

LAURI SUURPÄÄ, *DEATH IN WINTERREISE. MUSICO-POETIC ASSOCIATIONS IN SCHUBERT'S SONG CYCLE* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014). ISBN 978-0-253-01100-8, 224pp, €69.

Few compositions are more central to the art-song canon than *Winterreise*, and there is no shortage of literature on what is probably the best-known song cycle of all time. Can anything new be written about it under these circumstances? A lot, actually, as Lauri Suurpää demonstrates in his new book about Schubert's world-weary wanderer who turns away from his lost love in order to search for death. The book contains three parts. In the first, the author sets out his study's background and his methodological concepts (four chapters). This is followed by an analysis of the last eleven songs of *Winterreise* (seven chapters) and a final section in which he draws his conclusions (three chapters).

Part 1 opens with reflections on the genesis and narrative of the cycle. Suurpää explains that he mainly engages with the score as printed in the first edition—in which, compared to Schubert's autograph, four Lieder appear transposed downwards—his reason being that these were changes 'which we know Schubert accepted, or at least knew about, as he prepared his work for publication' (6). He also postulates the existence of a 'vague plot' which does not engage with events but rather with changes in the protagonist's inner world, based on two types of illusion: initially, looking into the past, his beloved, and later, looking into the future, his increasing longing for death. Yet both are unattainable as his love is lost while death remains elusive: 'With some brief and fleeting exceptions, the wanderer knows that the illusion he contemplates and longs for is not, and cannot be, real. This knowledge makes his longing even more desperate.' (8) This narrative leads the author to an ordering of the twenty-four Lieder in nine groups of between one and five songs. These move from the wanderer's departure, via increasing depression, to his turning away from the focus on his lost love toward death, which appears increasingly as his preferred option until it too proves unattainable. Since the focus of Suurpää's study is the role of death, he restricts his analyses and most of his conclusions to the last four of these groups (covering just under half of the twenty-four songs). However, death can have two meanings: an early Sturm-und-Drang one, exemplified by Goethe's *Werther*, in which death is regarded as a physical event that represents the end of everything, or a later, symbolic Romantic meaning that is in itself less terminal: 'Death and suicide are thus seen as means of reaching something higher, related to eternity and the absolute ... death provides a means to experience the boundless and the infinite, paradoxically, within life. Death is therefore not the end point; instead, it is in the service of life.' (27) To Suurpää, *Winterreise's* end point represents such a symbolic death (so that the Leiermann, the organ-grinder, is neither death himself nor a foreshadowing of the protagonist's physical death).

In his analyses, Suurpää first looks at the music without reference to the text, then at the text alone before finally comparing his findings. He utilizes Robert Hatten's 'expressive genres' as analytical tools, charting both the 'global trajectory' of the cycle and more local emotional states. In practice, he mainly distinguishes two emotional states in the music, 'tragic' and 'joyful', and investigates to what extent they support or juxtapose the emotional states expressed in the text accompanied by the music. While his music-analytical methodology adopts mainly Schenkerian methods, Suurpää relies for his textual interpretation on Algirdas Julien Greimas's method of analysing texts in a purely structural way without referring to their semantic content. In formulas reminiscent of the 'equations' of formal logic this reduces the content of a text to relations of binary oppositions, in this case the relationship of an acting subject (the protagonist) and a desired object (his love or later death). Another binary opposition is that of sender and receiver. In *Winterreise* the protagonist is usually the receiver as he is regularly reminded of his desired objects through an agent (like the snow that turns his head grey, the crow or an inn that triggers contemplation, and which thus acts as sender. This method not only allows for a better comparison of the structure of different poems (and in its subtle changes makes the narrative development much clearer than other, more content-oriented approaches); it also facilitates the comparison of the poetry to the musical text, which is naturally analysed in an equally structural and non-semantic way.

The second part of Suurpää's book engages in analyses of the last eleven songs of *Winterreise*, in which he sees the protagonist gradually turning away from the focus on getting his beloved back toward embracing death as an alternative goal. This part engages with the last four of the nine sections into which he divides the overall cycle: the emergence of death as a positive option (songs 14–15); reflecting on the idea of death and renouncing love (songs 16–19); the choice of death (song 20); and the inability to find death (songs 21–24). Songs 14, 15, 16, 20 and 21 are 'kernels', which drive the narrative forward, while songs 17–19 and 22–24 are 'satellites', which contemplate the position reached in the songs immediately prior to them (16 and 21 respectively).

A closer look at one of Suurpää's song analyses may give a more detailed insight into his methodology. I have selected 'Das Wirtshaus' for this purpose. The author determines 'joyful' as the song's initial expressive genre, which is mixed with 'shades of tragic' at bar 18 and becomes fully tragic at bar 23. However, the end returns to a joyful expression (albeit again with shades of tragic, or, as Suurpää occasionally calls it now, a 'depressed quality'). All this unfolds in a quasi-religious chorale-like texture that Suurpää, here and elsewhere in the cycle, relates to 'peace brought by death'. Yet the use of the chromatic pitch E flat, and whether it progresses to E natural or to D (an issue also playing an important part in the previous song, 'Der Wegweiser'), takes

centre stage in his analytical observations. Its first appearance in bar 3 heralds the unusual lengthening of the introduction from four to five bars, and in bar 6 it initiates the brief tonicization of G minor. It is even more prominent in bars 20ff., yet particularly crucial in bars 23ff. when it plays an important part in the tonally complex F minor/A-flat major context of the fourth stanza (Suurpää identifies the minor dominant in bar 25 as the musical high point of the song). After an initially unsuccessful attempt in bar 26, the dominance of E natural is finally re-established at the end.

The textual analysis of 'Das Wirtshaus' is relatively brief as the text is itself neither long nor complex. According to Suurpää, in the previous song the wanderer has taken the decision to search actively for death and regard it as something positive (an important turning point in the narrative), and now he welcomes the sight of a cemetery. Consequently, the Greimassian narrative structure moves from the wanderer's joyful illusion in the first two stanzas of soon being united with death, triggered by encountering the cemetery that acts as a sender, toward the sad realization that there is no space for him there, so that his death has to be postponed (the transformation occurs in the third stanza; the reality is then elaborated on in the fourth).

The links between the musical analysis and the textual narrative are then presented in a third section. The joyful expression corresponds to the first two stanzas in which the protagonist encounters the cemetery and looks forward to an end to his wandering. The tragic expression comes in when he discovers that there is no room for him at this 'inn'. The music of the third stanza (with its mix of tragic/depressive and joyful moments) describes his attempts to resist this realization, yet in the fourth stanza he has to accept reality over his former illusion. The juxtaposition of E flat–E natural or E flat–D is read by Suurpää, both here and in the previous song, as 'the decision to seek death and the inability to find it' (181). However, while E flat was a diatonic pitch in the G-minor context of 'Der Wegweiser', in 'Das Wirtshaus' it is a chromatic note—an important distinction: 'In "Der Wegweiser" death is a real option that ultimately is chosen; likewise, E flat is part of the song's underlying diatony, its tonal reality, as it were. In "Das Wirtshaus," by contrast, death is only an illusion, and hence, E flat is not part of the basic tonal framework' (137). Of course, the analysis contains many more details which cannot be discussed in this brief summary. Generally (and unsurprisingly) Suurpää repeatedly finds that the music is far more detailed and subtle than the text in its development of a song's internal narrative.

In the third part of his book, Suurpää focuses on general conclusions and the unifying and cyclic qualities of *Winterreise*. He defines Schubert's work as a mix of a topical and a narrative cycle: on the one hand there is the continuous focus on the subject of longing (first for the beloved, later for death), while there are also aspects of a logically constructed, goal-directed narrative. His distinction between kernels and

satellites helps him to deflect the critique of authors like David Ferris or Beate Julia Perry, who have questioned the identity of *Winterreise* as a cycle: the continuous narrative element is represented by the kernels while the ‘embellishing’ satellites are more topical. Ultimately he does not identify a global tonal centre, but determines a wealth of local harmonic connections.

Suurpää also isolates a number of musical elements that allow cross-referencing between the songs, with a special focus on fairly free musical associations rather than motivic relationships. Altogether, he identifies eight such elements; among these are the juxtaposition of major (indicating illusion) and minor (standing for reality), the use of unison (indicating the protagonist’s inability to exert influence on his own fate)¹ and a quasi-religious texture (referring to the peace brought by death). Satellites are again treated differently, as they display fewer cross-references than the kernels.

Finally Suurpää reaffirms his understanding of death in *Winterreise* as metaphorical rather than concrete. The protagonist finds out that he cannot die: ‘Suicide, and by extension physical death, does not seem to correspond to the poetic content of the cycle unless we assume that the protagonist lacks the courage to take his own life’ (191). Thus the state reached by the protagonist at the end of the cycle is rather one of general numbness: getting rid of the ‘misery of the lost love’ is paid for by losing the ability to feel any emotion at all.

Given the author’s combination of many different analytical methods and theoretical concepts—alongside Schenker and Greimas he utilizes ideas and concepts by Robert Hatten, Nicholas Cook, Kofi Agawu and Roland Barthes, as well as neo-Riemannian theory—an inevitable question for the reviewer has to be whether the resulting theoretical construct is coherent and convincing. To me this seems to be the case (with one exception discussed below), although Suurpää runs the risk that if a reader has a problem with just one of the underlying concepts the ground beneath the entire edifice may become shaky. The book’s central strength certainly lies in the way it convincingly relates musical and textual analysis to each other, thus facilitating the link-up and mutual reinforcement of musical and extra-musical observations. For this achievement alone Suurpää has to be congratulated.

A second possible critique could relate to the structure of the author’s analytical chapters. He first engages with the music alone, without any reference to the text, then

¹ This meaning is also indicated by the completion of the *Urlinie* by the piano but not the voice: ‘the singer is unable to take part in the inevitable course of the background voice leading, much as the protagonist cannot change the course of events.’ (183)

looks separately at the text before comparing and combining the two sets of findings. It is, however, virtually impossible that the author could completely ignore his pre-existing knowledge of the text when looking at the music and treat it as if he were unaware of Müller's corresponding words. Suurpää concedes that 'the choice of musical features to be examined in detail may be based on text-music relations ... but I will try to avoid allowing them to affect the music-analytical interpretations' (51), yet the crucial question here is if his analytical observations make sense in their own right, regardless of their possible connections (or lack thereof) to the text. Again, by and large Suurpää's analyses appear to be plausible, so he passes this test as well. Of course, the score was not written as absolute music and only later connected to the words, so it may not be that much of a surprise if there is a close connection between them. Even so, the separation of the two spheres for analytical purposes is an interesting exercise and offers new insights.

However, while Suurpää's analytical system is by and large plausible, at some moments such a complex theoretical construct is bound to be less than wholly convincing. As mentioned above, one of his eight crucial musical elements is a unison between voice and piano, which he identifies in songs 14, 15, 16 and 17, and determines as its meaning the 'inability of the protagonist to affect his own fate' (181). The temporary absence of an independent melodic line, and thus the singer's inability to contribute independent material to the unfolding of the music, indicates that the protagonist remains its object, rather than a subject actively shaping it. This makes perfect sense in, for example, 'Der greise Kopf', when the voice is repeatedly in unison with the piano (bars 11–12, 21–22, 25–28). Here the wanderer believes for a moment that he has turned into an old, grey man who is close to the grave, only to realize that frost had turned his hair grey and that he is still much younger than he had hoped. The protagonist is not active here, but falls for a cruel joke that nature plays on him.

According to Suurpää, the coda of 'Der Wegweiser' (bars 57ff.) represents one of the crucial moments of the entire cycle. Here the protagonist finally decides to pursue death actively, after several songs in which he contemplated it more remotely as a possible option. In reaching this decision, the wanderer is certainly acting more independently than at any other point during the eleven songs discussed in this book. However, during significant sections of this coda—bars 57–60 ('Einen Weiser seh' ich stehen ...'), 69–72 and 78–81—the voice is in unison with the piano. While some of the stanza's lines have an independent melody, both its declamatory opening on a repeated quaver G (first appearing in the piano, then joined by the voice in unison) and the closing, almost unison, phrase of the song contribute greatly to the ominous character of this section, and in a way that seems to contradict the author's reading of this musical element. Suurpää does not mention these unison passages but focuses entirely on the section's complex chromatic structure.

Another aspect that left me not fully convinced is Suurpää's discussion of the overall key scheme of songs 13–24. Incorporating ideas developed by neo-Riemannian theory, he concedes that there is no overall tonal centre in the cycle, yet postulates an ongoing harmonic narrative in which neighbouring tonics often share one (and occasionally two or three) pitches. There are common tones in the tonic triads of all neighbouring songs from no. 13 to no. 19 (with the exception of 16–17) while there are no shared notes in songs nos. 20–24 (with the exception of 23–24). Reminding us that songs 17–19 are 'satellites', he reads the 'break' between songs 16 and 17 (as well as another break between songs 19 and 20 while the 'kernel' songs 16 and 20 share two pitches in their tonic triads) as separating the more topical satellite section from the ongoing narrative of the kernels. However, after song 20 this strategy changes: all neighbouring songs (including a second group of satellites) now display no common notes, with the exception of the last two songs. Suurpää interprets this change as follows:

The avoidance of closely related tonic harmonies after 'Der Wegweiser', in contrast to the smooth connections that prevailed up to this point in part 2, is an apt reflection of the protagonist's confusion and frustration. His journey no longer has a goal Likewise, the harmonic motions are distant, without connecting common tones. (178)

While I would not object to the inclusion of neo-Riemannian theory in general, I am not fully convinced that the argument is entirely plausible here. The different treatment of the two groups of satellites may indeed make sense in terms of the narrative's progress, but Suurpää admits that the situation would be different if Schubert's original keys were taken into account: then there would be common tones between songs 21 and 22, and 22 and 23, yet not between 23 and 24.² This is the one moment in which the lowering of keys in the first edition really matters, and I disagree with Suurpää's assessment that the original key scheme is only 'slightly different' while 'the larger picture remains unaltered' (179). Given that throughout most of the book the results of structural analysis and contextual analysis are used to reinforce each other, the sudden switch to using contextual interpretation to explain a structural inconsistency (i.e., the different type of tonal relationships in the two groups of satellites) leaves me a bit uneasy.

However, despite these minor issues Suurpää's book is a highly valuable addition to the literature on *Winterreise*, while also being one that develops innovative approaches to the analysis of vocal music in general. It would be most interesting to

² In the autograph, the keys of songs 20–24 are G minor – F major – A minor – A major – B minor while in the first edition they are G minor – F major – G minor – A major – A minor.

apply the same methodology to the first thirteen songs of the cycle (or indeed to other songs and song cycles) to find out whether the combination of Schenker and Greimas works equally well there. For now, we have to praise Lauri Suurpää for opening up new insights into Schubert, the analysis of vocal music and, last but not least, the engagement with death through music.

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