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The challenges of music education. The “quandary” of the *Lied*¹

Wyzwania edukacji muzycznej. „Kłopoty” z *Pieśnią*

Abstract

The present essay tries to answer the following question: How do composer Franz Schubert’s romantic lied evoke landscapes, situations, environments, characters or feelings with no help other than music itself? We will talk about the symbolic resources that the musician used in this genre, with no other pretension than to provide a general view of the subject for those not initiated in the subject of Musical Analysis.

Keywords: Musical structures, Romantic music, emotional and musical resources.

Streszczenie

W prezentowanym tekście autor stara się odpowiedzieć na następujące pytanie: w jaki sposób romantyczna pieśń kompozytora Franza Schuberta przywołuje krajobrazy, sytuacje, środowiska, charaktery i uczucia, wykorzystując muzykę jako jedyne narzędzie przekazu? Przedstawiono źródła symboliczne wykorzystane w tym gatunku, aby nakreślić zarys problematyki osobom niewdrożonym w tematykę analizy muzycznej.

Słowa kluczowe: struktura muzyczna, muzyka romantyczna, źródła emocjonalne i muzyczne.

Introduction

Equivalent to the French term *chanson* or any other synonyms, but without an exact translation that manages to define it in its entirety, the *Lied* is a perfect and definite mix between literature (poetry in this case) and music, the two main arts of the 19th century. During that period called “Romanticism”, in social meetings of intellectual circles people started to talk about the interrelation between the arts.

However, the *Lieder*, which emerged in Germany as a brief and cultured (although from a popular origin) musical form for a single singer and piano accompaniment, that is, a vocal kind of music, monodic, expressive and in which the intelligible text plays

¹ Before starting to read this article, or even better, while reading it, I strongly recommend listening to some of the pieces dealt with here, like *Erlkönig* or *Der Wanderer*, preferably the versions by the admirable *Lied* baritone Dietrich Fischer – Dieskau, specialised in the work of Schumann and Schubert and famous for his wide dramatic ability and his control of dynamics.

an essential role in the formal construction and not just as an excuse for singing, are not a genre that appeared out of nowhere (in fact none is): we find precedents in the Carolingian period, the monody of troubadours, in ‘*a solo*’ songs of the German 16th century, in the operatic recitative, and even we can find ‘*a solo*’ *Lieder* anthologies and their inclusion in the operatic scene in the mid of the 18th century.

The text

A fundamental characteristic is, therefore, the importance of the text, since the music must combine with the poem in such a way that it is able to transmit its essence by means of the use of ‘symbolism’, and with a supreme respect to the poem structure, generally ternary (A – B – A), similar to the *sonata* (the great classic form of baroque heritage); that is, that the versification of the poem will determine to a large extent the form of the *Lied*. Here lies the difficulty (and the mystery!) of defining what the *Lied* genre consists of, since the impenetrable fusion of text and music will create, each time, a distinct and unique form...

Goethe (Schubert’s favourite), Schlegel, Harold, Schiller or Heine are some of the authors of the German Romanticism whose texts are the most used by musicians like Schubert or Schumann, emblematic composers of this genre. We are talking about admired poets, in this case; bear in mind that the renaissance of German poetry happened around 1750 with *Sturm und Drang* and reached its peak during the Romanticism.

Mozart or Beethoven had already composed songs successfully, but it was with Franz Schubert (1797–1828), with his more than 600 (634 to be exact) *Lieder*, when this genre reached its greatest splendour.

Just as the Grimm brothers created the German tale, the Romantic composers, influenced by the aesthetics of the time, led the popular song to the field of “classical music”, providing it with an incomparable complexity of dynamics and raising it, therefore, to the category of “work of art” (an unequivocally Romantic concept). However, Schubert, a pianist and fond of literary meetings (the already legendary “*Schubertiaden*”), not only worked with texts of admired poets: any text liable to be put in music was appropriate if he believed so. This genius, undervalued when alive, who was able to compose up to eight songs a day, hardly ever made corrections or drafts. His ability to give musical quality to the emerging German poetry (the only aspect of his work that saved him and for which he was admired while alive) took this genre to its highpoint. In the 19th century, we will find about 35 well-known *Lieder* composers, among whom we must highlight Hugo Wolf, Liszt, Gounod, Mahler or Richard Strauss.

This form of music of programmatic character (depending on extra-musical elements) and therefore opposed to what was called “absolute music” around the mid

18th century, adjusts piano and voice to express a series of feelings and emotions: love, pain, passion, sadness, death, humanity, joy... The poem suggests a unique experience through music, so the performer must understand the language well in order not to miss any dynamics and understand what the composer meant (in some cases personal experiences); that is, a total understanding of the German language is essential if we want to study the *Lied* as the most intimate expression in depth, but not entirely mandatory to understand its musical sense.

The form

The three most important types of *Lied*, despite the lack of labels to cover all its complexity and variety, are²:

- Strophic: The oldest and best-known. The music adapts to the meter. Structure with repeated melody and accompaniment, that is, several stanzas with the same music, except for variations. The text must be homogeneous, without abrupt dramatic changes, although the simplicity does not dismiss the delicate dynamics that every German *Lied* contains. If there are any independent motifs, there will be transitions between stanzas. This is the popular song established by Schubert and Brahms.
- Developed, compound or comprehensive: A freer structure, varied and rich, very usual in Schubert's compositions, with a structure A – B – A or a theme with variations. The accompaniment is uniform (joining ideas and moods) but more complex and changing, with a new melody for each stanza or poetic unit (as in *Der Wanderer*). Not to break the structure with excessive variations, it is usual to resort to beat repetitions. Clemens Kühn adds a third type, the "varied strophic *Lied*" (modifications in the *ritornello*), more free-flowing and with transitions, which keeps the initial melody but plays with variations according to the text (as in *Die Forelle* D. 550, "The Trout Quintet", by Schubert). And we could even talk about a fourth type, not as related to the strophic, which Kühn identifies in a clear way with the influence of folklore.
- Scenic or recited: Created by the Viennese Composer, it contained Italian and German elements with tempo variations, abrupt transitions, recitative separating scenes, declamation, etc. If the *Lied* is, so to speak, "popular song turned into classical music", which the Romantic composers embraced enthusiastically (all creation that came from the people was pure) and raised to its most complex heights, this would be the best example.

The ability to be sung is, as well as the no repetition of words and *melismas*, essential in the *Lied*. This, as we have already said, comes from folklore; the

² C. Kühn, *Tratado de la forma musical*, London 1998 (1989), p. 203.

importance of a *cantabile* melody and a structure based on stanzas so show it. Likewise we can observe the influence the old rhythmic modes such as *trochee*, *iambic verse*, etc. the first being very common in compositions. As prototypes of popular singing, sometimes they deal with topics such as the home, nostalgia...

It is likewise common in the *Lied* the imitation between the voices (singing and piano), in spite of the fact that at the beginning they were homophonic. From Berger theatricality³ starts to be included (for example, a pedal with a dramatic harmony in *arpeggios*). The most usual accompaniment was the piano, and it used to be very descriptive (like triplets simulating a gallop in Schubert's *Erlkönig* “Elf-King” based on a text by Goethe).

Going back to our initial question, how does the *lied* manage to move the audience, and which rhetoric does it use to suggest and recall feelings? It is not about such a fixed and theorized technique as the Baroque figuration, doubtlessly, but not because of that it is free from complexity, and especially if we pay close attention to the multiple elements that shape this musical form, fused together by a common cause, and not precisely by chance.

Harmony

As far as symbolism is concerned, the *Lied* transmits and develops an idea based on modulation first: we must not forget that we are in the middle of the 19th century... Harmony (chords and their interrelation) is rich and complex although still tonal in essence. The rigorous verticality inherited from the Classicism collapses, but does not disappear; modal and polyphonic elements are recovered in the melody (riddled with chromaticisms and dissonances) and modulations (changes of tone) move to more and more distant tones. In conclusion, Romanticism is harmony taken to the limit before the ‘dismemberment’ of tonality (in which Wagner and his “suspended” chords are very much to blame) that take us directly into the musical movements of the beginning of the 20th century. With all that, the vertical relation is always present in any kind of music, whether tonal or not, but it is in this period when the interaction between the *Tonic* and *Dominant* functions (functions of the degrees that determine the rest and tension chord in music) is stretched to its maximum point.

This treatment of verticality by the 19th century composers, the importance that this period gives to harmony and the tremendous development and transformation of the relations between chords at this stage would explain the fact that the use of ‘connected’ modulations constitutes the musical essence of the *Lied*, and the way in which this transmits “affection” (feeling or emotion associated to music and the elements that form part of it).

³ L. Plantinga, *La música romántica*, Madrid 1992 (1984), p. 127.

According to Arturo Reverter, in support of our statement, *the melodic streak in a Lieder composer is as important as the gift of modulation, the modification of tonality for expressive purposes in the right moment; something essential to reflect the changing mode states or character of a poem*⁴.

In this regard, here is a brief explanation of the character of each tonality (understood as the musical axis that determines the functional hierarchy of each chord in the system), which will help us understand the reason for choosing one in particular and its subsequent modulations according to what the composer wants to express through his song. The character of the poem itself and the emotional message that the music intends to transmit are determining elements when making a choice.

- **C major:** clear tonality, identified with nature.
- **C minor:** the opposite of the above, the supernatural, the menacing.
- **D major:** symphonic utility, rarely used.
- **D minor:** dramatic, valiant, alludes to the poetic elements, even to death.
- **E major:** innocence and joy.
- **E minor:** melancholy, depression, nostalgia.
- **F major:** pastoral nature, related to hope, with dream, etc. It can also refer to death.
- **F minor:** sorrow and nostalgia.
- **G major:** lyric, associated to love.
- **G minor:** fight against the supernatural, against an unfavourable destiny.
- **A major:** widely used by Schubert. It provides structural perfection, balance and conciseness.
- **A minor:** disillusionment, alienation, mental disorders.
- **E-flat major:** devotion to the sea, the night, the stars.
- **B-flat major:** poetic pieces related to spring.
- **A-flat major:** happiness, requited love, intimate feelings, trust in nature.
- **B-flat major and minor:** two ‘middle tones’ that connect passions, suffering, eroticism, or the idea of death.
- **F-sharp major and minor:** two more ‘middle tones’ of romantic air.
- **C-sharp minor:** used to contrast E major and se associated to the idea of travelling.
- **G-flat major:** piece and harmony with nature and love.

‘The Prince of the Lied’ surely had his favourites. In matters of storylines, his favourite themes were love, death, nature and the sea, and of course, wandering and travelling (*Der Wanderer*, ‘*The Wanderer*’, and several others prove it: *You must change, leave with the others, you must walk, fleeing easily from all complaints*⁵), and not in vain it is a reliable picture of his life, since he never stopped wandering

⁴ A. Reverter, *Schubert. Discografía recomendada. Lieder comentados*, Barcelona 1999, p. 11.

⁵ D. Fischer-Dieskau, *Los lieder de Schubert*, Madrid 1989, p. 120.

and changed his place of residence 28 times (although Beethoven changed his home 80 times!). Schubert himself is the paradigm of the German song, in part due to his fantastic Viennese relationships (he frequented the intellectual circles and his friends were mainly poets and some musicians), in part due to his ability to compose great and touching melodies (to the level of his classmate of the 1st Viennese school, a certain W.A. Mozart...). This last aspect, which permits a better and more free-flowing transmission of the poetic message, gave the composer fame and acknowledgement. Since it did not have the artifices of opera, it was clear that the *Lied* had to move along more subtle and reserved grounds.

Motifs and other aspects. Conclusion

It is not precisely by chance either the fact that the *Lied* reached its highest point during the long artistic and cultural period that is the 19th century; to a great extent, this is due to the important advances in the manufacture of pianos (linked to the Industrial Revolution), which fostered this musical instrument and increased its composing-interpreting possibilities up to unsuspected limits (like the *sostenuto* pedal or the use of felt on the hammers): at the same time the piano technique was developed progressively and in a magnificent way, what gave the instrumentalists a nearly unlimited series of virtuoso resources without which these pieces would lack their poetic-musical meaning, being the most common trills, arpeggios, parallel octaves, repeated notes, the creative use of the pedal to produce sound effects and an endless number of decorative elements, which, obviously, on their own could be the object of an extensive study.

The “emotional aspect” can also be transmitted by means of motifs, that is, small cells with meaning which are developed throughout the musical piece. This element, which many times works by means of regularities (like the above mentioned *Erlkönig*, pleasant in a rhythmical and tonal way, “as if a child were speaking”), can even relate several *Lieder* by means of motif references⁶. Nevertheless, the ascending and descending melodic imitations produced between voice and instrument, which reinforce the dramatic idea, come from the Baroque music, in the same way as the ‘*a solo*’ voice does. Let us remember that Romanticism resumes a great part of the Baroque musical style and wishes to adapt it to its own time. The use of techniques coming from the counterpoint, the liking for small musical forms, the circular fifth interval relations, etc. are a legacy from that “ancient” period that the Romantics wanted to recover.

Charles Rosen claims there is no conflict and resolution in the *Lied*, unlike in the sonata, but a rising tension and dramatic unity, as in the first Schubert public

⁶ C. Kühn, *Tratado de la forma musical*, London 1998 (1989), p. 205.

incursion in the genre (1814), “*Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel*” (*Gretchen am Spinnrade* op. 2, D.118, based on Goethe’s *Faust*), in which intensity rises thanks to repetitions. Rosen calls it “itinerant technique” and relates it to the continuous travels of the composer...⁷

León Plantinga affirms that, rather than strophic, the *Lied* consists of a tripartite form which reaches several highpoints on its passage through the different tonalities that make it up. In *Gretchen am Spinnrade*, of a simple and transparent formal technique as in a popular song, modulations represent the protagonist’s psychological journey. When evil characters appear, however, harmony gets darker, and chromaticisms and dissonances set the rule. In the dramatic yet fantastic *Erlkönig* (“*Elfking*”), father-son relationships are marked by tonality contrast; it is an exchange of dramatic effects, in which ones and others are resumed⁸. Cycles like *Winterreise* or *Die schöne Müllerin* are both perfectly valid examples in this respect.

There are cycles like Schumann’s *Liederkreis* (a cycle of songs by Heine) which work by tonality arrangement⁹, which gives them coherence. However, not all the cycles return to the starting tonality.

To sum up: we could conclude by claiming that harmony and (small and simple) motifs are the main instruments that seem to drive the “affection” of the *Lied* to the spectator and that, along with the poetic-musical metric (generally organised in 6/8 time signature) which gives form to the final structure, contain all the sensitivity inherent to this genre, what is wished to transmit.

Let us take the popular *Die Forelle* as an example, where the piano movement represents the states of water, which goes from calm and cheerful to turbid and dark, whereas the melody represents the confident trout and its tragic destiny...

Other remarkable elements would be the dynamics (hardly ever written by Schubert but mandatory for an appropriate interpretation), more stressed in the Romantic period than in the Baroque-Classicism (above all from Beethoven), the use of *tessituras* (*textures*) (although originally masculine, the *Lied* could be sung equally by men or women, as in *Erlkönig*, where Schubert fosters the contrast between very deep and very high textures) and, of course, the interpretation and all the elements that form it, liable to variability by the *Lieder* composers: the way in which the recitative is done and the creativity in the aspects of rhythm and *tempo* (anacrusis, duration of rest, a usually non-excessive *rubato*, with the Shubert’s characteristic use of pedals...) and the melodic phrase (textual and musical stress, *legatos* and *marcatos* more or less quick, several dynamics...); all these elements structure the final result of the piece when transmitting the interpretation to the

⁷ A. Reverter, *Schubert. Discografía recomendada. Lieder comentados*, Barcelona 1999, p. 10.

⁸ L. Plantinga, *La música romántica*, Madrid 1992 (1984), pp. 132–134.

⁹ C. Kühn, *Tratado de la forma musical*, London 1998 (1989), p. 207.

listener, who after all is the one who has to get the message. However, these are sporadic elements which would be linked to interpretation.

Finally, the *Lied* is nothing but one more of the Romantic short musical forms, whose humble aspiration was to communicate a series of feelings and emotions elegantly, joining music and poetry through the creation of a unique and indivisible mould, thanks to which it will transmit the spirit of the German Romanticism like none other (with maybe the exception of Wagnerian operas). We would like to remember that, if the text of the piece was of poor quality, the attention was diverted towards the music, which demonstrate the total unity of music and literature in these pieces and the exclusive link of dependence between them.

The ‘Schubertian literature’ covers more than 4,000 titles, including his letters (although less juicy than Mozart’s). In this sense Otto Erich Deutsch is, without a doubt, the reference author who we should resort to (in German).

After these reflections, we hope at least to have clarified some aspects regarding the ‘quandary’ of the *Lied*. For those who want to go deeper into the subject we provide below a few links to *YouTube* with analytic examples – score sheet extracts from the composer Franz Schubert related to this essay and which can help us understand it, as well as reinforce the arguments here presented based on a partial reflection, by no means definitive.

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Links: (updated on 20/05/2017)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=juNxRYBWB9g>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oBeVLfZVUDU>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MY0eeotSDi8>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vpe253nlj9w>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aA6551iW0v4>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nA0yOPA6-00>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnb5Q41f5zI>