

Introduction

Robert Schumann's *Frauenliebe und Leben*, Op. 42, is one of the composer's three great song cycles, along with *Dichterliebe*, Op. 48, and the Eichendorff *Liederkreis*, Op. 39. This cycle, like its companions, remains a staple on the concert stage, in voice studios, and on recordings. *Frauenliebe* was probably Schumann's most popular song cycle in the nineteenth century. His genius as a lied composer remains undisputed today. These songs demonstrate his compositional mastery with their sensitive treatment of poetic form and sentiment and their inherent musical expressiveness.

The poems, by Adelbert von Chamisso, a noted figure in his day, are among his "lyric-epic" creations – poems that are at once individual, first-person lyrical utterances and, when taken as a whole and in sequence, delineate a narrative. The *Frauenliebe*¹ poems portray moments in the life experience of a young German woman of the early nineteenth century, from adolescent infatuation to love, engagement, marriage, conjugal intimacy, motherhood, and (early?) widowhood. Chamisso's poetry in general, and these poems in particular, were immensely popular in the nineteenth century and into the twentieth.

Few if any will deny the beauty and expressiveness of Schumann's songs. Yet modern performers, audiences, and critics nearly always qualify their praise with an acknowledgment that the poems on which they are based, more than many other nineteenth-century lyrics, are out of touch with modern sensibilities. Even in the 1940s, the famous singer and lied interpreter Lotte Lehmann wrote: "One often hears Chamisso's poems for this cycle criticized as being old-fashioned."² To be sure, Lehmann herself proceeds to write about the songs sincerely and whole-heartedly, but her remark reflects a growing adverse opinion of the cycle. One modern view

¹ The title of Chamisso's poetic cycle is *Frauen-Liebe und Leben*, but Schumann's title for his songs is *Frauenliebe und Leben*. In this work I use the form *Frauenliebe und Leben* for both the poems and the song cycle, and also for the similarly titled *Lebenslieder und Bilder*. For the sake of brevity I also occasionally use the short titles *Frauenliebe* and *Lebenslieder*.

Unless otherwise indicated all translations are the author's own.

² Lotte Lehmann, *Eighteen Song Cycle: Studies in Their Interpretation*. London: Cassell / New York: Praeger (1972), 93.

even asserts that the poems must have presented stereotyped images of women and marriage unacceptable even in their own day. And since Schumann was drawn to these poems and set them, his music also comes under suspicion of fostering the outdated attitudes and ideas.³

Thus one approaches this cycle at a certain disadvantage. The songs come with a good deal of “baggage.” A question that hovers around this work without ever being explicitly acknowledged is whether it should even be performed any longer, since many find its sentiments uncomfortable, or worse, insulting and demeaning. How can a singer and pianist put their all into a performance, how can listeners enjoy the songs, if they have misgivings about the texts, and therefore about the music, which so sincerely embraces Chamisso’s poems? And yet on the evidence of the recital repertory and recordings, as I mentioned earlier, it is clear by and large that neither performers nor audiences reject this cycle.

Must we remain at such a dissatisfying impasse and live with this somewhat debilitating tension? The aim of this book is, at least partially, to suffuse the discussion of *Frauenliebe und Leben* with information about the social, philosophic, poetic, and musical contexts of Chamisso’s poetry and Schumann’s songs so that we may come to a more balanced view of them. I do not seek to convert anyone to a particular point of view, but I do hope to bring new information to the dialogue to promote a more nuanced perspective. I do not set out to “whitewash” Chamisso or Schumann, but to understand their achievements sympathetically from within their own era and culture. Chapter 1, then, is a prologue in which I offer a characterization of early nineteenth-century German society, ideas, and practices relating to women and marriage. I hope it provides readers with something more than “a naïve historical relativism”⁴ to help them understand and appreciate the poems and songs on their own terms.

The book also sets out to provide the English-speaking reader with a fuller portrait of Adelbert von Chamisso’s life and work than can be gleaned from most English-language sources.⁵ Chapter 2 provides a biographical sketch and introduction to his poetry, including a representative sampling of poems (with translations). Most English readers know little or nothing

³ For a summary of other similar and more recent opinions, see Ruth A. Solie, “Whose Life? The Gendered Self in Schumann’s *Frauenliebe* Songs,” in Steven Paul Scher, ed., *Music and Text: Critical Inquiries*, Cambridge University Press (1992), 219–240.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁵ The most that readers can find about Chamisso in English are encyclopedia entries and chapters in literary histories of Germany. Furthermore, very few of Chamisso’s poems are published in translation.

about Chamisso other than that he authored a fable about a man named Peter Schlemihl who sold his shadow to a mysterious man in gray – students of German literature will know this – or that he authored the poems that served as texts for Schumann’s song cycle – musicians are likely to be aware of this. But Chamisso deserves to be better known. He led a fascinating life and was an accomplished scientist and a beloved poet. Besides his “marvelous tale” of Peter Schlemihl and his collected poems, his chronicle of the trip he made around the world as the naturalist on an exploratory voyage was widely read. His scientific observations were significant contributions to the biological, geological, anthropological, and linguistic knowledge of the time. His poetry may suffer if we bring to it the same expectations that we bring to the work of his romantic predecessors and contemporaries, for he neither shared their aesthetic goals nor chose the same subjects for his writing. But his social and political poems are informative, insightful, and invigorating, and his narratives are well crafted, entertaining, and sometimes gripping and moving. And he had a delightful sense of humor. Chapter 3 will look more specifically at contemporary poems about women, both Chamisso’s and others, and will sample some poems *by* women as well. Our notions of his gender biases may be tempered by a better acquaintance with others of his own poems about women as well as by an appreciation of his liberal politics in other regards. The poems of *Frauenliebe und Leben* may grow in the estimation of readers when they are compared with some contemporaneous efforts in the same vein as well as with poetry by women.

If Chamisso’s cycle of poems is better appreciated when contextualized, so are Schumann’s songs, for he was by no means the only composer who set Chamisso’s texts. Chapter 4 will portray the reception of Chamisso’s poems in music, giving an overview of the cycles by Franz Kugler, Carl Loewe, and Schumann, comparing the features that make their songs cyclic compositions and considering some contemporary reviews. A number of individual songs based on Chamisso’s cycle by other composers round out the picture of the musical reception of these poems. Finally, some of the deluxe, illustrated editions of Chamisso’s poems from the later nineteenth century will close the chapter.

Chapter 5 tells the reader about Schumann’s composition of *Frauenliebe und Leben*. The fresh interpretations of Schumann’s songs in this book are based in part on insights gleaned from the study of the composer’s manuscripts. Schumann’s preliminary sketches, his full autograph draft or working manuscript, and his corrections and emendations in the copyist’s manuscript furnish details that are often interesting in themselves and that also provoke new interpretive speculation and insight.

Chapter 6 sets forth the author's analysis and interpretation of Schumann's songs, drawing together the poems, Schumann's compositional decisions, and comparisons with other musical settings. While the superiority of Schumann's songs over the cycles by Franz Kugler and Carl Loewe and over the settings of individual poems by other composers may seem a foregone conclusion, it is nevertheless revealing to consider the musical and expressive qualities of these other contemporary songs. Careful comparisons may serve to intensify our appreciation of the subtle psychological insights of Schumann's musical readings of the poems. Occasionally another setting may rival one of Schumann's in some way.

This is a propitious time for bringing together much new research and discussion concerning *Frauenliebe und Leben*. A number of scholars have taken a strong interest in this cycle in recent years and have presented a variety of arguments about the poetry and the music. The most significant, in chronological order of publication, are the articles by Ruth Solie, Kristina Muxfeldt, Matthias Walz, Elissa Guralnick, and Herbert Hopfgartner (see the bibliography). Their provocative and insightful essays have all contributed to the discussion in this book. Solie's article, to which I shall often refer, has pride of place. It is not far-fetched to say that her essay launched a new wave of study of this cycle, for Muxfeldt's and Guralnick's articles both take her arguments to some extent as points of departure. Her work has been a great catalyst for my own work on *Frauenliebe*; I am very grateful to her not only for the essay itself, but also for her stimulating correspondence and discussions with me through the years.

In the matter of primary manuscript materials, Kazuko Ozawa has studied the original sources of this cycle (as well as of Schumann's other Chamisso songs) and has transcribed the varying versions the songs, tracing their evolution painstakingly from sketch to first edition. Her book makes unnecessary a minute and thorough discussion of the sources here and allows me to bring to the fore only those original passages and emendations that, in my opinion, hold particular fascination and provide both insight into Schumann's creative mind and evidence for new critical interpretations. Chapter 6 will draw on and respond to this rich vein of primary documents and secondary literature.

Schumann's music in general has not fallen from grace; it is held in high regard by performers, listeners, and thinkers alike. We need make no allowances for his compositions. In this regard, of course, his lasting reputation differs from Chamisso's, whose work is much less well known and valued. In an afterword I offer a way for English-speaking readers,

particularly Americans, to construe a poet like Chamisso, by discussing a parallel case in nineteenth-century American literature.

As much as I have come to enjoy and admire Chamisso and his poetry, and though my love and admiration for Schumann's lieder continues to grow, I have endeavored to maintain a critical detachment in this book, perhaps not always successfully.

As soon . . . as the critic sees that his approvals and disapprovals reflect his own bias positions, he will take a more mature attitude toward his function as a critic. He is no longer a legislator, he is an explicator. He is no longer handing down a value judgment from on high; he now sees that he is merely explicating and elucidating the complex nexus of preferences on which every particular judgment of taste is based.⁶

I trust that readers will listen with interest and open minds to what I have to say in this book and that they will, perhaps after even further reading and reflection, make up their own minds. I am grateful for this opportunity to speak to them.

⁶ William Thomas Jones, *The Romantic Syndrome*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff (1961), 237.