

Schubert the Dramatist: The Song Cycles

Winterreise, D911: The Music of *Winterreise*

In a special Schubert centenary edition of *Music and Letters* in 1928, Stuart Wilson wrote:

When Schubert is weighed in our balances and measured by our rules, whatever of him survives our taste moves us with an increasing power, because of its astonishing, unworldly simplicity.

– words which have an even greater resonance today in our increasingly complex and divided world. There is certainly much of this ‘astonishing, unworldly simplicity’ in *Winterreise*. The winter wanderer’s conflicting emotions as he leaves the scenes of past happiness and, in a typically Romantic fashion, finds a reflection of his alternately numbed and overwrought feelings in the cold winter landscape with its ice, snow and chilling winds, are depicted in music of wonderful aptness. The minor key is predominant. Even those few songs which are in the major are frequently tinged with minor harmonies. Capell describes the charming ‘*Der Lindenbaum*’, for instance, as ‘a midwinter glimpse of the ghost of spring.’¹ It is as if Schubert, who was occupied with the correction of the proofs of the second part of the cycle right up until his premature death, realised that he had reached the winter of his own life and was thus able to identify with the wanderer’s state of mind and heart and to accompany him on his journey. In the remarkable final song, ‘*Der Leiermann*’, Schubert seems to confront his worst fear, perhaps the hurdy-gurdy player as a figure of Death or possibly as a premonition of what he himself might become when, in the later stages of syphilis, he would lose his creative artistic faculties and be able to do nothing more than grind out the same melody time and time again. Our sense that everything has come to a standstill is intensified by the hurdy-gurdy drone bass. There is both a sense of finality and a mood of inconclusiveness – finality in the persistence of this drone bass and the repetition of poignant melodic phrases in the voice, inconclusiveness in the ultimate relevance of this strange figure, the hurdy-gurdy man. One thing is certain – the wanderer does not find final peace and rest in the waters of the brook, as the miller lad does in *Die schöne Müllerin*.

But death spared Schubert the agonies and torments of the later stages of syphilis (it is possible but by no means certain that he contracted ‘typhoid fever’ in 1828). One of Schubert’s final songs (written a few months after the completion of *Winterreise*) is another ‘wandering song’ – ‘*In der Ferne*’, one of the seven Rellstab settings in *Schwanengesang*, D957 (August 1828). The drama involved is internal rather than external. Susan Youens makes a distinction between ‘apparent cyclic return’ (of which there is none because it is not suggested by the subject matter) and ‘more subterranean recurrence’ of material,² e.g. reminiscences of the non-legato repeated pitches and chords suggestive of the journey in ‘*Gute Nacht*’ in later songs, ‘*Der Wegweiser*’ in particular; off-beat accents signifying stumbling, straying or some kind of mental distress in many of the songs; association between certain tonalities and particular themes – A major, E flat major, C minor, B minor.

There are very few strictly strophic songs (e.g. ‘*Wasserflut*’, ‘*Frühlingstraum*’, ‘*Die Post*’ and ‘*Der Leiermann*’), mainly because an individual song often encompasses a change in the winter traveller’s emotional state – as a result of the experiences he has undergone during the song or he has remembered from earlier. A third of the songs are in varied strophic (three-part) form; ‘*Irrlicht*’ is in Bar form (AAB); ‘*Letzte Hoffnung*’ is through-composed.

Although there is almost no melodic reminiscence in the vocal part during the cycle, there are recurring melodic types. Daverio considers that:

Schubert conceived his cycle (or double cycle) as an interweaving of musicopoetic topoi – chorales, horn calls, echoes – all potentially representative of infinite extension in time and space.³

1 Richard Capell, *Schubert’s Songs*, Rev. Edn, London: Pan Books, 1973, p. 234.

2 Susan Youens, *Retracing a Winter’s Journey: Schubert’s Winterreise*, New York 1991, p. 74.

3 John Daverio, ‘The Song Cycle: Journeys through a Romantic Landscape’ in Rufus Hallmark (ed.), *German Lieder in the Nineteenth Century*, New York 1996, p. 288.

We see this in ‘*Der Lindenbaum*’ (no. 5), ‘*Wasserflut*’ (no. 6) and ‘*Auf dem Flusse*’ (no. 7), which have the same tonal centre (E major/minor) and include horn calls and chorale-like textures. Already in the first song, ‘*Gute Nacht*’, however, we are introduced to the two main musical topoi of the cycle – obsessive repeated rhythms and major/minor shifts. Repeated rhythms are characteristic features of *Wanderlieder*, of course, and are very powerful musical symbols of obsessive torment. In *Winterreise*, a walking or ‘journeying’ figure (non-legato repeated pitches or chords) which pervades ‘*Gute Nacht*’ is also prominent in ‘*Der Wegweiser*’, but makes occasional appearances in some other songs, viz. ‘*Gefrorne Tränen*’ (beginning and end), ‘*Auf dem Flusse*’ (piano interludes after the first and second verses and in the accompaniment figuration in the third and fourth verses), ‘*Irrlicht*’, ‘*Frühlingstraum*’ (in the *Langsam* sections), ‘*Einsamkeit*’ (divided between the left and right hands), ‘*Die Krähe*’ (at the end), ‘*Letzte Hoffnung*’ (in slightly varied form in bars 22–24 and the postlude), ‘*Täuschung*’ (again slightly varied form, in 6/8 time) and, finally, in ‘*Das Wirtshaus*’ (between verses 3 and 4) and ‘*Die Nebensonnen*’ (bar 17). ‘*Die Wetterfahne*’ (no. 2), ‘*Frühlingstraum*’ (no. 11) and ‘*Letzte Hoffnung*’ (no. 16) also contain striking alternations of major and minor (or vice versa). ‘*Der Wegweiser*’ (no. 20) occupies an important position in the cycle, as it includes several of the important musical topoi of the work – not only those mentioned above but a motive identified by Walter Everett as the ‘grief’ motive, viz. embellishment of the fifth degree of the scale by its semitone upper neighbour.⁴ It is a ‘sighing’ figure which is essentially confined to Part I of the cycle and is derived from the rising semitone figure at the word *eingezogen* in the first verse of ‘*Gute Nacht*’ (bars 8–9), making its first appearance in the accompaniment in bars 17–18, thereafter in ‘*Die Wetterfahne*’ (bars 18ff.), ‘*Gefrorne Tränen*’ (bars 20ff.), ‘*Der Lindenbaum*’ (bars 26ff.), ‘*Rast*’ (bars 17ff. and 47ff.), ‘*Frühlingstraum*’ (bars 16ff. and later in the song) and ‘*Einsamkeit*’ (bars 25 and 27). Occasionally Schubert makes use of small figures or motives to link two adjacent songs – for instance, the triplet-quaver accompaniment figuration throughout ‘*Erstarrung*’ is transformed into the triplet-semiquaver accompaniment figuration at the beginning of ‘*Der Lindenbaum*’, and the ‘weary’ ascending octave figure in bars 7–10 of ‘*Rast*’ returns in the slow sections of ‘*Frühlingstraum*’. A striking rhythmical rather than melodic feature of the song-cycle is the frequency of off-beat or weak-beat accents (in comparison with *Die schöne Müllerin*, where they are the exception rather than the rule). They seem to be associated particularly with the wanderer’s emotional disquiet and feelings of despair.

As far as the overall tonal plan is concerned, there is evidence of a certain amount of consistency, even although five of the songs were transposed between the autograph manuscript and first edition stages (probably because Haslinger, the publisher, wanted to avoid several high notes, e.g. high As, in the original keys), and we know that Schubert frequently permitted transpositions to suit the voice of a particular singer. Indeed some of the transpositions effect closer tonal relationships between particular songs, the last two being a particularly good example of this. There is certainly not a ‘rigorous tonal plan’ but neither is it arbitrary, and *Winterreise* is undeniably more than a succession of musically independent songs ... a subtle web of tonal connections and dramatic associations links groups of adjacent songs and even forms associative arches between widely separated songs, as when ‘*Täuschung*’ brings back the dance rhythms and A-major tonality of the dream in ‘*Frühlingstraum*’.⁵

One of the most striking and, for the period, astonishing tonal shifts in *Winterreise* is that between E minor and D sharp minor in ‘*Auf dem Flusse*’; it occurs in the first, second and fifth verses. In the first and second verses the return to E minor (E major) is effected via a move to B as the dominant of the original tonic, but in the fifth verse D sharp minor itself is a stepping-stone to G sharp minor.

4 Walter Everett. ‘Grief in *Winterreise*: A Schenkerian Perspective’ in *Music Analysis*, 9 (1990), pp. 157–75.

5 Youens op.cit., p. 103.

This 'semitonal' conflict of keys plays a crucial part in the song and is essentially a reflection of the 'sighing' melodic motive which appears in many of the songs, e.g. the semitone fall in the bass + augmented sixth chord at the end of *'Einsamkeit'*, the semitone fall from a C major chord to a B major chord at the words 'welch ein törichtes Verlangen' in the second verse of *'Der Wegweiser'*, and in the inner part at the end of *'Letzte Hoffnung'*.

Some notes on individual songs

1 'Gute Nacht'

The opening words, 'I came as a stranger, and I depart as a stranger', immediately bring us into the atmosphere of the whole cycle. The 'journeying' motif, viz. The footsteps of the wanderer, can be heard throughout the song; these footsteps 'never falter, except momentarily, as the music melts into the major for the last verse, and even then there is only a suggestion of a *ritenuto*, rather than a change of pace.'⁶ The final words, 'An dich hab' ich gedacht' ('I have thought of you'), resonate in the inner voices of the piano part in the postlude. The unavoidable implication is that the wanderer can still not get his former sweetheart out of his mind.

2 'Die Wetterfahne'

There are brutal contrasts between imagination and reality. The wanderer imagines that his former sweetheart is now a rich bride with bright prospects (movement towards A major cadence, bars 44–46), but the return of the bleak unisons in the postlude suggests present reality – the icy wind and his own bleak prospects.

3 'Gefrorne Tränen'

The almost exact repetition of the piano introduction in the postlude suggests that the wanderer's question – are his tears so tepid that they are turning to ice, in spite of the fact that they well forth from a burning heart? – is left unresolved.

4 'Erstarrung'

The wanderer's vain search for traces of his beloved's footsteps is conveyed by (a) insistent text repetitions; (b) obsessive rhythms, e.g. the triplet quavers in both right and left hands of the piano part and the crotchet–crotchet–crotchet–triplet–quaver idea in the left hand. At the end of the song Schubert makes a purely musical decision to override Müller: Schubert, despite his nearly uncanny sympathy with his chosen poet, transgresses Müller's ending to make explicit the conflict between mind and heart. Where Müller implied that reason is in complete control by the poem's end, Schubert says No and continues the painful search for keepsakes.⁷

5 'Der Lindenbaum'

In Romantic poetry the linden tree is a familiar place for lovers' trysts and a place where they could find shelter (cf. poems of Rückert, Uhland, Mayrhofer); the wanderer, however, declines the invitation to remain there and freeze to death (cf. The miller lad's imagined invitation from the brook to be drawn into its depths in 'Tränenregen' from *Die schöne Müllerin* – an invitation which he declines at the time but accepts at the end of the song-cycle).

6 'Wasserflut'

The contrast between the coldness of the elements and the turbulence of the wanderer's emotions (epitomised in this song by his 'burning tears') is found in several of the songs in the cycle, e.g. *'Gefrorne Tränen'*, *'Erstarrung'* and *'Auf dem Flusse'*.

7 'Auf dem Flusse'

Capell memorably described this song as a funeral march 'for the obsequies of dead love', while Maurice Brown remarked that it recalls 'Pause' in *Die schöne Müllerin* 'with its splendid balance between the intellectual development of musical theme and the integrity of its emotions.'⁸ In bars 5–21 the voice part is shadowed by the left hand of the piano part.

⁶ John Reed, *The Schubert Song Companion*, Manchester 1985, p. 444.

⁷ Youens op. cit., p. 150.

⁸ Maurice Brown, *Schubert Songs*, London: BBC Music Guides, 1967, p. 52.

The transference of the original vocal phrases to the left hand of the piano part in the second part of the song generates tremendous emotional energy. Indeed this second part which consists of the fifth stanza ('Mein Herz, in diesem Bache ...' – 'My heart, do you now see your own likeness in this stream'), the words of which are repeated, caused Schubert so much trouble that he had to make a fair copy of the final page (bars 51–74), which he inserted in the autograph MS. Although the words are repeated, the harmonies change (E minor–D sharp minor–D sharp–G sharp minor–B7–E minor in bars 41–54; E minor–G major–F sharp minor–B7–E minor–G minor–B7–E minor in bars 54–70); these are probably the most harmonically active bars in the whole cycle and marvellously evoke the image of the wanderer's heart swelling to almost bursting point beneath the icy crust of the brook.

8 'Rückblick'

Schubert also experienced difficulties in setting this song, but in this case it was the whole song, not just one part of it. A fair copy, almost certainly dating from the summer of 1827 at the earliest, i.e. when he was already at work on the songs of Part II, was inserted in the autograph MS. The first verse is characterised by the feminine endings in the three-bar vocal phrases and the canonic imitation between the voice part and the lowest voice in the left hand of the piano part. There are more feminine endings in the second verse, and the accents on the third beat of the voice part give a feel of 2/4 time. The third and fourth verses are in the major mode, with a gentler texture, no offbeat accents, and pairing of voice part and piano left hand.

9 'Irrlicht'

The key Schubert chose for this song (B minor) is the same as that chosen for '*Die liebe Farbe*' in *Die schöne Müllerin* and '*In der Ferne*' in *Schwanengesang*; the form is Bar form (AAB). In verse 3, the contrast between the Neapolitan C major and the tonic B minor is a subtle re-interpretation on Schubert's part of Müller's poetry. Where Müller makes a comparison between rivers that eventually flow into the sea and sorrows that reach the grave, Schubert provides a clear tonal contrast.

10 'Rast'

The wanderer's weary trudging ('journey without rest') is suggested by the alternation of left and right hands and the accents on the second beat in the piano introduction (bars 1–6), in the interlude between the third and fourth verses, which dovetails with the end of the vocal part (bars 31–36), and the postlude (bars 61–end).

11 'Frühlingstraum'

There is a marked contrast between the Classical poise of the diatonic first and fourth verses and the Romantic tenseness of the chromatic second and fifth verses. Further contrast between the parallel or relative major and minor modes suggests the dichotomy between illusion or happy memory and the present, often brutal, reality.

12 'Einsamkeit'

Once again we notice the trudging rhythms in the piano part and the contrast between diatonicism (verses 1 and 2) and chromaticism (verse 3 repeated).

13 'Die Post'

Müller borrowed the Romantic image of the posthorn as a symbol of Wanderlust from other poets, e.g. Tieck and Eichendorff. In this poem, however, the wanderer is already on his way to an unknown distant destination.

14 'Der greise Kopf'

The sense that nothing has really changed is eloquently conveyed by the repetition of the second half of the piano introduction in bars 8–10, 33–35 and at the end. The unison phrase with embellishments in the piano part (bars 24ff.) is reminiscent of *Totengräbers Heimweh*, D842 (April 1825), bars 41–48; cf. Piano Sonata in A minor, D845, 1st movement.

15 'Die Krähe'

The doubling of the voice part and the piano left hand suggests the close proximity of the wanderer and his 'companion', the crow. The diminished 7th on the second syllable of Grabe ('grave') in bar 33 is reminiscent of a similar climactic harmonic gesture on the word Weh ('grief') in '*Wasserflut*' (bar 12).

16 'Letzte Hoffnung'

The staccato falling figures in the piano part are suggestive of falling leaves. As the leaf upon which the wanderer has pinned all his hopes falls to the ground, so are the final vestiges of hope dashed and he himself falls to the ground. Schubert's setting eloquently conveys the sense of the wanderer's increasing desperation and disillusionment. Müller's first two lines – 'Hier und da ist an den Bäumen / Noch ein buntes Blatt zu sehen' – are changed to 'Hie und da ist an den Bäumen / Manches bunte Blatt zu sehen', the 'r' being omitted, according to Youens, because it interrupts and darkens the initial words', and the singular being changed to the plural perhaps to fit Schubert's 'conception of many falling intervals in the piano introduction.'⁹

17 'Im Dorfe'

This contains probably the most independent piano part in all the songs of the cycle, apart from the phrase 'Was will ich unter den Schläfern säumen?' ('Why should I remain among the sleepers?') which comes twice (bars 37–40; bars 42–46) and has a chordal, almost hymn-like accompaniment. Schubert made a few alterations to the text throughout the cycle. In this song, he substituted the gentler and arguably more singable and mellifluous *schlafen* ('sleep') for Müller's marvellously onomatopoeic *schnarchen* ('snore').

18 'Der stürmische Morgen'

In this song we find, instead of the contrast between the coldness of the elements and the heat of the wanderer's emotions, a remarkable similarity between the turbulence of his feelings and the violence of the storm – 'a morning after my own heart'.

19 'Täuschung'

'Täuschung' is an example of self-borrowing on Schubert's part, its source being an aria from Act II of his opera *Alfonso und Estrella*, D732. The aria recounts a similar tale of illusion concerning a Lorelei-like enchantress. The subtle divergences in phrasing between the voice and piano parts (e.g. bars 5–9) heighten the mood of unreality.

20 'Der Wegweiser'

This is a modified strophic setting (ABAC). The 'journeying' quaver figure is prominent here as it is in 'Gute Nacht'. Whereas in the latter it remains constant, rhythmically unchanged and confined almost entirely to the piano part, here it undergoes different harmonic and rhythmical changes and is included in the vocal line. There are also motivic connections with 'Auf dem Flusse', the most prominent being the dotted rising phrase in the voice part and piano part in bars 16–18 and 51–54. The combination of the almost static voice part at times and the rapidly shifting harmonic movement in the piano part in the last verse is a marvellous setting of the words – 'I see a signpost that stands immovable before me. I must traverse a road on which there is no return.'

21 'Das Wirtshaus'

Altered chords, modal changes, poignant dissonances – all suggest the wanderer's weariness and despair.

22 'Mut'

In this song Schubert paints a memorable musical picture of the increasingly desperate wanderer waving his fist at circumstances; it is, in Youens' aptly chosen words, a 'bravado exercise in denial'¹⁰

23 'Die Nebensonnen'

The two illusory suns are probably to be taken as symbols of the beloved's eyes. When these two illusory suns disappear, the wanderer realises that the love of his sweetheart was also an illusion that has now disappeared for ever; cf. reference to the 'maiden's two eyes glowing' in 'Rückblick'. There are five word alterations from the original poem; all result in better melodic sonority, and two of them (*ja* for *ach*, *wollten* for *könnten*) intensify the original meaning.

⁹ Susan Youens, 'Schubert and his poets' in Christopher H. Gibbs (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Schubert*, Cambridge 1997, p. 114.

¹⁰ Youens, *Schubert's Winterreise op. cit.*, p. 286.

24 'Der Leiermann'

This is a remarkable song – all the more so as its effect is achieved by an extreme economy of musical means. When the wanderer sings, there is a minimum of piano accompaniment, except for the poignant final words – 'Wunderlicher Alter, soll ich mit dir gehn? / Willst zu meinen Liedern deine Leier drehn?' ('Strange old man, shall I go with you? Will you grind your hurdy-gurdy to my songs?').

The above is a revised version of a talk given at the Royal Northern College of Music Schubertfest in January 2002.