

The Schubert Lied Revisited: Some Subjective Sources of Modernity

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--Den Dichter dichtet er zurück;
als heil'ge Doppelgänger
steh'n Wort und Sang, ein Leib, ein Stück,
vor unserm Blick,
und Dichter wird der Sänger.

--The poet he gives poetry in return;
as sacred Doppelgängers
stand word and song, one body, one piece,
before our eyes,
and the singer becomes the poet.

--Johann Gabriel Seidl, "Meinem Freunde Franz Schubert! Am Vortage seines Begräbnisses" (To my Friend Franz Schubert on the Day Before his Burial).

In "The Schubert Lied: Romantic Form and Romantic Consciousness," an essay first published in 1985, I sought to reinterpret Franz Schubert's well-known innovations in the genre of the art song—the setting to music of preexisting poetic texts—by suggesting that for Schubert the aim of song was not primarily to express feelings or meanings first located in poetry, but instead "to align music with the widespread effort of literary and philosophical Romanticism to represent subjectivity in action." The publication in 2017 of a retrospective of my work, *Song Acts: Writings on Words and Music* (Leiden and Boston: Brill Academic Publishers), gave me to the opportunity to revisit and revise my earlier essay and to refine the studies of particular songs contained in it. The chapter, like all those in the volume, is available for download from the publisher:

<http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/books/9789004342132>.

If I were writing the essay today, I would give more attention to the vicissitudes of performance and the particularities of history than I did originally, but the essay's line of

thought still seems to me to hold good. What follows here is a quasi-aphoristic series of supplementary reflections on some of the issues raised in both the original and the revised text.

--Lyric and Modernity: Schubert and the Supplement of Lied.

What would happen if we were to take the standard clichéd description--Schubert invented the modern art song by enriching the role of the piano until it equaled that of the voice--and ask why he did it and what he did by it? We might answer by saying that he anticipated, from quite a marginal position, at least three key facets of modernity, each of which subsequently became one of the fundamental motives for song.

1. *Divination*. When Johann Seidl wrote that Schubert gives the poet poetry in return—literally “poetizes back”—he meant that Schubert’s songs divine a kernel of meaning in the poem that no one else, not even the poet, had previously apprehended. (The sentiment was common among Schubert’s friends. “Divination” was the term used by Friedrich Schleiermacher in his 1819 “Outline of Hermeneutics” to characterize this kind of mysterious yet not esoteric perception.) The source of this poetic reciprocity is the combination of the expanded, often independent role of the piano in Schubert’s most characteristic songs, and the complex interaction with the voice that the unfettered piano enables, even necessitates. The result is a continual friction between the apparent primacy of what the poem says and the ascendancy of what the music divines. The relationship of music to poetry thus defines itself as expressive excess.

2. *The modern subject as its own unhappiness*. The promotion of the piano part from accompaniment to collaboration and sometimes to antagonism is only the leading edge of a full remaking of poetry by song. Schubert’s songs poetize their texts back in a

form that the texts might scarcely recognize. The songs do not follow the imperative of poetic authority. Instead they heed the compulsions of a subject that lacks authority at its core. Whatever else the modern subject might be, it is a subject built up around this particular lack. Accordingly it is a subject that is (that becomes, that stands revealed as) not *one*, but always more or less than one. The “I” is, or becomes, recognizable, even to itself, by reference to its lack or excess over against a norm that can never actually be inhabited, and that no one any longer believes can be inhabited (if anyone ever did).

One result is a pervasive call to sympathy with troubled figures like the wounded, even pathological protagonists of Schubert’s two (or, counting the Heine settings, three) song cycles: *Die schöne Müllerin*, *Winterreise*, and the second part of *Schwanengesang*. Schubert’s song protagonists nurse their wounds, not in the sense of seeking to calm or cure them, but in the sense of giving them nourishment. The implications of this process form one of the main topics of my book *Franz Schubert: Sexuality, Subjectivity, Song*.

3. *The emotional sublime*. The call to sympathy leads to a socially disturbing valuation of subjectivity for its own sake independent of its character or “content.” Whoever feels has a claim on fellow feeling, even if what is felt is painful or ugly. This claim would subsequently serve to justify the passions of the alienated, abject figures—doomed couples, usually illicit, amoral artists, great criminals, obsessives, pariahs—who loomed so large in the imagination of the nineteenth century and whose heirs in the twentieth would become the personae of much, perhaps most, popular song. The exemplary subject of modern song is—choose any or all—the figure beset by desire, the thwarted lover, the outlaw spirit, the homeless mind.

--Schubert's most characteristic songs not only show subjectivity in action but also postulate this subjectivity as inherently legible. As noted earlier in connection with divination, Schubert's friends laid great emphasis on what in a later idiom might be called his grasp of other minds. His songs formed a guarantee of intersubjectivity at a moment in history when subjectivity increasingly appeared as opaque or enigmatic. The songs exemplified the divinatory reading of one mind's or heart's meaning by another's. Animated in one mind, the meaning becomes animated further by its transfer to, and transformation in, another mind—and also in another medium, as the difference in mental space came to coincide with difference in medial space. The result, expressed in Schubert's day by the soirees devoted to his songs—the famous Schubertiads—was the transformation of social space from a scene of assembly to a place of alliance by the expansion of legible subjectivity. Modern subjectivity seems to be, seems always to have been, in constant quest of this legibility. But each new success brings with it a further opacity, which must in turn be both preserved and overcome by new changes of venue.

--The Schubert Lied is the first musical genre (preceding Beethoven's late sonatas and quartets) in which art becomes the means of modeling and legitimizing non-conforming modes of subjectivity. Song underwrites a dispensation in which the subject can exist within the system of normative and normalizing structures only if it has a separate existence on the outside. In musical terms, this project involves a continual but never complete departure from a certain fiction of "classical" common practice: a preference for third- rather than fifth-relations, the avoidance or denaturing of symmetrical resolution, the faux-naïf use of tonic-dominant surfaces, the emphasis on song and dance

as melodic matrices, and the location of the composer's agency in the dialogue between textual and musical "voices." The decline of aristocratic authority that becomes irrevocable around 1800 correlates with an incipient reordering of identity in which the primary referent of subject formation changes from (social) power to (sexual) desire. (Certain Mozart operas, notably *Don Giovanni*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, and *The Magic Flute*, mark this change musically.) Schubert uses the Lied as a venue to exemplify this change and to radicalize it. He situates desire in the space of difference (or, if you will, *différance*) filled by the crisscrossing motions of vocal line, performing voice, accompaniment, text, intertext, musical enunciation, social order, and cultural practice. He composes on behalf of an insubordinate persona for whom desire and unruliness are effectively the same thing.

--What Keats called "negative capability"—a power of extreme empathy with no limit on its objects—is perhaps the first principle of agency in Schubert's songs. The power to participate in the subjectivity of one unlike oneself (but what is oneself like?) outweighs the pleasure of confronting one's magnified image in a magic mirror. One consequence is that pleasure becomes less trustworthy than pain. Schubert flourishes in the "weak," the inchoate, zone of the Romantic ego, wherein one is sore pressed but never annihilated. This zone is sought willingly, if not eagerly. What occurs there rejects, disrupts, or travesties the ascetic quest to reconcile inner and outer reality associated for Schubert with the paternal figures of Goethe and Beethoven. (They cannot save you from the Erlkönig. They live in the houses guarded by barking dogs—see "Im Dorfe" [In the Village] from *Winterreise*.) Self becomes measured by the capacity for sacrifice,

"selflessness," the ability to "go outside one's own nature" without asking for pleasure (barring the paradoxical aesthetic pleasure won from the contemplation of unpleasure). *Winterreise* anticipates the later history of the Romantic ego by eroticizing its stubborn despondency and rendering its "weakness" a strenuous activity. Wandering takes effort.

--It may be that Schubert is so interested in song, an innovation, after all, as high art, because the genre offers him a host of opportunities—pretexts, if you like—for exploring the boundaries of sexuality and identity without incurring censure. Song can hide its aspirations behind its status as a minor genre, and for that very reason it can form a workshop for extending into the major genres the forces that it releases. Compositions like the "Trout" Quintet and the "Death and the Maiden" Quartet are only among the most explicit of the consequences.

Meanwhile, song benefits too, both in what it can be and in what, retroactively, it has been. Song in this dispensation is an instituted chance for the listener-spectator to fasten desire on the desiring singer, the desire of the singer, rather than to join the singer in desiring a usually absent or rejecting object. The fair maid of the mill turns out to be expendable. Even a song like "Gretchen am Spinnrade," which depends on modes of desire that are conventional in everything but their intensity, can be heard, played, and sung as if from a position in which the strength of desire, not the mode of desire, is paramount--a position, say, which emphasizes the piano part as the recipient of shattering vocal energies, a piano part orgasmically ruptured and enraptured at the cardinal moments of the singer's trajectory. The voice summons the piano for breakage as if to celebrate, in absentia, a perverse *Polterabend*, the wedding eve on which the celebrants smash crockery

to bring good luck. The good luck in this case is the smashing of the subject along with the crockery.

--The subject according to Schubert is always in danger of collapsing into its components. Placed at the site of separation between identity and agency, this subject experiences itself less as a distinct or distinctive presence than as a site where contending forces proliferate. It is at once animated and obstructed by the dynamic energies of its own plurality, of a "splitting" felt not as an accidental condition but as an imperative or goal. Pertinent here is the Enlightenment understanding of the subject as a bounded form energized by electrical fluids. As tokens of cosmic order these fluidic streams support metaphors of transcendence, but under the sign of mesmerism or animal magnetism they threaten to turn the person into a puppet or automaton.

This extranormal subject is not nihilistic in tendency, however despairing it may become. It differs from the supposedly singular, supposedly normative subject in the multiplicity and flexibility of its boundaries, not in their presence or absence, and in the degree of mobility it will welcome or tolerate before construing mobility as collapse. A fully nihilistic subject would develop only later, generally as a literary rather than a practical fiction. The precarious mobility of Schubert's subjects resounds in its impact on musical form, traditionally held to be Schubert's weak spot. The so-called weakness is more often a principle. There must be form; but equally that form must neither adhere to nor defy a norm, neither seek nor surrender mastery. Instead it must emerge from within a field of subject-positions which it endows with a local, ad hoc, transparently contingent dynamism.

--Remarks on "Wanderers Nachtlied": Just one example.

Just a few lines: very famous, very simple, very elusive:

Über allen Gipfeln
Ist Ruh,
In allen Wipfeln
Spürest du
Kaum einen Hauch;
Die Vögelein schweigen im Walde.
Warte nur, balde
Ruhest du auch.

In my translation:

On all the peaks
There is peace,
In all the treetops
You discern
Scarcely a breath;
The birds in the woods fall silent.
Only wait, soon
You too will rest.

The poem is irreducibly ambiguous, this "Wanderer's Night Song." Is it a song *for* a wanderer or a song *by* one? Is the song something the wanderer hears, perhaps from a passing companion, perhaps from a spirit, or is it something he sings to himself for consolation in his wanderings? It is impossible to say; only the desire for rest is certain. Also, the poem oddly tells the wanderer to wait, rather than to keep going, in order to find the promised rest. Given the imagery of breathlessness and falling silent, the intimation of

mortality can hardly be avoided, but it is not certain. Perhaps the wanderer, like the sleeping birds, will awaken, refreshed, to the dawn. Or perhaps not.

Schubert's poetizing-back pivots on a dark dissonance in the setting of "Spürest du / Kaum einen Hauch." The dissonance intrudes a sense of foreboding that can have its source only in the wanderer's state of mind, and so makes the song something sung, not heard, by the subject. Or, rather, the wanderer-subject is the hearer within the song as well as its singer. He addresses a kind of lullaby to himself; the listeners in the audience merely eavesdrop.

At the same time, on the piano, musical motion increases and syncopation arises precisely during the text's description of the breathless stillness and the birds' silence. The close, setting the last two lines, aims to smooth out this expressive dissonance of feeling and description and to restore the musical calm. It seeks to charm the foreboding away with repetition: the promise of rest ("Warte nur, balde / Ruhest du auch") is heard twice and within each statement of it the injunction to wait is heard twice. The result is a mixture of the hypnotic and the uneasy; which feeling prevails, if one does, depends on the performers. Either way, the chant-like repetition conflates reassurance with anxiety, acquiescence with uncertainty—uncertainty about what awaits, and whether, and when.

To compound the ambivalence, the close relocates the night song in the silent woods while at the same time it renders this location merely imaginary. Thus the piano accompanies "Warte" (wait) but not the similar "Walde" (woods) with horn fifths, open fifths traditionally used to evoke pastoral woodland.

The subject thus proves to be a wanderer from itself, beckoned to a rest that consists, paradoxically, in the very beckoning. This paradox plays out as the voice

increases its melodic motion with melismas while it describes the falling silent of the birds. The melismas carry over into the setting of “balde” in the chant of the close, partly unraveling the soothing effect of the promise. “Balde” comes to designate another site of dislocation, of wandering further: the wanderer’s true destination is not the promised rest but the condition of being soon, of coming soon. This condition resonates in the fusion of harmonic finality (a tonic chord) and melodic expectancy (an ending on the fifth degree) in the setting of “balde.” The first time that the close soothes this expectancy, with a tonic cadence on “ruhest du auch,” the tonic leads without pause to the relative minor on the repetition of “Warte nur.” The promised rest turns out to harbor a kernel or residue of restlessness, which is later to be dissolved, if at all, by only a single measure of cadential piano postlude.

Other light touches of unrest permeate the song. The calm closing cadences incorporate a poignant passing dissonance which insinuates a contrary feeling, whether of desire, anguish, torment, or incredulity. Moreover, the same cadence also appears in m. 2, so that the work closes with part of its own unresting prelude, as if its “soon,” or any soon, were premature. And the tessitura of the voice, on the high side of the written octave F4-F5, heard against a piano part that never rises above F4, adds a layer of distinct if muted strain throughout.

The night song, it turns out, is not just a wanderer’s. It is a wanderer.

--The (Schubert) Lied institutionalizes a relation of mutual otherness, and accordingly of mutual ekphrasis, between music and culturally valued text. In other words the music and the text describe each other, evocatively but of necessity imperfectly. The

traditional idea that the art song expresses something inherent in a poem is deaf to the consequences of this re-mediation. Nothing is inherent anywhere except the mutual opacity—understood as something to be *affirmed*, not resisted. Schubert was not the first to recognize this opacity; no one was. But he did give it a priority that established a new imperative in the genre of song. Making this change was a symptom of a cultural shift. Instrumental genres became meaningful, in retrospect as well as in subsequent practice, partly by re-enacting this Lied-like equivocation between music and an intertext more often than not left indefinite--and all the more resonant for it.

--The mutual opacity of text and music, which is also a mutual translucency, places the song act in a sphere of semantic incompleteness. The setting, by intention or not, must necessarily be full of slippage, appropriation, reconfiguring. Within this order of construction, the text-music relationship may be focused on, or focused through, processes of interpretation and deconstruction, processes of identification and agency, processes of text-or reading-driven articulation, or all at once. Song, apparently the most simple and direct form of musical expression, is actually the most complex and qualified.