

Death, the Trout, and the Maiden: Schubert's Instrumental Interpretation of His Lieder

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Europe in the nineteenth century played host to one of the most important intellectual and artistic movements in cultural history: Romanticism. The movement was a response to the influence of the cold and mechanical Industrial Revolution, and its focus was dramatic, emotive expression. These notions of Romanticism first emerged in literature, and its expressive characteristics were absorbed by the contemporary musical style, in reaction to Classical music's emphasis on the structure of musical composition. Composers during the Romantic period created works layered with emotive context. In vocal music, the Romantic qualities were especially prevalent in the Germanic regions of Europe, where the German *Lied*, or in its plural form *Lieder*, became the quintessential vocal genre of the Romantic period. The composer best known for his mastery of *Lieder* was Franz Schubert; however, he also wrote in instrumental genres. Using the third movement of the *Piano Quintet in A Major* and the second movement of the *String Quartet in D Minor*, this analysis will examine Schubert's treatment of his songs in an instrumental context. Though Schubert wrote the instrumental ensemble works independent of his *Lieder*, the style in which he treated borrowed thematic content was similar. Through his use of musical form and carefully planned deviations from the original *Lieder*, Schubert was able to successfully transfer his interpretive *Lieder* style to purely instrumental mediums.

Before discussing the instrumental works of Schubert based on his *Lieder*, it is important to understand his style within the context of the period. Schubert wrote a vast body of *Lieder*, due in part to their popularity as a genre. The German *Lied* genre involved a single vocal line with piano accompaniment, and, though the accompaniment could be simple or elaborate based on the composer's wishes, the accompaniment was as critical and requiring of "artistic interpretation" as the vocal line.¹ Such importance was placed on interpretation because the lyrics to the *Lieder* were from pre-existing poetry, often contemporaneous. The prevalence and quality of Germanic poets like Goethe, Mayrhofer, and Schiller, all of whom provided texts that Schubert incorporated into his

¹ Michael Kennedy, "Lied, Lieder" in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music*, 3rd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1980), 370.

Lieder, created an environment of rich source material that could be set to music. Thus one reason that German *Lieder* became integral to the Romantic movement was that they represented the synthesis of Romanticism as both a literary and musical movement.

Lieder were characteristically simple in terms of the vocal part, and the availability of piano for music-making in the home enabled *Lieder* to be consumed by the public en masse.² In terms of writing for voice, the simplicity of *Lieder* is a stylistic reaction to the exorbitant ornamentation and improvisation that was in vogue for the operatic singing style that had dominated the Classical period. The simplicity of Schubert's vocal parts did not mean Schubert limited himself to writing simplistically in the piano parts; some of them are demanding of the pianist while others are performable by amateur pianists. His variety of difficulty can be seen in comparing the piano accompaniments to *Die Forelle* and *Der Tod und Das Mädchen*.³

Example 1.1. Schubert, *Die Forelle*, mm. 1-2.⁴



Example 1.2. Schubert, *Der Tod und Das Mädchen*, mm. 9-10.⁵



The accompaniment to *Die Forelle* beginning in the first measure, though rhythmically repetitive, is highly involved in the context of the song: it mimics the rippling of the water the trout swims in. *Der Tod*, on the other hand, has accompaniment beginning in m. 9 that serves mainly to advance the song rhythmically while also offering harmonic support to the vocalist.

² “Schubert’s *Lieder*: Settings of Goethe’s Poems,” OpenLearn: Free Learning from the Open University, 2017. <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/history/history-art/schuberts-lieder-settings-goethes-poems/content-section-0> (30 January 2016).

³ The *Lieder* titles translate to *The Trout* and *Death and the Maiden*, respectively.

⁴ Franz Schubert, *Die Forelle* in *Franz Schubert's Werke, Serie XX: Sämtliche einstimmige Lieder und Gesänge* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1895).

⁵ Franz Schubert, *Der Tod und Das Mädchen* (Vienna: Diabelli, 1822).

The importance of both the accompaniment and the vocal parts helped distinguish Schubert's *Lieder* in how thoroughly the music serves the overall meaning of the source text. The emphasis placed on the text, which served as the base for Schubert's lyric selection, reflected the nature of the Romantic movement, which was not isolated to music alone, but also branched into literature and philosophy.⁶ German literature, poetry in particular, truly began to flourish in the 19th Century, which coincided with the Romantic period.⁷ This meant that Schubert and his contemporaries had access to a vast array of poetic works from which songs could be created. The creative process was not limited to the choice of poem for text setting, but was expanded to include interpretation of the text via the text setting—the musical accompaniment. Schubert's poetic interpretations were done meticulously, and he paid attention to the minute details within a text, such as passing phrases or even a single word.⁸ These details were then incorporated into the lyrics, which were often direct quotations of the poems, and into the music Schubert wrote, either in a melody, musical accents, a harmony, or even the rhythmic figures of the accompaniment. Measures 26–32 of *Die Forelle* present one of the best examples of this thorough interpretation. The following musical example is from mm. 29 and 30 since it features the important segments that occur throughout the larger section.

Example 2. Schubert, *Die Forelle*, mm. 29-30.⁹



Though the vocal line is significant for advancing the story told through the text, the musical interpretation of the accompaniment is of greater importance in this section. Partly, this has to do with Schubert's propensity for finding the best rhythm or figure to create the desired mood or effect.¹⁰ In m. 29 of *Die Forelle*, the piano part becomes busy, with constant arpeggiation of chords. It replaces the lilting, lackadaisical flow of the accompaniment up through m. 25. The significance of this shift lies in its parallel to what

⁶ Lisa Feurzeig, *Schubert's Lieder and the Philosophy of German Romanticism* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014), 2.

⁷ Germany as a country did not exist in Schubert's time and would not until 1871; however, the Germanic cultural heritage was recognizable through much of Europe, and any reference in this paper to Germany refers to the Germanic regions.

⁸ Brian Newbould, *Schubert: The Music and the Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 147.

⁹ Schubert, *Die Forelle*.

¹⁰ "Franz Schubert: Music for Solo Voice & Piano," *FranzPeterSchubert.com*, n.d. http://www.franzpeterschubert.com/solo_voice__piano.html (22 January 2016).

is happening to the trout. The lyric “*Er macht das bächlein tückisch trübe*” translates to “[the fisher] makes the little brook muddy,” which would cause the trout to swim in panic.¹¹ This development explains why the piano accompaniment becomes more frantic: it represents both the muddying of the water and the panic of the trout. This passage is only one example of how Schubert took care to interpret a text completely, but it is this level of dedication to the source text that makes his *Lieder* so notable.

Even though Schubert is known for his numerous *Lieder*, he also wrote substantial instrumental works. In some of these pieces, Schubert revisited themes composed for his *Lieder*. This reuse of themes raises questions about how he treated the thematic material in a different medium, and in order to answer these questions, this analysis examines the *Piano Quintet in A* and the *String Quartet in D minor*. Both of these pieces have been given famous epithets because of their inclusion of thematic material from Schubert’s *Lieder*. The *Quartet in D minor* is referred to as the “Death and the Maiden Quartet” because of *Der Tod*’s appearance in the second movement, and the *Piano Quintet* is referred to as the “Trout Quintet” due to *Die Forelle*’s presence in the third movement.

Each instrumental work was written and published after its corresponding *Lied*. This sequence allowed time for the songs to work into public circulation, establishing widespread familiarity with these *Lieder*. In fact, *Die Forelle* was the *Lied* chosen for the Quintet because it was requested by the patron who commissioned the Quintet.¹² Though this explains the Quintet, the question of the Quartet’s inclusion of *Der Tod* remains unanswered. Schubert was by no means short on thematic material, as indicated by his large body of work, but his inclusion of themes that would have been relatively well known to a large number of people is curious. This familiarity could have been a tactic to sell more music. However, this hypothesis is unlikely for several reasons. The first has to do with how music was sold by utilizing the relationships between musicians, composers, and amateur musicians.¹³ Though music was designed to include a familiar theme, the inclusion would not be enough on its own, and the enthusiasm of other people was vital to popularize a new piece. The other reason that the inclusion of familiar themes would not have been a marketing ploy has to do with the names of the actual pieces. Both the Quartet and the Quintet follow a pattern of generic labeling of a piece with its genre and key signature, and the more individualized epithets by which the Quartet and the Quintet are known today arose after they were performed. Initially, people learned that *Lieder* themes were used in the instrumental works through actually playing them or hearing them played.

Because the thematic material was not for publicity purposes, the question of why the composer used pre-existing thematic material still remains. The answer lies in the form of each movement where the material occurs. Both the second movement of the “Death and the Maiden Quartet” and the third movement of the “Trout Quintet” are written in theme and variation form. This actually fits a pattern that occurs in Schubert’s *Lieder*. Whenever he revised a new setting, he elaborated on it instead of

¹¹ Translation by Katlin Harris.

¹² L. Michael Griffel, “*Der Tod und Die Forelle*: New Thoughts on Schubert’s Quintet,” *Current Musicology*, no. 79/80 (2005): 59.

¹³ William Weber, “Mass Culture and the Reshaping of European Musical Taste, 1770-1870,” *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 25, no. 1/2 (1994): 179.

drastically changing it.¹⁴ The theme and variation form essentially allowed Schubert to continue elaborating on his theme in new and various ways. Schubert marked the Quintet into theme and variation sections. The “Thema” or theme section of mm. 1–21 begins the movement and is then followed by six variations, five of them labeled and the sixth being marked by a labeled tempo change that doubles as a style change. The Quartet, on the other hand, is not marked so obviously. There are no words delineating a theme section or variations. However, a mere glance reveals that the movement is rife with repeated sections that occur in a regular pattern. In mm. 1–24, the notable *Der Tod und das Mädchen* theme is introduced. Within this span there are two repeated sections; the first is from mm. 1–8 and the second is from mm. 9–24, and they create an 8:16 measure ratio.¹⁵ This ratio is the basis for each following unmarked variation, and the pattern of using repeat signs to mark sections is exactly the same until m. 137. At m. 137, there is no sign of repeat; however, the 8:16 ratio remains the same. The only departure from the 8:16 ratio occurs in mm. 177–180, and this is simply because this passage functions as the ending of the movement, thus giving it a sense of finality and completion. A harmonic analysis additionally shows that each section has a relatively similar harmonic pattern, even when the movement changes keys. The first section is centered around the minor tonic triad, followed by the second section, which is centered around the major submediant but cadences on the major tonic. There are also other chords within the sections, but the simplification $|| : i : || : VI \ I : ||$ best serves the overall pattern of minor transitioning to major that occurs in all of the variations. The form acts as Schubert’s musical canvas for his interpretation.

As previously stated, the *Lieder* that the thematic material came from were written prior to the creation of the instrumental works, and this means that Schubert already had interpreted the source texts. The question then becomes how he recreated the textual interpretation in a purely instrumental medium. To accomplish this, Schubert had to combine his pre-existing textual interpretation with new musical content. The result is a highly intellectual endeavor. The intellectual focus is a byproduct of the historical and cultural environment in which Schubert was living. In the 1800s, Europe was marked by the aftershocks of the French Revolution and by Napoleon’s political ideals. One of the main consequences was a shift away from aristocracy, which affected music directly because of its historic association with the aristocratic class.¹⁶ This meant that music as an art form would be linked to politics. This political linkage was widely and heavily felt, particularly in the late 19th Century, but the roots of the phenomenon took hold during Schubert’s time. The German government, in an attempt to stifle revolutionary thoughts from spreading to the populace, began to monitor its people.¹⁷ The hope of the governing elites was to prevent any insurrection based on revolutionary ideals, but they also understood that the written word was not the only way to disseminate views that they saw as detrimental to the existing political system. The

¹⁴ Reinhard Van Hoorickx, “Schubert’s Reminiscences of His Own Works,” *The Musical Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (July 1974): 378-9.

¹⁵ The description excludes the repetition of the section.

¹⁶ Celia Applegate, “How German Is It? Nationalism and the Idea of Serious Music in the Early Nineteenth Century,” *19th-Century Music* 21, no. 3 (1998): 286.

¹⁷ Andrew Hemingway and William Vaughan, *Art in Bourgeois Society, 1790 – 1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 203.

societal monitoring was also extended to visual art and to vocal music, which, because of its ability to articulate actual words, was prone to censorship. Instrumental music of the Romantic period focused on emotions and could move people through the power of the musicians' abilities to create emotion with their playing. Emotions such as anger and



Portrait of Franz Schubert, 1797-1828, oil on canvas by Carl Jager. Public domain (PD-1923). https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Portrait_of_Franz_Schubert_1797-1828,_oil_on_canvas_by_Carl_Jager

despair over existing political circumstances were at the root of many revolutionary thoughts, thus making them dangerous. The music's emotional context could then be indirectly influenced through piece titles and instrumental arrangements of vocal songs that could not otherwise be performed under censorship. Governments were less wary of

this subtle ability to express independent thought, which made instrumental music an ideal platform for subversive expression.

Schubert had firsthand experience with political oppression, and he actively fought against it in the defense of a friend who had spoken out against political repression. In 1820, the chambers of his friend Johann Senn were searched and his writings confiscated under official orders of the chief of police; Senn angrily began to argue with the police who were invading his liberties, and Schubert “chimed in against the authorized official...inveighing against him with insulting and opprobrious language,” for which he was then arrested.¹⁸ This incident shows that Schubert was not afraid of going against the political powers of the time in order to defend his friends and his core belief in civil liberties. Musically, this translates to his shift to composing instrumental works. Instrumental music featured no words to be censored, yet could still evoke desired moods and subtly undermine political powers of the time. Schubert made a drastic shift in 1824, the year the *Quartet in D Minor* was written, to compose fewer *Lieder* and more instrumental music.¹⁹ This later instrumental music is more complex, as seen in the differences in the theme and variations. The *Die Forelle* variations are significantly more straightforward in regard to the notable theme than are the Quartet’s variations. Recognizing the variations in the Quartet requires greater intellectual effort, but that subtlety does not impede Schubert’s ability to apply his textual interpretation from the *Lieder*; if anything, it actually elevates the interpretation.

An understanding of Schubert’s instrumental interpretation requires discussion of the differences in the *Lieder* as compared to the instrumental movements. Firstly, neither of the instrumental works is set in the original key of the *Lieder*.²⁰ Though this may seem like a small difference, it is important to evaluate the change because it is possible that the difference in key signatures exists for the sake of artistic interpretation. For the Quintet, the choice of key has to do with the overall form of the entire work. The Quintet is in A major, but *Die Forelle* is originally written in Db major. Db is not one of the notes found in the key of A major, and therefore would not be a key signature that appears within an A major work in accordance with traditional form. The reason for the key change is the change in instrumentation. Db major is a key that is more accessible to vocalists; however, for string players, Db major is more of a hindrance than A major. Therefore, this deliberate changing of keys is to facilitate performance rather than musical interpretation. The original key of *Der Tod* is D minor, and the Quartet is in D minor, yet the second movement, which contains the thematic content in question, is in G minor. Though Schubert could have used the original key, the use of a different key is feasible in the context of the larger work because the keys are separated by a fifth. This means that they are closely related in terms of their key signatures, and the *Lied* will not sound drastically different from the String Quartet. The change of keys is therefore not for interpretation, but in order to ease execution of the music and adhere to tenets of music theory regarding closely related keys.

¹⁸ Report from High Commissioner of Police von Ferstl, March 1820, in *Schubert: A Documentary Biography* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons LTD., 1946), 128.

¹⁹ Blake Howe, “The Allure of Dissolution: Bodies, Forces, and Cyclicity in Schubert’s Final Mayrhofer Settings,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 62, no. 2 Summer (2009): 276.

²⁰ Each key is composed of a different set of notes. Thus when a key is changed, the sound can be drastically different or slightly similar if the key signatures share similar notes.

The biggest difference between the *Lieder* and the instrumental works is how Schubert approaches the statement of the themes. The Quintet and the Quartet approach the themes and the manner in which they are varied in almost opposite ways. The theme used by the Quintet covers mm. 1–20 from the original *Lied*; however, the Quintet does not repeat where the *Lied* repeats. *Die Forelle* repeats from mm. 1–24 in order to create strophic verses before a change in character and melody. The Quintet, on the other hand, repeats mm. 1–8, which comprise roughly half of the first verse in the song, before finishing the theme in mm. 10–21. Additionally, the theme is not presented exactly as it is in the *Lied*. In the first few measures of the melody alone, the instrumental version has

Example 3.1. Schubert, *Die Forelle*, mm. 1-4.²¹



Example 3.2. Schubert, *Piano Quintet in A Major*, Op. 114, Mvmt. III mm. 1-4.²²



several dotted rhythms, which give the theme a lighter, more playful sound. More importantly, this rhythmic change prevents the string sound from being too sustained, which is uncharacteristic of the human voice. The different rhythm and articulation actually enable the strings to sound more buoyant and to mimic the crisp sounds of the German language. In addition to introducing more vivacious rhythms, the Quintet dispenses with the famous piano accompaniment of the original *Lied*. (See Example 1.1) The original accompaniment is not referenced until m. 133 at the beginning of the final variation. The articulation changes, but in almost every variation, the theme is easily visible to the players and audible to the listeners. In general, Schubert uses the formula of one part having the melody, one part having an ornamental line, and the other parts having filler notes and rhythms. Of most importance are the ornamental and melodic lines because they offer continuous movement underneath the melody. The Quartet, on the other hand, approaches the theme in an opposite manner. The theme utilized is from mm. 1–8 of *Der Tod*. Unlike the Quintet, the Quartet restates the original *Lied* exactly, though the parts appear voiced in a chorale-like manner instead of the close chords of the piano accompaniment. The theme is clearly and distinctly stated, but only two times: once at the beginning and then at m. 169, which is where the

²¹ Schubert, *Die Forelle*.

²² Franz Schubert, *Piano Quintet in A Major*, Op. 114 (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1886).

final variation begins to near its completion. Outside of these two instances, the other variations differ considerably from the original thematic content.

Given the deviations from the original *Lieder*, the question remains: how could Schubert have maintained a textual interpretation from the *Lieder*? The forms chosen prevented Schubert from utilizing the entirety of the *Lieder*, and the lack of text prevented any verbal communication. The verbal communication dilemma is solved in a rather simple manner. Music making in the 19th Century still placed a large emphasis on music in the home.²³ The fact that the instrumental works were published after the *Lieder* had been released for public consumption meant that the themes in and of themselves were recognizable to those who had heard the *Lieder*. Another possibility is that at least one person either playing the music or listening to its performance had earlier heard the corresponding *Lied*, thus enabling this person to tell others. The answer to these problems created by the form are actually solved by the form. Each individual variation can almost be viewed as a verse, and the “verses” that show drastic style differences correspond to mood change or the creation of conflict within the original *Lieder*.

The Quintet is the quintessential example of Schubert’s use of variation to create the textual interpretation. *Die Forelle* tells the tale of a trout that eludes capture by a fisherman until the fisherman disturbs the water, thus enabling him to capture the fish. In the instrumental work, the melody is always present and it is passed to a different member of the ensemble. It is written in a lively manner through the use of dotted rhythms and is kept moving forward by ornamented lines. This corresponds to the trout swimming peacefully in the water. The muddying of the water occurs in m. 89 at the start of Variation IV. Unlike the previous variations, this one does not utilize many dotted rhythms, instead opting for aggressive triplets and strictly rhythmic eighth notes. Its importance as a section is also marked by the only fortissimo in the entire movement, as well as the first key change from D major into D minor. By Variation V, the key changes again, and the texture thins as the presence of dotted rhythms returns. In the original *Lied*, the vocalist sings about the dead trout in the same lively manner as at the beginning, but more importantly, the accompaniment returns to the lilting, water-like motif from the beginning. The Quintet follows suit exactly. The lilting theme from *Die Forelle* is hinted at in the piano part at m. 133 upon the arrival at the final variation. Only when every part has played the motif does the Quintet end.

What the “Trout Quintet” accomplishes through key signature and motif, the *String Quartet in D Minor* accomplishes through its harmony and its division of variations into sections. *Der Tod und Das Mädchen* is about a young woman’s conversation with Death, who welcomes her to sleep in its arms. The song is divided into two sections, the first representing the maiden, and the second section, beginning at m. 22, representing Death. It is important to note that Death’s theme encapsulates the song, serving as the piano prelude and the end of the piece, though then it ends in the major key. In short, Schubert interprets Death to be a calming presence, as indicated by Death’s theme ending as a major key instead of a minor key. Death as a non-menacing presence is actually one of Schubert’s most common interpretations.²⁴ Thus the positive portrayal of

²³ Weber, “Mass Culture,” 178.

²⁴ Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, *Schubert’s Songs: A Biographical Study* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 85.

Death in the Quartet is a continuation of Schubert's *Lieder* style. In the Quartet, each repeated section serves the function of being either the maiden or Death, and each variation can be viewed as a conversation between the two. The first three variations, mm. 25–101, are busy in terms of number of notes and interaction of parts. This activity culminates at m. 76, when all four instruments are in rhythmic unison. This passage is aggressive, as indicated by the fortissimo marking and subsequent sforzandos on each beat in mm. 76 and 77. This feeling of aggression is alleviated immediately in the following variation, which changes keys and features instrumentation that is more reminiscent of a chorale. Ultimately the movement ends as it began, except at a softer dynamic and voiced in a higher register, thus signifying the maiden's welcome into Death's embrace. The inclusion of aggressive and chaotic variations to represent the maiden and her life, and the culmination in calmness are unique to the instrumental work. By rewriting *Der Tod* in this instrumental context, Schubert was actually able to improve on his original vocal interpretation.

Schubert was a master poetic interpreter, and he was able to make his *Lieder* embody the essence of a text. However, with growing political unrest, vocal music was no longer a safe medium. As a result, instrumental music's rising prevalence gave Schubert new opportunities to disseminate his *Lieder*. Despite the challenge of having no vocal line to advance musical meaning, Schubert was able to create not one, but two musical masterworks of interpretation. First came the second movement of the Piano "Trout" Quintet. After a few years, Schubert again used a movement of a larger instrumental work to showcase one of his own songs, and this time Schubert conveyed, through the new medium, not merely his original interpretation but an even more complex interpretation. Schubert may have composed instrumental music as well as *Lieder*, but it was his aptitude for poetic interpretation that served as the driving force behind his writing process.

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