

Introduction: An Endless Winter Journey

MARJORIE W. HIRSCH AND LISA FEURZEIG

“I like these songs more than all the rest, and you will come to like them as well,” Franz Schubert reportedly declared upon first singing through his haunting new song cycle *Winterreise* (D911) to a few close friends.¹ The first half of the statement is remarkable given that by 1827, the year in which this intimate premiere took place, Schubert had already composed over 550 Lieder, including countless gems. His claim to prefer these “horrifying” new songs depicting a solitary wanderer’s alienation, disorientation, and despair suffered amidst a bleak, frigid landscape bespeaks a deep personal attachment to the cycle. Composing the work had been taxing, as indicated by the numerous cross-outs, rewritings, and insertions in portions of the autograph manuscript, and Schubert was plainly proud of his accomplishment.² In asserting “I like these songs more than all the rest,” he may have intended to steer his friends toward a positive assessment of the cycle, to reassure them that it was not merely the regrettable creation of a disturbed mind.

If Schubert was proud of *Winterreise*, he was also prescient: the second half of the statement has borne out. Although his friends and other early listeners were initially dismayed by the gloominess and magnitude of the cycle (one early reviewer grumbled, “It might have become one good song had it not become twenty-four of them”),³ before long, their bewilderment turned to enthusiasm. The composer’s circle came to venerate the work – “More beautiful German songs probably do not exist,” his friend Joseph von Spaun later wrote – as, over time, did the wider public. Fulfilling Schubert’s confident prediction, *Winterreise*, his second song cycle with poetic texts by Wilhelm Müller (1794–1827), has become one of the most esteemed works of his compositional oeuvre.

Given *Winterreise*’s virtually unrelieved mood of despondency, minimal plot, limited melodiousness, and great length, such high regard was hardly guaranteed. Schubert’s first Müller cycle, *Die schöne Müllerin*, composed several years earlier, offered listeners a less formidable portrayal of love’s rejection. The traditional story of a miller lad who falls for a miller maid who falls for a hunter develops with a clear narrative arc, and the musical settings, fusing qualities of folk-song with compositional artistry,

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2 Marjorie W. Hirsch and Lisa Feurzeig

have a natural appeal. Unsurprisingly, during much of the nineteenth century, the “Müllerlieder,” as the first cycle was widely known on account of both its protagonist and its poet, enjoyed greater popularity than the second cycle (although neither was performed publicly in its entirety until mid-century). Both cycles are large-scale works with the emotional intensity and dramatic immediacy of opera. But with *Winterreise*, Schubert had made an extraordinary leap, re-envisioning what a song cycle could express and how it could do so, creating challenges for both performers and listeners. His claim “you will come to like [these songs] as well” – recalling Beethoven’s terse comment about listeners’ difficulty appreciating one of his late string quartets: “Some day it will suit them”⁴ – betrays no hint of impatience, but rather recognition that widespread appreciation of groundbreaking works takes time. As it turned out, this was more time than Schubert was given.

Winterreise shortly preceded the composer’s death. Schubert wrote the cycle between late 1826 or early 1827 and October 1827, fully aware that syphilis, the disease he had contracted five years earlier, would result in his early demise. The only uncertainties were when this would occur and, relatedly, whether he would survive long enough to enter the final stage of the disease, which could bring about insanity and the loss of his creative faculties. The *Winterreise* protagonist’s longing for death and the possibility that he joins the *Leiermann* (hurdy-gurdy player) in madness at the end of the cycle thus resonate painfully with Schubert’s personal story. That Schubert in fact died before suffering a ravaged mind may be due, ironically, to his composition of the cycle. Spaun, in his 1858 reminiscences, wrote, “There is no doubt in my mind that the excitement in which he composed his most beautiful songs, and especially his *Winterreise*, contributed to his early death.”⁵

To what extent did Schubert, who corrected the proofs to Part II of the cycle on his deathbed, project himself onto the work? How closely did he identify with the wanderer’s journey into the unknown? Spaun notes that Schubert had been depressed for some time before working on *Winterreise*. Johann Mayrhofer, another member of the composer’s circle, drew a fairly direct connection to the winter wanderer: “[Schubert] had been long and seriously ill, had gone through disheartening experiences, and life for him had shed its rosy colour; winter had come for him.”⁶ Beyond his own illness, he was profoundly saddened by Beethoven’s death on March 26, 1827. Presumably Schubert gravitated to Müller’s poetic cycle *Die Winterreise* in part because he felt a kinship with the despondent wanderer. In his final days, perhaps he also felt a bond with Mozart, a composer he greatly admired (“O Mozart, immortal Mozart, how many, oh how endlessly many such comforting perceptions of a brighter and better life hast

3 Introduction: An Endless Winter Journey

thou brought to our souls!" he once wrote in his diary),⁷ and whose compositional career was also tragically cut short by illness. It is fitting that a performance of the Mozart Requiem – a work that shortly preceded its composer's death, that had preoccupied him on his deathbed,⁸ and that Schubert revered – took place in the latter's honor shortly after his own untimely death on November 19, 1828.

Schubert died at the age of thirty-one, but nearly two hundred years later, *Winterreise* lives on. With its symphonic proportions, complexity, and seriousness, it has become a mainstay of the Western canon, as reflected in an unending stream of performances and recordings, important compositional progeny, an array of musical transcriptions and artistic reworkings, and a vast scholarly literature. The work is regularly taught in music history, theory, performance, and German literature and culture courses. Interest in *Winterreise*, which grew significantly during the late nineteenth century and even more so during the twentieth, shows no signs of abating. While the cycle may be rooted in early nineteenth-century aesthetics and intimately connected with Schubert's personal plight, its themes of isolation, alienation, and suffering are broadly relevant today, and its musical renderings of poetic imagery, emotions, and ideas still leave listeners in awe.

The cycle is the central focus of several recent books, most notably Susan Youens' *Retracing a Winter's Journey: Schubert's Winterreise* (1991), Lauri Suurpää's *Death in Winterreise: Musico-Poetic Associations in Schubert's Song Cycle* (2014), and Ian Bostridge's *Schubert's Winter Journey: Anatomy of an Obsession* (2015). Youens – to whom the contributors to this volume and other Schubert enthusiasts are deeply indebted for her extraordinary contributions to Schubert scholarship – provides detailed information about the cycle's cultural milieu, genesis, and sources, and closely examines the poetry and music of each of the twenty-four songs. Suurpää draws on Greimassian semiotics and Schenkerian analysis to elucidate the musico-poetic expression of longing for death in songs 14–24. Bostridge, a renowned Lied interpreter, as well as historian, who has performed *Winterreise* hundreds of times, offers a performer's insights into the cycle while also illuminating the cycle's dense web of historical, literary, philosophical, and scientific associations. Richard Kramer's illuminating *Distant Cycles: Schubert and the Conceiving of Song* (1994) and Arnold Feil's *Franz Schubert: Die schöne Müllerin, Winterreise* (1975, Eng. trans. 1988) provide a wealth of information and analytical/interpretive insights about the cycle, as do two comprehensive studies of Schubert's songs, John Reed's *The Schubert Song Companion* (1985) and Graham Johnson's magisterial, three-volume *Franz Schubert: The Complete Songs* (2014). (Johnson's substantial

4 Marjorie W. Hirsch and Lisa Feurzeig

entry on *Winterreise* is a virtual monograph within the larger encyclopedic study.) The Further Reading section at the end of this volume lists many other valuable resources.

Rather than offer a detailed, song-by-song analysis of *Winterreise*, as do many of the studies cited above, this *Companion*, aimed at students though hopefully also of interest to scholars and general music lovers, is intended to illuminate a wide range of topics pertaining to the cycle. While the aforementioned books deal with some of the topics addressed here, they mostly do so within discussions of individual songs. By contrast, the essays in the present volume, authored by scholars in multiple disciplines, are organized in five parts focusing on different aspects of the cycle, its background and contexts, and its continuing impact on music and other art forms across nearly two centuries.

Our goal is to provide two types of information: background knowledge to help readers understand what *Winterreise* meant in its own time, and direct commentary on the work itself as it has been interpreted and understood more recently. In the first category, we address topics such as the place of this cycle in the biographies of its two creators, the genre of the song cycle in the 1820s, the relation of the work to historical events, the contemporary understanding of psychological topics in the period, and the contemporary view of science that would influence readers' and listeners' understanding of winter weather phenomena and other scientific topics touched on in the cycle. In the second category, we consider the cycle of poetry and song in itself, addressing topics such as how poetic images and musical motives are passed among poems and songs in the cycle, what types of musical material (such as harmony, rhythm, and the relation between piano and voice) are used to create meaning, and how the cycle has been interpreted as an existential expression of loneliness and a journey through time and space that transcends the specifics of its plot.

Part I of the book offers an introduction to the political, cultural, and musical environments in which Schubert's *Winterreise* was created. Andrea Lindmayr-Brandl describes early nineteenth-century Vienna, the "City of Music." With an eye for intriguing detail, she surveys the broad range of performing venues, musical institutions, concert series, and home music-making, including "Schubertiades" hosted by the composer's friends, and discusses the rise of the freelance musician, of which Schubert is a prime early example. Marjorie Hirsch illuminates Schubert's ties to tradition and his groundbreaking transformation of the Lied by examining his two settings of Goethe's "An den Mond" – a thematic precursor to *Winterreise* – in conjunction with settings of the poem by earlier composers. Lisa Feurzeig explores the topics of winter and wandering in poetry and song, tracing an evolution away from the pious

5 Introduction: An Endless Winter Journey

perspective of the eighteenth century to a more open-ended, questioning presentation of those topics in Schubert's songs and the poetry he selected. She also outlines the development of the song cycle and its predecessor, the *Liederspiel*, before *Winterreise*.

Part II addresses Wilhelm Müller and his poetic cycle *Die Winterreise*. Kristina Muxfeldt describes Müller's formative experiences, from his exposure to controversial thinkers at the University of Berlin to his military travails in the Wars of Liberation to his friendships, love interests, and travels. Muxfeldt argues that the poems of *Die Winterreise* are related not only to other *Wanderlieder* but also to prose writing projects by Müller, including a biography of the poet Lord Byron and a book on the transmission of Homeric myth. Rufus Hallmark, after recounting the three-stage publication history of the *Winterreise* poems and Schubert's two-stage discovery of them, discusses the significance of Schubert's alterations to Müller's cycle, from the order of songs to changes in wording. Hallmark also casts a spotlight on unusual and largely overlooked metrical/rhythmic aspects of Schubert's settings, inviting new ways of understanding the cycle's stylistic heritage.

Part III illuminates *Winterreise* by looking beyond music and poetry to the realms of psychology, science, sociology, and political history. The two-part chapter by David Romand and Lisa Feurzeig considers the cycle's relation to psychology. Romand outlines the important developments in that nascent field of study at the time, emphasizing German writers and their concerns, and concludes that Müller's writing is rather distant from that approach. Feurzeig seeks closer relationships to the cycle in literature: popular novels, semi-fictional narratives, and poetry; she also describes the strange world of amateur animal magnetism, a type of psychological treatment at the time, and Schubert's direct encounter with that practice. Blake Howe draws parallels between the solitary wanderer in *Winterreise* and early nineteenth-century scientists who undertook similar journeys through the vast unknown of the natural world, recording their observations of landscapes, plants, animals, weather conditions, and atmospheric phenomena, including mysterious lights such as mock suns and will-o'-the-wisps. As Howe explains, the external world of nature and the internal subjectivity of the wanderer are dynamically connected. George S. Williamson associates the *Winterreise* protagonist with the legions of "wandering people" in early nineteenth-century Europe – those who took to the road, as outcasts, beggars, pilgrims, robbers, student nationalists, military deserters, minstrels, grifters, Jews, Gypsies, and travelers on the mail coaches. Williamson also examines political undercurrents in *Die Winterreise* against the backdrop of political developments from the French Revolution to the Restoration.

Part IV focuses more directly on the song cycle. James William Sobaskie compares *Winterreise* to *Die schöne Müllerin* with regard to the

6 Marjorie W. Hirsch and Lisa Feurzeig

narratological concept of “identification.” In examining song forms, textual elements, and contextual processes within the two cycles, he illuminates listeners’ closer identification with, and empathy for, the *Winterreise* protagonist. Susan Wollenberg discusses overarching elements, or “connecting threads,” in the words and music of *Winterreise*. In addition to investigating text–music relationships, she deepens understanding of ties between the cycle and the broader corpus of Schubert’s music by identifying numerous “fingerprints” of his compositional style. Xavier Hascher scrutinizes the cycle’s loose sense of coherence – the impression of uniformity, with shades of difference among the songs, created from resonances across the cycle rather than motifs or a harmonic scheme. In doing so, he analyzes the tonal journey through four harmonic quadrants linked to the poetic content, and identifies “associative relations” among the songs involving texture, timbre, register, and articulation, among other elements. Deborah Stein argues that the cycle is characterized primarily by a sense of discontinuity in both the poetry and the music. She supports this view with a close analysis of poetic themes (many associated with German Romanticism), the overall tonal design, and various temporal aspects of the cycle.

Finally, Part V concentrates on *Winterreise* in the nearly two centuries since its completion in the fall of 1827. Benjamin Binder traces the performance and reception history of the cycle, describing its rise in popularity as the sentimental nineteenth century yielded to the neurotic twentieth, the impact of recordings, and two common, contrasting approaches to interpretation – dramatic enactment vs. lyrical narration – that vocalists have adopted from Schubert’s time to our own. As a fitting conclusion to the volume, Laura Tunbridge addresses the canonical status and vast cultural legacy of *Winterreise*. Her far-ranging discussion covers musical arrangements, reworkings, and homages, as well as references and transformations in film, literature, and the visual arts – a rich demonstration of changing attitudes towards Lieder generally and *Winterreise* in particular, and a testament to the cycle’s endless allure.

The musical score to *Winterreise* is readily available; readers are encouraged to keep a copy of it close at hand. For their convenience, we have included an English translation of Müller’s *Die Winterreise* cycle in an appendix. We are grateful to Celia Sgroi for kindly allowing us to reproduce her translation.⁹

Notes

1. As quoted by Joseph von Spaun in his 1858 reminiscences of Schubert. Translation by Susan Youens, *RWJ*, 27. See also *SMF*, 138 and *SEF*, 160–61.

7 Introduction: An Endless Winter Journey

2. The autograph manuscript of *Winterreise* is housed in the Morgan Library in New York City, NY. The manuscript for Part I (songs 1–12) comprises working versions for most of the songs as well as fair copies for two whole songs and parts of three others. The manuscript for Part II (songs 13–24) consists entirely of fair copies. For more on the manuscript, see Susan Youens, Introduction to *Franz Schubert: Winterreise: The Autograph Score* (New York: The Pierpont Morgan Library and Dover Publications, 1989), vii–xvii.
3. *SR*, 786.
4. Reminiscence of Gerhard von Breuning, as cited in O. G. Sonneck (ed.), *Beethoven: Impressions By His Contemporaries* (New York: Dover, 1926; 3rd ed. 1967), 206.
5. *SMF*, 139.
6. *SMF*, 15.
7. Schubert wrote this encomium to Mozart in his diary on June 14, 1816 after attending a performance of a Mozart string quintet. *SR*, 60. As Susan Wollenberg discusses in Chapter 10 of this volume, Mozart's influence can be detected in *Winterreise*. For a more extensive discussion of Mozart's influence on Schubert, see *SF*, 133–59.
8. Mozart worked on the Requiem during the fall of 1791, but died in December before finishing it; in his final hours, he reportedly sang through the work with several friends gathered around his bedside.
9. Sgroi's texts and translations (1998), which may be found at gopera.com/winterreise/songs/cycle.mv, differ in a few details from Schubert's song texts. For the poetic originals and a song-by-song itemization of Schubert's textual changes, see Maximilian and Lily Schochow, *Franz Schubert: Die Texte seiner einstimmig und mehrstimmig komponierten Lieder und ihre Dichter*, 2 vols. (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1997), vol. 2, 395–410.