Lovers of German song are often told that of the four great nineteenth-century song composers – Franz Schubert, Robert Schumann, Johannes Brahms and Hugo Wolf – Schumann and Wolf selected their song-texts with discernment and taste, whereas Schubert and Brahms were not that choosy.¹ This view has emerged only in the last half-century – in 1962, Hans-Joachim Moser in his seminal study of the Lied declared Brahms a ‘connoisseur’ of texts – but it has been cemented by countless programme booklets, pre-concert talks and recording liner notes.² General wisdom has it that Brahms was attracted by the broad emotional content of a poem (its Stimmung), ideally content which mirrored his private emotions at the time, and that the textual detail was relatively unimportant. Of course, this view is not shared by all, nor is it applied equally to all the


poems, nor, indeed, is it entirely unjustified. Nevertheless, the result is that very little is known about most of Brahms’s poets; and if the clue to unlocking the song lies exclusively within the composer’s genius, and the poet is obscure, then who cares?

Do we really believe, in Brahms’s case, that the lied represents ‘an equality of music and text’? Performers and scholars alike recognise and respect the names of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Heinrich Heine, Joseph von Eichendorff and Eduard Mörike; however, when confronted with Carl Lemcke, Adolf von Schack or Hans Schmidt, it is tempting to argue that Brahms’s compositions are complete in their own right. The trend towards recitals themed by poets or organised around cycles makes Brahms’s panoply of poets, whose work he often set just once or twice, still more daunting. And yet his musical responses include some of the best-loved songs in the repertoire. This transformation cannot be ascribed purely to Brahms’s alchemical gifts; he must have glimpsed a trace of gold in each poem he set, otherwise this extremely exacting composer would not have bothered.

Spotting this trace ourselves becomes possible if we understand what Brahms’s poets – and by association Brahms – believed to be ‘good poetry’, and this in turn can be achieved by exploring what these figures meant to him and his society. The purpose and design of this volume is therefore simple: each of the 46 poets whose verses Brahms set in solo song within a published, numbered opus (i.e. where the song was overseen by him from genesis to publication) is accorded a lexicon entry. The entry is generally in two parts; the first considers Brahms’s relationship to the poet, and the second offers further context in the form of a summary biography of the poet and an

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5 A summary of Brahms’s Lieder is offered by Jost, ‘Lieder und Gesänge,’ 208–57.
account of contemporary reception. It is recognised that ‘raw’ biography has inherent risks, but this material is intended as a starting-point, a springboard for further exploration.\footnote{For searching comments on the risks of biographical material, see J. Daverio, \textit{Crossing Paths: Schubert Schumann, and Brahms} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 87f.}