

“Horrible Songs:” Schubert’s *Winterreise*

An Essay by Susan Youens

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Thirty years after Schubert’s death, one of his closest friends, a man named Joseph von Spaun, wrote down his memories of the first performance of this song cycle, a private performance in which the composer previewed his latest work for his circle of friends.

*For some time, Schubert appeared very upset and melancholy. When I asked him what was troubling him, he would say only, “Soon you will hear and understand”. One day he said to me, “Come over to Schober’s today and I will sing you a cycle of horrifying [schauerlicher] songs. I am anxious to know what you will say about them. They have cost me more effort than any of my other songs.” So he sang the entire Winterreise through to us in a voice full of emotion. We were utterly dumbfounded by the mournful, gloomy tone of these songs, and Schober said that only one of them, “Der Lindenbaum” (The Linden Tree), had appealed to him. To this Schubert replied, “I like these songs more than all the rest, and you will come to like them as well”.*

“Like” is far too pallid a word for the way we now feel about this, one of the supreme masterpieces of the genre. Schubert’s autograph manuscript for the first half of the cycle is testimony to the effort Spaun recorded in his reminiscences – there are places that look as if the Napoleonic Wars had been fought all over again on these folios, replete with revisions, deletions, added bars, and changes of all kinds (the entire manuscript is in The Pierpont Morgan Library in New York and in a facsimile edition by Dover Publications, Inc.). One can, for example, see Schubert’s exasperation with an entire lengthy passage in the twelfth song, “Einsamkeit” (“Loneliness”), when he crosses out three unfinished staff systems with an X so furious that it almost cuts through the paper.

Schubert insisted that he had to have good poetry before he could compose good songs – he was among the most literary of all composers. We can surmise that he had sought appropriate poetry for a song cycle of his own for some time, and he finally found the perfect subject for his purposes in works by the Prussian poet Wilhelm Müller (1794-1827), almost exactly his contemporary. It was fashionable

for much of this century to decry Müller as a second rate (or worse) hack, but he was actually a fine poet and a powerful one on many occasions, a writer who found new expression for the literary ideals of his day. *Winterreise* was not Schubert's first cycle to poems by Müller, who was famous in his own lifetime as the "Griechen Müller," or "Greek Müller" (like Lord Byron, whose works Müller helped to popularize in Germany, he championed Greek independence from the Ottoman Empire). In late 1822 or early 1823, Schubert had discovered Müller's first anthology of poetry, the extravagantly entitled *Siebenundsiebzig Gedichte aus den hinterlassenen Papieren eines reisenden Waldhornisten* (*Seventy seven poems from the posthumous papers of a travelling hornplayer*, published in the poet's native Dessau in 1821), and had set the first work in the volume – *Die schöne Müllerin* (*The Beautiful Miller Maid*) – to music in 1823. Several years later, perhaps near the end of 1826, he discovered a cycle of twelve poems entitled *Die Winterreise* (*The Winter Journey*) in the literary periodical *Urania: Taschenbuch auf das Jahr 1823* (pp. 207–22). Thinking that this was the entirety of the work, he set the cycle to music, perhaps in early 1827, and wrote "Fine" – The End – with a flourish at the conclusion of the twelfth song.

Soon after, possibly in March or April, Schubert discovered volume 2 of Müller's *Poems from the posthumous papers of a travelling hornplayer*, published in 1824; there, he found the cycle extended to twice its original length, from twelve poems to twenty four, and reshuffled in a different order from the *Urania* text. Müller might speculatively have wanted to take the solitary wanderer we meet in this work to some kind of resolution beyond what one finds in the first twelve poems, and therefore augmented the cycle. Schubert could not duplicate Müller's final order without disturbing the subtle musical relationships between the twelve songs he had already composed and therefore set the remaining poems in order (with one exception: he switched the order of "Die Nebensonnen" and "Mut" near the end) as the "Fortsetzung" (Continuation) of his winter journey. The poetic cycle, *Die Winterreise*, is thus in some respects a different work from Schubert's cycle *Winterreise* (the composer omitted the definite article for a starker, stronger effect). In these poems, Müller took a Romantic cliché – an alienated, isolated wanderer on a journey into the wintry geography of the soul in search of self-knowledge – and fashioned something original from it, a post Romantic variation on a theme. At the outset, Müller's wayfarer is impelled by rejection in love to dissect his innermost being, and to do so decades before Freud would propose a framework for such

investigations. His first words, "Fremd bin ich eingezogen, Fremd zieh' ich wieder aus" ("I came here a stranger, I depart a stranger"), state an existential dilemma beyond sorrow over lost love, as wrenching as that is; thereafter, over and over again, he asks himself variations on the fundamental question, "Why am I always a *Fremdling*, a stranger to others and to myself?". Müller fashioned his wanderer's search for answers as a monodrama, with only one speaking character and no narrator to supply information the wanderer omits; we are never told his name, what he looks like (except that he has black hair), his birthplace, occupation, upbringing, or personal history. Of his inner life, we learn much more – he is a philosopher manqué, an atheist who cannot be comforted by appeals to a spiritual realm, a realist who knows that dreams are wish fulfillment, a being remarkably free from self-pity. By the end, he even understands his past love to have been illusion. In "Die Nebensonnen", he sees the atmospheric illusion known as perihelia, or two phantom suns on either side of the real sun; like the short lived light of the illusory globes of light in the sky, his sweetheart's eyes shone on him only briefly and then vanished. She was not meant for him because he was destined to travel "eine Straße., die noch keiner ging zurück" ("a road from which no one returned"). That line in the twentieth song, "Der Wegweiser", is what the Greeks termed the *peripeteia* of the work, the moment of revelation in which all of the veils obscuring the truth from our gaze are stripped away. Here, unutterably weary and depressed, the wanderer asks himself why his journey – his life – is so different from that of other people, what compulsion drives him to keep going, and why he chooses to be so isolated. (Recognizing the bridge between the first song, "Gute Nacht", in which the wanderer first describes the journey, and this song, Schubert fills both lieder with a repeated note figure emblematic of the journey.) As if his very frustration had opened a window in the mind, all of a sudden he sees a metaphorical signpost pointing the way to a road "from which no one returned". Is this death, the bourne from which no traveller returns? But death rejects the wanderer decisively in "Das Wirtshaus" immediately after "Der Wegweiser"; this cycle has as one important theme the difficulty of dying when one wishes, or the tenacity of life, all the more marked when unwanted. What if the sign tells of a *Künstlerberufung*, or an artist's discovery of his calling? The wanderer has sung of his journey all along; now he discovers that he is condemned to continued life, or rather, a living death as a singer poet irrevocably set apart from society.

The wanderer, however, does not want this fate. He has yearned throughout the

cycle for reciprocated love and domesticity, for a “bright, warm house” and a “beloved soul” within; when this precious, ordinary happiness is denied him, he longs for a nihilistic death. The prospect of an artist’s lonely existence horrifies him, impelling once again the desire for death real death. In this, as in much else, Müller shows his colors as a post Romantic; a true Romantic would have found some possibility for art as a means of transcendence, but the wanderer can find nothing of the kind in the fate he sees spelled out for him on a signpost in the mind. At the end of the cycle (which is not a true ending), he “meets” the hurdy gurdy player, who is perhaps a nightmarish image of the wanderer’s own future and a haunting statement of the absolute necessity for human bonds; where they do not exist, the mind will project them onto the external world in a Doppelgänger mirror of itself. It is crucial that this uniquely powerful figure (Müller had a knack for ending cycles with his best efforts) is a beggar musician: music reduced to its most elemental state – “laute Leere”, or “sounding nothingness” – is all that is left to the wanderer. We should remember that when Schubert set these poems to music, he was confronting his own probable fate. Enough was known about the terminal stages of syphilis in the 1820s for Schubert to realize that this illness ended in horrifying dementia and paralysis preceding the ultimate denouement, If death turned him away in the first or second stages of the disease, as it turns away the wanderer in “Das Wirtshaus”, would he have to suffer the living death the wanderer endures, his creative faculties numbed and the stream of his music frozen? The cycle ends on a terrifying question mark, for which there is no answer, only the echoing silence following the dying away drone of the hurdy-gurdy. Realizing this, one understands what a heroic act it was for Schubert to set this text, of all texts, to music, to wring music of this power from the bleakest fear imaginable. Somewhat fancifully, I like to think that Death, perhaps flattered by Schubert’s many and varied portraits of him in music, spared the composer the fate he most dreaded, taking him swiftly and before the otherwise inevitable onset of insanity. Despite the tragedy of his premature death (and we will always wonder what might have been), we can only be grateful that he escaped the wanderer’s miserable fate, that he transformed Müller’s characters into songs “I like more than all the rest” before his own gentler end.