began releasing the volumes now reissued in this boxed set. Many singers were invited to participate. Legge's choice of singers was sometimes idiosyncratic. You might wonder how an Irish tenor, a Ukrainian bass and a Greek soprano were admitted to the roster. The results, however, especially in the case of the contributions of John McCormack and Alexander Kipnis, prove the sureness of his instincts. About half Wolf's songs were made available in the original issue, between 1931 and 1938. With this reissue comes unused and hitherto unissued recordings, many by Tiana Lemnitz and Herbert Jannsen. So there is now more to discover and exploration is made easier for us in 2003 than it was in the 1930s. The remastering has improved the sound, Legge's widow Dame Elisabeth Schwarzkopf is able to provide a perceptive introduction in an accompanying booklet, and the texts of the songs are now provided in German and English. See all 5 customer reviews...


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