

“Encountering crows”, bizarre incidents in Schubert’s *Winterreise*.

Those of us who know and love the songs in Schubert’s last great cycle are familiar with the cameo appearances of crows in a few of the songs: No. 15 *Die Krähe* (The crow) and no. 8 *Rückblick* (A backward glance).

They may also recall those other members of the crow family - 25 ravens - who, along with the cocks, are there to remind the protagonist that his “Dream of spring” has been irretrievably shattered, in no. 11 *Frühlingstraum*.

The most bizarre of the three is undoubtedly how crows are presented in *Rückblick*. There we read of how “Die Krähen warfen Bäll” und Schloßen/ Auf meinen Hut von jedem Haus’. Professor Prawer translates this rather neutrally as “The crows threw snow and hailstones on to my hat from all the house-tops”.¹ John Reed, in the *Schubert Song Companion*, opts for a more emotive rendering: “from every house the crows pelted my hat with snowballs and hailstones”.² This version seems to endow the crows with more intentional malevolence. Ian Bostridge, in his most stimulating book on this cycle, provides the most accurate rendition with “The crows threw snowballs and hailstones at my hat from every house”.³

In terms of commentary on the strangeness of the image, Reed keeps his silence, and Bostridge makes only passing reference to the crows’ behaviour: “a poetic image of comical, almost cartoon, absurdity – those hostile crows throwing snow and ice from the rooftops”⁴ But is that all that we can say?

Without trawling through the literary depictions of birds from Aesop to Poe, Kafka and Ted Hughes, what might be going on here? Well, in the first place, the context of the song itself is revealing. There is a nightmare quality about the situation. The protagonist flees from the town where he is no longer welcome. His frenzy, his haste and the highly-charged emotional atmosphere create a scene where malevolence is everywhere. The whole world is against him. Paranoia even extends to the crows on the rooftops.

There is almost a Hitchcockian atmosphere of attacking birds, as he flees “hotfoot” from where his romantic hopes have been dashed. In a heightening of the “pathetic fallacy” which projects his own emotions onto the natural world, not only is he tripping up on “every stone” (jeden Stein) but each rooftop (von jedem Haus) is suddenly populated with the local urchins now transformed into birds, who take delight in his discomfiture and rub salt, as it were, into his open (emotional) wounds. Without over-analyzing the briefest of vignettes, there is a deliberate contrast drawn between the melodious birdsong of larks and nightingales which accompanied his erstwhile hope-filled arrival in the town, his heart on fire with romantic love, and his ignominious departure after his (presumed) rejection. Crows are also not known for their melodious songs, but here it is not their rasping voices we are offered but a surreal, grotesque, anthropomorphic presence. These are indeed the crows of nightmare, capable of venting their spleen as they lacerate the hapless lover with snowballs and hailstones. Their abilities go beyond even the unthinking thrill-seeking psychopathy of juveniles. But why crows, rather than, say, house martins? Crows seem to be much better cast as the villains of the piece. Their black colour might associate them with evil, but then blackbirds do not suffer from that association. The most appropriate characteristic is that they are opportunistic feeders, who include carrion in their diet. In the wintry landscape of these poems by Müller, their survival is calibrated on the demise of other creatures. The narrator-protagonist feels he has now been cast out from human society. Just as a man crossing the desert might be stalked by vultures, so the poet has been expelled by crows to be stalked by a solitary crow in no. 15.

1 S.S. Prawer, *The Penguin book of Lieder* (London, 1964), p. 57

2 John Reed, *The Schubert Song Companion* (Manchester, 1993), p. 448.

3 Ian Bostridge, *Schubert’s Winter Journey: Anatomy of an obsession* (London, 2015), p. 187.

4 Bostridge, p. 190.26

The sight of the crow circling overhead and shadowing his steps in the frozen landscape leads to ambivalence in his reactions to it. He is aware that the crow's accompaniment of his journey is not to seek human companionship, as a dog might, but out of a vested interest. This hapless lover is to furnish the crow's next meal: "Meinst wohl bald als Beute hier/Meinen Leib zu fassen?" (Are you thinking of preying on my corpse soon?).⁵

However, such is the poet's sense of being an outcast, the only suitable companion for him might after all be a bird who feeds on carrion. The only "Fidelity" (Treue) he can know in a life where he has been (presumably) jilted and rejected is that of a bird which will indeed be faithful until death, will show him life-long loyalty, but only because he will then become its source of nourishment. A bleak view indeed. By losing a companion for life (the "zwei Mädchenaugen" of no. 8) he is left with a companion for death who will track him to the bitter end.

Robert Cotter

5 Reed, p. 452.