In his doctoral thesis “Tonality and Atonality in Alban Berg’s Four Songs Op. 2” Gary Richard Tucker writes – that it is possible to regard “…tonality and atonality not as opposite principles but as complementary contexts in which pitch structure may be understood”. Today’s absolutely marvellous recital by Frauke Jürgensen and Ralph Stelzenmüller opened our ears to the living exemplification of that idea. These two performers are normally associated together in the University with much earlier music but along with her interest and expertise in Early Music, Frauke, as the programme informed us, “…has a particular interest in Art Song of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Berg’s song cycle Vier Gesänge, Op 2 was composed between 1908 and 1910 and published in 1910. This was over one hundred years ago so it is surprising that many audiences still regard this music as “ultra modern”. Today’s performance threw dazzling new light on this music by running the three cycles by Berg then Strauss and finally Wagner without a pause. In doing so, they also ran the cycles in reverse order of time Berg’s Op.2 (1910), Strauss’s Vier Lieder, Op. 27 (1894) and Wagner’s Wesendonck-Lieder (1857/58). The four songs by Berg move from tonality gradually towards atonality in the last song but as Gary Richard Tucker suggests, in this cycle, tonality and atonality are not opposites and the songs run together very satisfyingly. It was interesting too that the first of the Strauss songs, Ruhe, meine Seele, does not depart joltingly from Berg’s sound world. It was only as the song progressed that little drops of tonal sweetness became evident. Then of course we moved steadily through more tonally chromatic music to the deliciously sweet Morgen with its marvellous solo piano sections. Finally we were in the highly chromatic world of Wagner and the central work of his five songs Im Treibhaus which reminds us that at this time Wagner was also working on Tristan und Isolde. Today’s song duo gave us a marvellous account of all the songs. Frauke’s performance was wonderfully clean and clear with perfect German and a dynamic vocal range that went from the gentlest whispers to wonderfully passionate crescendos with pure clear firmly held top notes. I loved the crescendo near the end of Berg’s final song Warm die Lüfte landing on the almost spoken word Stirb! I was reminded here of Berg’s dramatic operatic writing. The wide vocal leaps in the Strauss songs, one of this composer’s stylistic signatures were beautifully smoothly and naturally sung by Frauke without any hint of strain or stress. I have already mentioned the piano solos in Morgen. Ralph’s playing here was emblematic of his performances in all of the songs. In Wagner’s Im Treibhaus for instance the original piano score came through more expressively than in any of the orchestral versions I have heard. All these Wagner songs were marvellously performed by the duo – the stunning crescendo in the second verse of Schmerzen followed by the gentle melancholy of the final two verses. Then in the final song, Träume, Frauke made the words come tumbling passionately forward until the last few lines of the song.
As with many of the recitals with Ralph and Frauke I felt I learned a great deal as well as enjoying their performance thoroughly.