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978-0-521-02875-2 - Schubert's Late Lieder: Beyond the Song-Cycles

Susan Youens

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Schubert's Late Lieder

Of all the songs Franz Schubert composed in the 1820s, the best-known are the famous cycles *Die schöne Müllerin* and *Winterreise*, and also the “cycle” *Schwannengesang* created by Schubert's publisher. But the individual songs composed by Schubert between 1822 and his death on 19 November 1828 have much that is deserving of elucidation.

Schubert's Late Lieder is a study of selected songs for voice and piano composed in the final six years of his life. Around late 1822, he was diagnosed with syphilis, and many of the songs discussed in this book were written under the seal of impending death. It is possible to locate in these songs a “late song style,” full of elegiac references to Schubert's other death-haunted works and marked by distinctive variation techniques. The songs on poems by Schubert's Austrian contemporaries are less well known than they should be, and yet the backdrop to these works is often fascinating. In this book, Susan Youens introduces the poets Matthäus von Collin, Johann Ladislaus Pyrker, Carl Gottfried Ritter von Leitner, Johann Anton Friedrich Reil, Franz von Schlectha, and Johann Gabriel Seidl and discusses Schubert's songs to their poetry, revealing much about the poet and about Austrian history and culture.

Susan Youens is Professor of Musicology at the University of Notre Dame. She is the author of six books on the lieder of Franz Schubert and Hugo Wolf, four of which are published by Cambridge University Press: *Schubert: Die schöne Müllerin* (1992), *Schubert's Poets and the Making of Lieder* (1996), *Schubert, Müller and Die schöne Müllerin* (1997), *Hugo Wolf and his Mörike Songs* (2000).

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When one thinks of the songs from Schubert's last years, it is usually the large cycles *Die schöne Müllerin* and *Winterreise* that come to mind, or the songs that the publisher Tobias Haslinger assembled in *Schwanengesang*, or the last Goethe settings from 1826 (the Mignon songs of D. 877). The individual lieder on poems by minor poets are less well known, and yet this repertory contains marvels. All of it was composed after Schubert's aspirations to challenge Beethoven were in full force, and much of it was composed under the sign and seal of impending death. Schubert was probably diagnosed with syphilis in late 1822, and he would have known that this disease usually culminated, if accident or other illness did not intervene, in death after an incalculable lapse of time. He could not know how much time remained to him, but he did know that there was a limit, that it was sooner rather than later, that Death would be his shadow-companion from that day forward. The knowledge could not but make an impress both on his choice of poetry and on the manner of its setting.

Even those songs familiar in the recital halls of the world issue from contexts lost to us over the years. For those singers capable of the most long-breathed legato, "Nacht und Träume" (Night and Dreams) is a *ne plus ultra* creation, a nugget of purest Romanticism, while "Die Allmacht" (The Almighty) is one of the most powerful lieder Schubert ever wrote, but few know who Matthäus von Collin and Johann Ladislaus Pyrker, the poets of these two songs, were or what their connection to Schubert was. None of the poets in this book can share the literary limelight with poetic genius of the order of Schiller, Goethe, or Heine, and their comparative inconsequentiality has meant that little attention has been paid, but the "mystery" of Schubert's attraction to poems such as these vanishes when one investigates further. The six poets portrayed in this book are linked by shared traits: for example, all of them either knew Schubert personally or knew of him through mutual friends. All six men dreamed of literary glory and none of them attained it, although two were remarkably thoughtful people who explored new literary currents in their poetry. The others represent in varying degrees Austria's post-Napoleonic conservative tendencies; they shunned whatever might call back into being the demons of recent upheaval and preached loyalty to the Habsburgs and Biedermeier contentment with limitation in their poetry. Several of them were poet-bureaucrats ("Beamten-Dichter") – writers condemned to desk jobs in civil service for a salary – of the sort commonplace in nineteenth-century Austria, with Franz Grillparzer being the most famous example. All of these poets wrote about death, and all but one of them explored the workings of desire. All of them played various roles in

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historical upheavals during and after the Napoleonic imperium: one had a savage encounter with Metternich's censors, and several were censors themselves. One sought to inculcate Austrian patriotism through literature, and another was a bit player in Italian resistance to Austrian rule, the stirrings of reform in Hungary, the aftermath of Byron's tempestuous life, and much more. The *Vormärz* comes to life in these songs.

There are musical bonds between these songs as well. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Milan Kundera wrote about the propensity of musical genius near the end of its mortal coil to explore variation form for its metaphysical properties, its "invitation au voyage." An infinity of possibilities lies within a few measures, and one need not lose *this* infinity to death, as one loses beloved people. Kundera was writing about Beethoven, not Schubert, and what the Czech writer celebrates is the manner in which the voyage takes the music far away from its starting point. In certain late songs, however, Schubert explores another kind of variation technique that I would argue belongs to his death-haunted later years. In songs such as "Der Winterabend" (The Winter Evening), "Das Lied im Grünen" (The Song in the Green Countryside), and "Im Freien" (In the Open), one hears, not a Beethovenian epic journey, but rather one lapidary variation of detail after another without ever losing sight or sound of the initial musical kernel from which the song is derived. The result is a fusion of change and continuity in which continuity comes more to the fore than in Beethoven's practice, for what I would like to think were poetic and perhaps personal reasons on Schubert's part. These poems are meditations on what constitutes a "good life" and a "good death," and the composer who set them to music knew what it was to look back at the past with the retrospective gaze of summation, for all that he was only in his twenties. It is easy to admire the Beethovenian model for its epic sweep, carrying one from Diabelli to infinity and beyond, but this quieter formal proposition strikes, I would argue, just as deep.

In these four chapters, I have traced an imprecise chronology from the months just before the diagnosis which changed Schubert's life to the end of that life, to the last song Schubert ever completed. In each chapter, I focus on one poet or a small group of poets, beginning with Matthäus von Collin (1779–1824), who played a considerable role in the dissemination of German Romantic ideas in Austria. Kin to Schubert's longtime friend Joseph von Spaun, Collin knew Schubert personally and introduced him to various notables in Vienna's literary world. Like his more famous brother Heinrich, whose play *Coriolan* was graced with an overture by Beethoven, Matthäus had dramatic ambitions. Before becoming first and foremost a literary critic in his later years, he completed part of a projected cycle of historical dramas intended to instruct the Austrian populace about past historical glory so that they might be inspired to recreate that splendor in the present. Collin's duties as a tutor to Napoleon's half-Austrian son, his role as one of the founders of the influential periodical *Jahrbücher der Literatur*, and his preoccupation with drama in theater-mad Vienna meant that he wrote very little lyric poetry, but the few specimens he did produce include the texts for three of Schubert's greatest songs: the ballad "Der Zwerg" (The Dwarf), D. 771; "Nacht und Träume," D. 827; and "Wehmut" (Melancholy), D. 772. In addition, Schubert found the words for the duet "Licht und Liebe" (Light and Love), D. 352, in one of Collin's chronicle plays, and the two men collaborated on a comic "send-up" of Rossinian aria style intended to make the absent and dilatory Joseph von Spaun write to them ("Epistel: Musikalischer

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Schwank," D. 749). In part through his associations with Ludwig Tieck and Friedrich Schlegel, Collin was *au courant* with Romantic concepts on which he devised his own thought-provoking variations, such as the Sadean exploration of murderous erotic desire in "Der Zwerg." Peeling away layers of meaning, one finds possible political subtexts in this ballad having to do both with the Reign of Terror and Napoleon's rule, as well as musical subtexts which tell of Beethoven's presence in Schubert's life. This grotesque tale is, furthermore, a distillate of centuries of Teutonic dwarf-lore; from Albrecht in the *Nibelungenlied* to Günter Grass's Oskar in *The Tin Drum*, the German-speaking world has been fascinated by this particular medical-mythical condition. And the Siamese twinship of Eros and Death is not the only Romantic notion to be found in Schubert's Collin songs. In "Nacht und Träume" and "Wehmut," Collin created potent miniature evocations of nocturnal dream-worlds and of the melancholy considered to be a special property of the artistic temperament since antiquity. Schubert's songs are, like the poems, small things, their profundity heightened by the compact dimensions. Not until Hugo Wolf's "Alles endet, was entsteht" would there be another lied-meditation on the end of all things with the intensity of "Wehmut."

The second chapter, "Ego, *Ehrgeiz*, and the lied: Schubert and 'the Homer of the Habsburgs,' Johann Ladislaus Pyrker," is a study of Schubert's two songs on words by Johann Ladislaus Pyrker, Patriarch of Venice and Archbishop of Eger (1772–1847). Both songs – "Das Heimweh" (Homesickness), D. 851, on a poem carved from Pyrker's epic poem *Tunisiäs* of 1820, and "Die Allmacht," D. 852, its text taken from Pyrker's *Perlen der heiligen Vorzeit* (Pearls of Holy Antiquity) of 1821 – are important works. Unlike the other figures discussed in this book, the brief contact between Pyrker and Schubert demonstrates a paradox of lied history: that it is sometimes crucial for a composer *not* to know much about his chosen poet. The two men were guests at Badgastein in August and early September of 1825, and the ecclesiastic impressed Schubert greatly, so we are told. Had Schubert known Pyrker better, however, one doubts he would have liked this man, whose charm was a thin veneer over roiling jealousy and avarice. Consumed by ravening desire for literary immortality, Pyrker believed himself to be a better poet than "Minister Goethe," whose "mistakes" he totted up, and he staked his reputation on the already antiquated genre of the heroic epic poem in hexameters as the most suitable medium for lauding royalty. When he hymned the battlefield exploits of two Habsburg monarchs – the sixteenth-century Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and the thirteenth-century "founder of the Habsburgs," Rudolph I – at great length in his *Tunisiäs* and *Rudolph von Habsburg*, Pyrker became one of the foremost propagandists for the Habsburg myth of the Emperor as a benevolent, all-knowing father to a nation of childlike, obedient, grateful subjects. The *Perlen der heiligen Vorzeit* tells of Old Testament patriarchs rather than royal patriarchs, and one suspects Pyrker of attempting to replace Friedrich Klopstock's New Testament epic *Messias* (Messiah) with his own Old Testament rodomontade. Pyrker was not a great poet, and his gaseous verse died when he did, but we must be grateful for the two Schubert–Pyrker songs. These are works rich in cultural content, "Das Heimweh," for example, exemplifying the vogue for all things Helvetic in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Those who lived in the Alps pined for its mountain magnificence when away from home, according to the myth, and poets and composers made much of the fashionable phenomenon. Pyrker borrows from Goethe – he

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probably did so unconsciously – for his evocation of “Sehnsucht nach den Alpen” (longing for the Alps), and what Schubert does with this Goethean moment in “Das Heimweh” is immensity in a nutshell.

Lest we become too cynical about human nature after contemplating Pyrker, we turn in chapter 3 (“Of song, sorrow, and censorship: Schubert and Carl Gottfried Ritter von Leitner”) to the songs on poems by the Styrian poet Carl Gottfried Ritter von Leitner (1800–90), a reticent person whose poems are as thoughtful as Collin’s and less inept in poetic technique. His first volume of poetry in 1825 was the source for ten Schubert songs composed in late 1827 or early 1828, although three were never completed. The composer had visited Graz in September 1827 and was reminded of Leitner’s verse on that occasion by Marie Pachler, Schubert’s host and a friend of the poet’s. In the spring of 1827, a few months before Schubert’s trip to Graz, Leitner submitted his second book manuscript – a collection of novellas – to the Viennese censorship bureaucracy and was stunned by their harsh verdict on his work. If Metternich’s Austria was far from being Stalin’s Russia in its repression of writers, the censors could and did ruin lives. Ironically, the novella “Meister Kunbert” (Master Kunbert), one of Leitner’s best works, is an allegory of the State’s enmity to artists. A bleak, unsparring creation, it goes beyond the bounds of Leitner’s time and place to tell of oppressed artists anywhere, at any time.

Two of the late Leitner–Schubert songs discussed in the third chapter are particularly significant: “Des Fischers Liebesglück” (The Fisherman’s Happiness in Love) and “Der Winterabend.” Leitner’s experiment with rhyme, meter, and rhythm in “Des Fischers Liebesglück” – erotic transcendence “auf dem Wasser zu singen” – becomes in Schubert a remarkable experiment with musical palindromes, with harmonies that sound as if they hail from Atlantis or the “cathédrale d’Ys,” and with rhythmic and metric complexities to match Leitner’s play with verbal rhythms. If “Des Fischers Liebesglück” has long been acknowledged as an extraordinary composition, “Der Winterabend” has not yet received the full homage due to it. The poem seems the essence of the Biedermeier, with its elderly persona who withdraws gratefully from the world into nocturnal memories of a long-dead, much-loved spouse, but Schubert understood it as a depiction of the best of good deaths and fills his music with emblems of life’s end. In Leitner’s poem, thoughts of the past shape the present moment and give it its meaning, and Schubert, realizing this, enacts the workings of memory in the idiosyncratic formal structure of “Der Winterabend.” For Schubert, who might well have feared that his own death would not be as gentle as this one, to create such an affectionate portrait of love at the end of it all must have required courage, imagination, and a certain generosity of spirit.

The fourth and final chapter, “Songs of life, death, and departure: Schubert’s Viennese contemporaries,” brings together a trio of writers in Schubert’s own city. Johann Anton Friedrich Reil (1773–1843) was an actor at the Burgtheater, a cultivated man who had fallen out of favor with the theatrical management at the time he collaborated with Schubert on the creation of “Das Lied im Grünen” (The Song in the Green Countryside), D. 917. This is the only solo song on a text by Reil, but it is among the greatest gems of the last years. The amateur poet Reil probably took as his model a lyric poem by Johann Heinrich Voß, famous for his translations of Homer, and improved upon it. Voß had burgeoning life and sex in springtime

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on his mind – a rustic romp – while Reil plumbs deeper mysteries, evoking a green season of creativity which one must use wisely. The groves of Arcadia have long been haunted by death; pastoral and elegy go hand-in-hand, and Reil's personae, rejoicing in Nature, love, and art, know that the skeletal figure is there. Like "Der Winterabend," this is music born of quiet courage. When Schubert allows one touch of dread in D minor, as if a chill finger from Mozart's Requiem had reached out to touch this spring song, and then dispels it with a willed return to the vitality regnant everywhere else in the lied, he demonstrates the sort of sad wisdom available only to the most extraordinary thirty-year-olds.

Schubert was also friends with Baron Franz Xaver von Schlechta-Wssehrd (1796–1875), and composed seven songs on texts by this dilettante-poet between 1815 and 1826. Schlechta is a textbook case of *Dichter-Beamtentum*. He longed to be a playwright, but indifferent reviews of his stage works and the need to earn a living for his wife and family forced him into employment at the Finance Ministry. In his unpublished *Nachlaß*, one finds several poems in which the bureaucrat laments the loss of his creative faculties. If these poems have little or no artistic value, they are revealing as social commentary, and they evince a kind of honesty that one imagines might well have constituted a bond between Schlechta and Schubert. Because themes of desire and death predominate in this book, only two of the Schlechta songs appear within these covers: "Widerschein" (Reflection), D. 639, with its snapshot of heterosexual desire as the early nineteenth century conceived it, and "Todtengräber-Weise" (Gravedigger's Tune), D. 869. Only the most radical of exercises in enharmonic transformation, in tonal "travel" from one state of being to another, would do, Schubert evidently concluded, for Schlechta's assertion in "Todtengräber-Weise" of belief in the afterlife of art. This same poem also gave the composer the chance to devise another work based on the same musical conception one finds in "Der Pilgrim" (The Pilgrim), D. 794, on a poem by Schiller, but turned to different ends. In both songs, matters of belief sound to simulacra of congregational chorales, and in both, the complexities of spiritual life give rise to tonal complexities of the most challenging kind. But where "Der Pilgrim" leads to nihilism, the intensity of despair at its end matched only by the darkest moments of *Winterreise*, "Todtengräber-Weise" sounds the final trumpet throughout in a celebration of assured faith.

This book ends where Schubert's songwriting life ended, with "Die Taubenpost" (The Carrier Pigeon), D. 957, no. 14, on a text by Johann Gabriel Seidl (1804–75), the last poet between these covers. Seidl was ambitious, pushy, and prolific – there is hardly a literary almanac or *Taschenbuch* printed between the early 1820s and early 1850s lacking in this man's prose or poetry or both. His first collection of poetry appeared in 1826 when Seidl was only twenty-two years old, and the poet, desirous of musical settings, made sure that the collection found its way into Schubert's hands immediately. All six songs are gems, although considerations of space and the principal thematic concerns of this book have led me to discuss only three of them: "Das Zügelglöcklein" (The Passing Bell), D. 871; "Im Freien" (In the Open), D. 880; and "Die Taubenpost," D. 957, no. 14. "Im Freien" in particular is one of Schubert's adumbrations in song of what matters most in life: friends, lovers, beloved places, and music. Seidl could be annoyingly preachy, the optimism of his poems issuing from willed ignorance of life's darkness, but the sermonizing in "Im Freien" was of a gentler sort with which Schubert could agree. Five more Seidl songs followed, most likely in 1828:

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a mini song-cycle, the *Vier Refrain-Lieder* (Four Refrain Songs), D. 866, with its tale of village philandering, and “Die Taubenpost.” Schubert could not, of course, know that the latter would be his last song, but for posterity, the symbolism of the carrier pigeon who brings messages to the beloved is both beautiful and painful. The fact that the song “ends” inconclusively, as if poised to begin again and wing its way through more verses, more songs, is calculated to make those of us who love this repertory wistful.

In the end, the real subject of this book is the precision of Schubert’s musical language, with the late lieder as case-studies. Because songs were held in lower esteem than larger genres for a long time, commentary on them was once quite general, with little heed to the specificity of nuance that is so compelling in these works. That situation has changed, thanks to scholars such as Richard Kramer, Ruth Solie, Edward Kravitt, Rufus Hallmark, Lawrence Kramer, Kristina Muxfeldt, Berthold Hoeckner, Christopher Gibbs, David Gramit, John Daverio, Marie-Agnes Dittrich, James Parsons, Amanda Glauert, and many others. The point still needs to be demonstrated, however, especially where the lieder in question are quiet things. Size and heaven-storming difficulty always command attention, and Schubert made it a lifelong habit to compose songs such as “Der Zwerg” and “Die Allmacht” that challenge singers, pianists, and listeners alike. But wellsprings of profundity are also at work in quieter songs such as “Der Winterabend,” “Das Lied im Grünen,” “Des Fischers Liebesglück,” “Im Freien,” and “Die Taubenpost.” Here, one finds rare qualities of acceptance, a philosophical stance from the outermost brink of a well-lived life. If this is less dramatic than existential despair or rage or flaming passion, it is ultimately the most moving dimension of all. That Schubert found music for it is his last gift to us.

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Susan Youens

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