

The Lied in Schubert's work. Stylistic and interpretive perspectives

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Abstract: *Schubert is considered to be a composer with an outstanding sensitivity for poetry. It is not astonishing that he chose to musically comment the works of the most well-known poets, with an incredible adaptation capacity to any stylistic particularity or literary content. Along with his creation, the lied will become the perfect merger of poetry and music, addressing the most diverse topics and attaining new expressive aspects. Schubert's model, of outstanding stylistic art, will become an inexhaustible source of inspiration for future generations of composers.*

Key-words: *Franz Schubert, lied, stylistic, poetry, voice, piano, accompaniment*

1. Introduction

The Age of Enlightenment, dominated by rigorous form delineation and the tendency towards monumentalism, has not brought about representative compositions in the lied genre, which had only a secondary role in the art of the great classics. Towards the end of the 18th Century, the genre would become more and more prevalent, due to the works of Hiller (*singspieler* composer), Reichardt, and Zelter. Mozart introduces the lied in his operas *The Magic Flute* and *Così fan tutte*, and Beethoven will compose a considerable number of miniatures for voice and piano. Lieder were accompanied in a simple style, with chords, having a role of harmonic support. At the end of the 18th Century and the beginning of the 19th Century, the lyrical poetry underwent a great blossoming, which determined the distinguishing of the miniature genre of chamber music and of a cultural trend largely spread in Europe. The writings of the most well-known poets of the time, such as Goethe, Heine, Schiller, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Mayrhofer, Schlegel, Rückert, and Walter Scott represent an inspiration source and a richness of nuances and feelings

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rendered musically through the creative art of the composers. The new genre designed for voice and piano accompaniment becomes the most important artistic manifestation of the Romantic movement and its main representatives are Franz Schubert, Robert Schumann, Johannes Brahms, and Hugo Wolf.

2. Franz Schubert, the creator of the Romantic lied

Schubert, the pathfinder named “the father of the Romantic lied” will confer to this musical genre an importance equal to that of opera or symphony. He finds new meanings of traditions that he directs to other ideals of artistic manifestation. Spontaneity and improvisation combined with emotional depth in a multitude of nuances preserve the simplicity and soul balance. The closeness to nature determines a diversity of descriptions that will always be subordinated to the expression, sometimes fusing with it, while the accompaniment will create an almost material atmosphere, through an instrumental colouring. The theme of love, under all the aspects and emotional nuances, the traits of daily world, the motif of tragic loneliness, or the folk legends, are the elements of poetic texts in which Schubert finds himself and that he expresses in his works. Some of the more than 600 lieder (inspired by Goethe, Heine, Shakespeare, Walter Scott, Petrarca, Ossian, Müller, Mayrhofer, Schober, Rückert, and Schlegel) were reunited in cycles such as: *Die schöneMüllerin*, D.795, *Die Winterreise*, D.911 and *Schwanengesang*, D.957, to which we can add the *Wilhelm-Meister-Lieder* series. Besides a rich harmonic language, the distant key modulations or the free treatment of the musical form, we find a main feature of his lieder that is the melodic cantability, which captivates through charm and simplicity. This also results from the characterisation made by V. Konen: “Schubert’s lieder captivate us before everything through the flow of the spontaneous cantability of the melody, by its brilliant simplicity (Konen 1961, 101).

3. A stylistic approach to Schubert’s lieder

Schubert is an improviser whose source of inspiration is found in lyrical poetry and his compositions being addressed to a limited public, having as a favourite theme, “the lyrical confession” (Konen 1961, 93). After 1817, due to his collaboration with the baritone Johann Michael Vogl, Schubert’s works, heard until then only in some smaller circles, would be applauded in the Viennese concert halls and also in other Austrian towns. Preserving the features of the miniature type, Schubert gives his lieder a national colour, with specific intonations from the Viennese folklore. At the

beginning of the 19th Century, song would accompany day-to-day life: going in the fields or walking in the forest, dancing on feast days, cradle songs, and serenades. Also, people were accustomed to the church bells that would announce the liturgy, weddings or funerals, the post horn or the hunting horn, and of course, the sounds of nature: the flow of water, the wind blowing through foliage, and the raindrops. Schubert added these elements to his lieder, sometimes in an obvious form, and other times stylised (Parsons 2004, 86).

The state of spirit expressed by poems but also the natural sequence of actions would determine the form of a musical image. This is the reason why a large part of Schubert's lieder has a through-composed form; this being strictly related to the evolution of poetry or characters in certain cases. The perfect singable character of his songs is also due to a very good knowledge of human voices, with all their possibilities of sound and expression. Schubert's new romantic style brings some innovating composition methods such as: a complex intonational design, ingenious modulations, the colouring and the melodic originality, fantasy of improvisation, as far as the freedom characteristic to the musical form. Frequent changes between major and minor keys, the daring chords sequences, the unexpected modulations or the harmonic changes of minor half, always pursue the creation of a specific state of mind detached from poetry. Schubert's experiments in a musical genre with a permanent developing tendency, such as *the ballad*, in which the length of a lyric determines the construction of a musical phrase, were divided throughout his entire creation. A series of lieder date back to his adolescence, with an obvious operatic influence, as being extracted from an ample dramatic work (*Hagens Klage, Der Erlkönig, Der Wanderer, Der Taucher, Szenes Faust, Der Liedler*). But the expressivity and freedom of the Romantic language would fuse into a rigorous structure, the composer being always preoccupied by rendering the text faithfully and genuinely. Schiller's dramatic poetry had a strong impact on his lied creation, as did the writings of Goethe, if we take into account the large number of works inspired by their lyrics (Parsons 2004, 93). Music unfolds on several plans: the piano accompaniment is transformed by taking over the elements of classical symphonism and the ones specific to the ample dramatic genres. Most of the times, the piano acquires an expressivity of descriptive or painterly nature, the composer using rhythmic or melodic motifs to express a certain image, a state of mind or a character. V. Konen notes: "In Schubert's sentimental songs, the chamber accompaniment acquired an equal meaning to that of the orchestra part in the vocal-dramatic music of the Viennese classics" (Konen 1961, 109). In his lieder, such as *Die Nacht, Am Meer, Nur wenn die Sehnsucht kennt, Heiss mich nicht reden, Die Stadt, Der Doppelgänger, Prometheus, and Ganymed*, we find declamatory song elements and even the recitative. One of the telling examples in this regard is *Erlkönig* with the poet's J.W. von Goethe lyrics.

The picture outlines the image of the father who rides back home, holding his suffering child in his arms, who is called by the King of Elves, a supernatural being, who attracts him in his luring game. From the first bars, the music introduces the listener in the middle of the action through the piano accompaniment made up of octaves grouped in triplets, repeated by the right hand in a *forte* nuance. This rhythmic idea, present until the end of the song, is associated with the horse's ceaseless gallop, and it creates a feeling of straining, hurry, and inner turmoil (figure 1).

Fig. 1. *Erlkönig* –piano introduction (fragment)

Schubert concentrates in a very few minutes, a story of great dramatic loading, where the key plays a very important role in establishing the general atmosphere of the song. Varied and contrasting expressions are created, by switching major with minor keys, and by using different registers and characteristic styles of accompaniment for each figure individually. The mysterious character of the vocal discourse, as well as the harmonic colouring, captures all the aspects of the story and captivate the listener. The song's endings sets out the tragic outcome by means of a recitative (fig. 2), a contrasting element with the tumultuous unfolding of the action expressed through rapid deployment of the music and ostinato accompaniment made up of triplets on repeated sounds.

Fig. 2. *Erlkönig* –final

In the lied *Wohin?* the river downstream is associated with the uninterrupted sextuplets of the right hand on the sounds of *G major* arpeggio, and the bass crotchets are rendering the steps of the one who's accompanying the river (figure 3).

Fig. 3. *Wohin?*

The accompaniment of the lied *Gretchen am Spinnrade* made up also of semiquavers grouped in sextuplets. After the short introduction, the listener is already brought into the story, being seized by a melancholy associated with an inner unease and seeming to hear the uninterrupted functioning of the spinning wheel (figure 4).

Fig. 4. *Gretchen am Spinnrade*

The rhythm as a main motif in the accompaniment, above which the other poetic elements are woven, can also be found in *Standchen* where the piano imitates the guitar or the lute, while the soloist has a discourse of great cantability (figure 5).

Fig. 5. *Standchen*

We find the ephemeral joy and the impression of water babbling in the lied *Die Forelle* (figure 6):

Etwas geschwind.

In ei - nem Bächlein hel - - le, da schoss in fro - her Eil' die
Fi - scher mit der Ru - - the wohl an dem U - fer stand, und

The image shows a musical score for 'Die Forelle'. It consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked 'Etwas geschwind.' The key signature has three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and the time signature is 3/4. The lyrics are: 'In ei - nem Bächlein hel - - le, da schoss in fro - her Eil' die Fi - scher mit der Ru - - the wohl an dem U - fer stand, und'.

Fig. 6. *Die Forelle*

Although of a simple style, with chords, the accompaniment of the lied *Der Todd und das Mädchen* made up of harmonies that unfold in a monotonous sequence, reminds us of a church bell (figure 7).

Mässig. $\text{♩} = 54.$

Etwas geschwinder.
Das Mädchen.

Vor - über, ach vor.

pp (sempre con Pedale e Sordino)

The image shows a musical score for 'Der Todd und das Mädchen'. It features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked 'Mässig. ♩ = 54.' and 'Etwas geschwinder.' The key signature has one flat (F) and the time signature is 3/4. The lyrics are: 'Vor - über, ach vor.' The piano part is marked 'pp (sempre con Pedale e Sordino)'.

Fig. 7. *Der Todd und das Mädchen*

The funeral march is present in the piano accompaniment of *Trockne Blumen* (figure 8):

Und wenn sie wandelt am Hü - gel vorbey und denkt im Herzen der incint' es treu! Dann

The image shows a musical score for 'Trockne Blumen'. It consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The key signature has two sharps (F#, C#) and the time signature is 3/4. The lyrics are: 'Und wenn sie wandelt am Hü - gel vorbey und denkt im Herzen der incint' es treu! Dann'.

Fig. 8. *Trockne Blumen*

The image of the calm waves and their movement without ending is rendered through arpeggiated chords in *Meeresstille* (figure 9).

Sehr langsam, ängstlich. ♩ = 27.

Tie - fe Stil - le herrscht im Was - ser, oh - ne Re - gung ruht — das

Fig. 9. *Meeresstille*

Another achievement of the composer is also the creation of the lied cycle, a sort of lyrical-musical dramatic art. Even if each work separately expresses a distinct lyrical moment, overall, they form a story. *Die schöne Müllerin* combines the love them with that of wanderings – the cycle begins with the lied *Das Wandern*, the traveller always been a typical character presenting Schubert's working an encrypted (pseudonymized) form -, and nature takes part at the hero's state of mind. On the other hand, the artist is captive in one endless winter, in the cycle *Die Winterreise* where each song brings a change of light in a varied repetition of a fixed idea, leading to the same ending (Perrey 2005, 7). *Der Wanderer* becomes *Der Leierman*, the one who, with his frozen fingers, is repeating obsessively the same musical motif. This lied, that completes the cycle, illustrates the despair carried to the extreme, the despondency, and the feeling of loneliness. Completed a short time before Schubert's death, *Die Winterreise* brings again to the fore the idea of lyrical confession, expressing into some kind of impressive way, the feelings of the artist and the acceptance of a tragic fate.

4. The accompaniment

Usually, the accompaniment lies at the heart of the colourful background of the song, and creates a state of spirit through the sound properties and the suggestive associations. The composer gives uniqueness to each composition by associating especially expressive intonations with a uniform pulsation. Many times, the right hand is entrusted with melodic elements that support the discourse of the soloist, while the left hand creates complexity. Liliana Iacobescu notes the importance of the role that the accompanists have, and their responsibility in completing the interpretation: "Each sound of the piano has to speak in a different manner, preparing the atmosphere of the lied, supporting, completing the voice" (Iacobescu 2001, 8).

The expressivity and diversity of the accompaniment in Schubert's case was prepared by the progress registered in terms of piano compositions, starting from the end of the 18th Century. In his turn, he contributed to the development of

piano literature through a more complex role that he attributed to this instrument, raising technique and interpretation issues worthy of soloist works. The subtle nuances of each emotion detached from the poetry are outlined through a special attention to the details. Thus, the alternation between major and minor keys reflects the passing from hope to sadness, or from dream to reality, the dissonances and sudden modulations occur at moments of psychological tension, the change of rhythm can signal the appearance of another character etc. The harmonic richness of the lieder is obviously tightly related to the piano part. Schubert explores the colouring and the sound resources of the piano, as well as the pedal sonorities, giving to his accompaniments an absolute novelty and the irunique style that he will also transpose in instrumental music. In his variations, *Musical moments or Impromptus*, we find elements borrowed from the lied creation. His innovations have inspired other composers, such as Mendelssohn (in creating the famous *Songs without words*), Schumann and Brahms, who adopted this form revealing wonderful poems in miniature (Landormy 1942, 264). Also, Franz Liszt has accomplished a series of transcriptions for piano solo, of some Schubert's lieder.

5. Conclusion

Through the compositional techniques and expressive methods used in his creation for voice and piano, Schubert opens new horizons for this musical genre, influencing many composers from 19th Century and the beginning of 20th Century. Schumann, Brahms, Wolf, and R. Strauss took over certain elements of his work, processing them according to their own vision. They all acknowledged Schubert as being the one who brought the lied to perfection, through the quality of musical writing, the overflowing imagination, and the way that his music wraps poetry and shows it to its best in a perfect fusion.

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