

Decoding the music master pieces: Schubert's Winterreise

Franz Schubert's *Winterreise*, completed in 1827, is a set of 24 songs for voice and piano composed almost entirely using minor keys, which unlike the warm sounds of major keys often sound sad to our ears. Its mournful character reflects some of the personal trauma that Schubert himself was experiencing at the time. After years of a rather debauched life Schubert had contracted syphilis. The disease (or perhaps the treatment of it), was ultimately responsible for his death in 1828 at the age of 31.



Schubert described *Winterreise* as being “truly terrible, songs which have affected me more than any others”. The songs take the audience on a journey that it is clear, by the very nature of the opening song, will end fatefully. Even the title, meaning “winter’s journey”, conjures up a visual image of a cold and dark landscape.

The lyrics are poems by Wilhelm Müller and tell the story of a lonely traveller who ventures out into the snow on a journey to rid himself of his lost love. Along the way he experiences a turmoil of different emotions, mostly ranging from despair to greater despair.

During his short life Schubert wrote over 600 art songs, 20 sonatas for piano, six major works for violin and piano, nine symphonies for orchestra and an impressive amount of chamber music for other groups of instruments.

His art song output consists of the three main cycles – *Die schöne Müllerin* (The Beautiful Miller’s Daughter), *Winterreise*, and *Schwanengesang* (Swan Song), which was published after his death. *Die schöne Müllerin*, written in 1823 with poems also by Müller is - despite the hopelessness of unrequited love and the protagonist’s probable death at the end - a positive sounding cycle. *Winterreise* would prove to be a much darker journey.

Schubert set both collections of Müller’s poems to music to be performed with his friend and baritone Johann Michael Vogl. A literary and philosophical man, Vogl came to regard Schubert’s songs as “divine inspirations, the utterance of a musical clairvoyance”.

A ‘truly terrible’ journey

The first song in *Winterreise*, *Gute Nacht* (Good Night) begins enigmatically, as our protagonist ventures out into the snow, accompanied by trudging and relentless short notes on the piano. He reflects on a woman who “spoke of love, the mother of marriage”. Why is the traveller embarking on this journey? Surely this is about unrequited love. He finishes by singing that he wrote “good night” on the gate of his lover showing that despite the fact he is the one who is leaving, his thoughts were still of her.

By the third song, *Gefrorne Tränen* (Frozen Tears), we realise the depth of his despair, amplified in the fourth song, *Erstarrung* (Numbness) when he talks of his “heart as if frozen”. His love is not merely missing but truly dead and gone. These first four songs are all in a minor key, albeit the first does have a moment where hope can be felt in those few bars in a major key.

The fifth song, *Der Lindenbaum* (The Linden Tree), speaks of the sense of security and comfort experienced when reclining and dreaming under the branches of the Linden tree, a feeling which still comes to him when he has departed that safe haven.

The journey continues with many references to snow, ice, loneliness and tears. Although none of the songs offer any positive outcomes for our traveller, *Frühlingstraum* (Dreaming of Spring) and *Die Post* (The Post) are in major keys.

In *Frühlingstraum* he dreams of springs gone by, of colourful flowers and green meadows. From this dream he is awakened by the cock crowing and realises that around him is not the spring of his dreams but the cold, misty darkness of his present place. “*Die Post*” tells of his desire to receive a letter from his beloved when he hears the jolly horn of the post man. Alas, his hopes are again shattered – as there is no letter for him.

The final song, *Der Leiermann* (The Hurdy Gurdy man), describes not only his final despair but the absolute and unequivocal deterioration of his mental state. The piano plays the most forlorn repetitive melody and under the sung text is only a bare fifth chord. The desolation and despair are complete.

The colour of despair

Schubert composed countless other songs where the text (poems) are placed into a musical context, written for voice and the equal partnership of a piano, with the piano writing suggesting strong visual imagery tied to the meaning of the poem.

The romantic composers such as Schubert, and later Robert Schumann, treated musical settings of poems very differently. Unlike Schubert, Schumann rarely introduced the singer with an introduction played by the piano. The right hand of the pianist often played the vocal melody – though sometimes with embellishments.

Schumann relied on harmony, rather than a motive, to create the visual images associated with the poem. There was often a protracted coda (the concluding passage) played by the piano at the end of the song which seemed to make a comment or reinforce the emotive content in the text.

Schubert, on the other hand, predominantly used rhythm or melody in the piano writing which served to illustrate the setting of the text. In *Der Erlkönig* (The Earl King), based on the poem by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, continuous triplets (three notes played evenly over two beats) illustrate a horse galloping through the night.

In *Gretchen am Spinnrade* (Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel) a sextuplet figure (six notes played over four beats), winding round and round, illustrates the spinning wheel. And the falling semiquavers with their repeated notes illustrate the flowing water in *Auf dem Wasser zu singen* (To sing on the water).

Schubert also made use of synaesthesia (the colour of certain musical keys) to create a definite atmosphere. For example, he used the dramatic G minor for *Der Erlkönig*; the despairing D minor for *Gretchen am Spinnrade*; the resolute, yet exultant, A-flat major for *Auf dem Wasser zu singen*; and the happy and restful key of F major for *Frühlingsglaube* (Belief in Spring).

Winterreise requires the performers to immerse themselves totally in the atmosphere of cold, dark, forlorn despair. They need to create that atmosphere by the tonal colour of the voice and of the possibilities of the instrument. Rarely does an audience leave a performance of this work unmoved, and the experiencing this masterpiece first hand will be remembered.