

**Compare the composers' response to the text in two songs
from each of Schubert's *Die Schöne Müllerin*,
and Schumann's *Myrthen* song cycle.**

Both Franz Schubert (1797 – 1828) and Robert Schumann (1810 – 1856) were prolific composers of lieder with an output of over six hundred songs and nearly three hundred songs respectively. Schubert's *Die Schöne Müllerin* (opus 25) was written in 1823 and is a setting of texts written by Wilhelm Müller and published two years earlier. The words tell the story of a young miller who falls impossibly in love with his master's daughter, and end with his suicide. By setting an entire text in individual songs Capell suggests that Schubert had made a “new musical form”, much as he had done with the single song a decade earlier, in which the separate songs reveal a drama from different “standpoints in time” (1977:190); although writing more recently, Youens considers a collection of songs written in 1815 to be earlier evidence of a song cycle (2001:§2). Of the twenty songs it is the second, ‘Wohin?’, and the sixth, ‘Die Neugierige’, that will be considered here.

In contrast to the continuous text in *Müllerin*, Schumann's *Myrthen* song-cycle (opus 25) sets unrelated texts by poets as diverse as Goethe and Byron, and Heine and Burns. The song-cycle was written in 1840 (alongside another 114 songs) as a wedding present to Clara, and it is therefore no surprise that the disparate texts are all linked by the Romantic themes of love, nature, and emotional experience. From the twenty-six songs the two to be considered are the first, ‘Widmung’, and the seventh, ‘Die Lotosblume’.

‘Wohin?’, or ‘Whither?’, follows the young miller at the start of his journey, although he has no real idea of his ultimate destination. He hears the “babbling brook”¹ running through the valley, which is portrayed to the listener in the sextuplets of the piano accompaniment

¹ Any unattributed references, such as this, in the text are direct quotations from the songs, either in the original German or the fully referenced translations provided in the appendices.

running through the song. In contrast to the constantly moving right hand, the left hand uses

three different patterns throughout the song. The first pattern can be seen in bars one to ten:



'Wohin?' bars 1 - 2

The effect of the syncopated open fifths creates a rocking motion which could serve to indicate footfalls against the steady motion of the brook, or the water tumbling over rocky ground. Despite the fact that the first ten bars are all in the tonic, this cross bar rhythm helps to maintain the music's impetus. Indeed, the harmony does not move away from the tonic until the words "I know not how it happen'd" (bar 11) with a first inversion of B major, followed by a diminished 7th. This dramatic change in harmony draws attention to the traveller's confusion, and the diminished chord adds a feeling of imminent danger that the listener is aware of, but the protagonist is not. The left hand movement changes for these four bars into regular quavers, but as the brook is mentioned again the harmony reverts to the tonic with the syncopated bass that started the song.

The third type of bass line used is where it moves in unison an octave lower with the voice part, such as bars 23 to 26, and bars 62 to 65. This device is used to illustrate the miller addressing the brook directly, rather than just narrating his rambling journey. The melody is relatively simple and includes many arpeggio passages; Brown points out Schubert's association of "water with themes based on the notes of the common chord" (1967:35) throughout the cycle.

The piano part is unquestionably an accompaniment to the vocal line of the song, but it has moved on from the "aggressive simplicity" (Plantinga, 1984:113) of earlier lieder to become

an integral part of the song. Although it still supports the singer, it is certainly of as much importance as the melody in conveying the emotive content of the text and adding another dimension of meaning to the song.

The next song, 'Der Neugierige' or 'The Questioner', describes how the boy asks the brook whether the miller's daughter loves him. It starts with one of the few passages in the cycle where the brook's absence is notable in the accompaniment. As he lists natural elements – the flower and the star – that cannot help him, the song is written in short phrases, and breaks such as those in bars six, eight, and ten give the song a very fragmented feel. It is not until the third stanza that the brook appears, but this is also where the tempo direction *sehr langsam* (very slowly) is used for only time in the cycle. The brook is portrayed by the semiquaver movement, but at such a slow tempo it is more like a stagnant pond than a babbling brook. While the brook's answer is not given in the text, it is clearly provided to the listener.

As in the previous song, a diminished 7th is used to foretell trouble: in the third stanza (final crotchet of bar 28) as the brook is asked for "one word, either way", and the final stanza (bar 50), as the brook is again extolled to speak. In bar 33 the boy sings "'Yes', is the word I hope for" at which point the piano movement stops and holds a first inversion of the dominant – the lack of movement is not unlike a person refusing to speak in order to protect the questioner from an unwanted answer, but musically it is more like a recitative allowing a less important part of the story to be told quickly. The harmonically stable dominant chord is more indicative of the questioner's wish that "Yes" is the answer. In contrast to this the other option, "No", is given in bar 35 and the piano begins moving slowly, tentatively, again, but it has modulated to G major. The use of such a distant key emphasises the importance of the answer, Brown describes it as the "whole world hang[ing] on the girl's 'Yes' or 'No' (1967:34).

If the unfortunate answer to the question had not already been made clearly enough, in the antepenultimate bar the jarring clash on the second beat, in contrast to the predominantly tonic harmony, leaves the listener in no uncertainty:



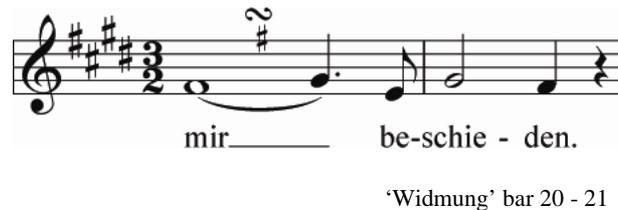
'Der Neugierige' bar 53

The placing of the semiquavers in the left hand for the final four bars, and the fact that they are descending could also be interpreted as the brook moving away from the boy, and in turn illustrate hope in his fated love disappearing – although he is not yet aware of it.

As well as providing a setting for the song, there are instances where the piano can also be seen to be reflecting the boy's emotions. For example, in bar 25 his frustration at the brook's silence, and his awareness of the brook's waywardness in bar 45 are shown in the B minor chords against the major tonality. Again, although still an accompaniment, the interplay between the piano and the singer can clearly be seen to be increasing.

Schumann's 'Widmung', or 'Devotion', is a paean of praise to Clara, described by Desmond as the "perfect song of love and gratitude to the woman who has been the inspiration of his music and the solace of his heart" (1972:13). The key of the song, A flat, is used by Schumann to indicate a "mood of reverence" (Sams, 1975:8), and the use of tonic and subdominant tonality in the opening and closing sections combined with the long bass notes give a sense of firmness to his assertions; there is also a sense of the reverence of hymnody in the choice of these chords. In the arpeggio passages, the use of the dotted quaver rhythm is an indication of "manliness" (M56) (*ibid* 21) juxtaposed against his declaration of love.

The song abounds with other Schumann motifs, such as the flattened seventh (M50) to accompany the word “himmel” (“heaven”) in the final beat of bar seven, and leading into bar 19, or the Clara motif (A, B flat, D flat, E flat) in the piano bass in bar 37. Sams also indicates a more personal tribute to Clara in bar 20 where he suggests the melody on “mir beschieden” is a quotation from Schubert’s song *Das Rosenband* in which the text set is “at that look her life entwined with mine” (*ibid* 52).



The motifs are also used in conjunction with the song’s harmony, for example on the word “schwebe” in bar nine the “striving” is illustrated by a move towards D flat but the falling semitone in the voice is described as M2, indicating happiness, by Sams (*ibid* 11); this use of the flattened tonality with a ‘happy’ motif adds emotional poignancy to the song.

As a whole the accompaniment to the E major section reflects the words’ reverence, although the key has moved away from A flat the emotional sincerity is retained, and works with the text to display Schumann’s “repose and peace” as he acknowledges to himself that Clara “justifies me”.

As Schubert used the closing bars to reinforce the unwritten text, Schumann uses the final bars to display the extremes of his emotion. The repeated quotation from Schubert’s *Ave Maria* in bars 40 and 42 suggest a beatification of Clara to the status of the Blessed Virgin Mary, although the use of the flattened sixth on the second beat of the two bars hark back to

the harmony on “grab” (“grave”) in bar 10 which could, as Sams suggests, indicate a sense of “doubt or unworthiness” (*ibid* 52) in Schumann’s mind.

The piano’s rôle has moved on from Schubert’s involved accompaniment and is now a crucial part in its own right; indeed it would not be inconceivable to play the piano part as a solo. At the same time, its involvement with the emotion and meaning of the song has moved to another level as illustrated above.

‘Die Lotosblume’, or ‘The lotus flower’ is a far more meditative song portraying the beauty of a lotus flower which blooms at night. The first nine bars illustrate the lake on which the flower is floating (Desmond 1972:16) with the steady bass line and the repeated chords unpinning the simple melody; if the sun that the flower fears is indicated by the use of F major, it has certainly set by bar nine on the word “nacht” where it has modulated to the dominant (M43 (Sams 1975:58)). However it is the moon’s appearance in bar 10 that is shown by a magical modulation to the flattened submediant, A flat major. As before, the key of A flat is considered to be a sign of reverence, in this case that of the flower for her lover the moon. If F major is considered to be the sun it must be no coincidence that in bar 14 the moon’s brightness is welcomed by the flower with a root position chord of F, and then reinforced a bar later with a first inversion.

The use of repeated chords in both hands from bar ten onwards as the moon appears and the flower opens is an example of M38, and although the word “demut” (humility) is not present it could be seen as an oblique reference to Schumann’s personal feelings in Clara’s presence (*ibid* 19). As with ‘Widmung’ there are also direct references to Clara, and the opening vocal phrase (C – B flat – A – G sharp – A) must be one of the clearest examples of the Clara theme in the cycle.

The final vocal line is repeated (bars 24 and 26) and the falling sixths and fourths and the song exemplify the “pain of love”, leaving the listener with just the memory of the beauty of the flower’s opening, returning to the tonic and presumably a new day dawning.

As a whole the song covers a wide range of emotions in a very short space of time, and there are notable extremes throughout: it moves from day to night, from calmness to an excited state, and from the flower’s sleeping to opening. All of these are conveyed in the text, but also in the music, the harmonies, the textures, the tempi, and the dynamics.

Again, the piano and voice are entwined and as Sams and Johnson note:

as Mendelssohn played songs on the piano and called them *Lieder ohne worte*, so Schumann sang piano pieces and turned them back into lieder (2001:§4).

In creating these songs, Schumann has encompassed the entire gamut of Romantic elements: they are concerned with nature, emotion, love, poetry and beauty and he creates

a natural unity out of a collection of different objects without compromising the independence [...] of each member (Sams & Johnsons 2001: §4)

while at the same time displaying his technical brilliance with the inclusion of the plethora of ciphers throughout the cycle.

In no way was Schubert’s writing any less accomplished than Schumann’s, indeed without his songs the foundation on which Schumann built would have been considerably weakened. Blume sees Schubert’s innovations as a result of the development of Romantic poetry which lead him to divide his attention “between the emotionally motivated but still ‘songlike’ leadership of the voice and the independently descriptive piano accompaniment” (1972:169). As Schubert developed the song and made the piano a more important element, Schumann, a “musical representative of the [...] German Romantic movement” (Desmond 1972:61), took this further and in unifying the piano and voice embodied the ultimate Romantic ideal.

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Appendix I

'Wohin?' from *Die Schöne Müllerin* – Schubert

from the Lea Pocket Scores series (nd), with translation
from the German by Sir Robert Randolph Garran

I heard a brooklet babble
From rocky fountain near,
All down the valley babble,
So brisk and wondrous clear.

I know not how it happen'd,
Nor whence the counsel came,
I too with staff of travel
Must follow just the same.

And farther down and farther
My wandering way I took:
And still more briskly babbled
The music of the brook.

And is this then my pathway?
O brooklet, whither, say?
O say, whither, say?
For thou hast with thy babbling
Quite babbled my wits away.

But how believe it babbling?
No babble does it seem:
'Tis singing of the Nixies
That live beneath the stream.

Stop singing, my friend, and babbling,
And for a mill-wheel look:
There is a mill-wheel turning
In every crystal brook.

Appendix II

'Der Neugierige' from *Die Schöne Müllerin* – Schubert

from the Lea Pocket Scores series (nd), with translation
from the German by Sir Robert Randolph Garran

I'll not ask any flower,
I'll not ask any star;
To answer what I would be asking
They all unable are.

I have no skill in gardens,
The stars are set too high;
I'll bid my brooklet tell me
If me my heart belie.

O brooklet that I love so,
How dumb you are today!
'Tis but one thing I ask you,
But one word, either way.

'Yes' is the word I hope for,
The other word is 'No':
For me those two words carry
A world of joy or woe.

O brooklet that I love so,
How waywards you can be!
Just once again I ask you:
Say, brooklet, loves she me?

Appendix III

'Widmung' from *Myrthen* – Schumann

from the Lea Pocket Scores series (nd), with translation from the German taken from
Sams, E (1975) *The Songs of Robert Schumann* London: Ernst Eulenburg Ltd.

You are my heart and soul, my bliss and pain;
You are the world I live in, the heaven I aspire to,
The tomb where I have laid my sorrow to rest for ever.

You are repose and peace, and my share of heaven;
Your love justifies me, your gaze transfigures me,
Lovingly you raise me to new heights, my good angel, my better self.

You are my heart and soul, my bliss and pain;
World I live in, heave I aspire to,
My good angel, my better self.

Appendix IV

'Die Lotosblume' from *Myrthen* – Schumann

from the Lea Pocket Scores series (nd), with translation from the German taken from
Sams, E (1975) *The Songs of Robert Schumann* London: Ernst Eulenburg Ltd.

The lotus flower is fearful of the sun's splendour,
And with bowed head dreaming she awaits the night.

The moon is her lover;
He wakes her with his light and to him she joyously unveils her devoted flower-face.

She blooms and glows and shines and looks up speechless at the sky,
Trembling for love and the pain of love.
