RACHEL FENLON

soprano & piano

FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797–1828)

Die Winterreise

Gute Nacht (Good Night)

Die Wetterfahne (The Weathervane)

Gefrorne Tränen (Frozen Tears)

Erstarrung (Numbness)

Der Lindenbaum (The Linden Tree)

Wasserflut (Flood Water)

Auf dem Flusse (On the River)

Rückblick (Looking Backward)

Irrlicht (Will o' the Wisp)

Rast (Rest)

Frühlingstraum (Dream of Spring)

Einsamkeit (Solitude)

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Die Post (The Post)

Der greise Kopf (The Old Man's Head)

Die Krähe (The Crow)

Letzte Hoffnung (Last Hope)

Im Dorfe (In the Village)

Der stürmische Morgen (The Stormy Morning)

Täuschung (Illusion)

Der Wegweiser (The Sign Post)

Das Wirtshaus (The Inn)

Mut! (Courage)

Die Nebensonnen (The Sun Dogs)

Der Leiermann (The Hurdy-Gurdy Man)

(approx. 75 minutes)

Franz Schubert's *Die Winterreise*

The art songs of Franz Schubert lie at the foundation of the lied genre itself, and at the pinnacle of Schubert's lieder output stands *Die Winterreise*, a song cycle remarkable for its vivid musical portraits of the human heart smarting from the pains of love lost and stoically resigned to the approach of death.

Conceived as a journey into the cold of winter, it sets to music a selection of poems by Wilhelm Müller published in 1823 and 1824 under the title *Seventy-Seven Poems from the Posthumous Papers of a Travelling Horn-Player.* Unlike the composer's previous song cycle, *Die Schöne Müllerin* (set to texts by the same poet), *Winterreise* presents more of a slide show than a plot, as all of the important action has taken place before the narration begins. The narrator-singer is heard in conversation with his own heart, by turns reflective, questioning, ironic and finally resigned. In this speculative frame of mind, he drifts fluidly between the world of his dreams and the bitter reality he faces.

At issue is a love affair gone wrong. The wanderer's beloved has broken off their relationship to marry a richer man, leaving him despairing and alone with his thoughts, which travel through dark territory as he traverses village and country settings after leaving her house.

The work was composed in two separate parts in 1827, the year before Schubert's death, making the terminal illness from which he was suffering one obvious point of reference. But the poems from Wilhelm Müller's collection provide apt imagery for such a presentation of moods, with their recurring themes of loneliness and isolation, watchwords of the emerging Romantic movement in art.

The cast of characters with whom the narrator interacts are elements of the natural landscape (sun, wind, trees and leaves, flowers, rivers and snow, crows and ravens), elements that form symbolic company for his journey. Schubert's achievement in setting these poems is to give musical life to these images, not only in the contours of the singer's melody, but especially in the pictorial vividness of the piano score. The piano serves as more than mere accompaniment: it often acts out the role of the external surroundings through which the singer travels.

And yet a paradox pervades this piano score. It is both richly allusive and unusually austere. Benjamin Britten, in discussing Schubert's artistry, outlines the performers' challenge in these terms:

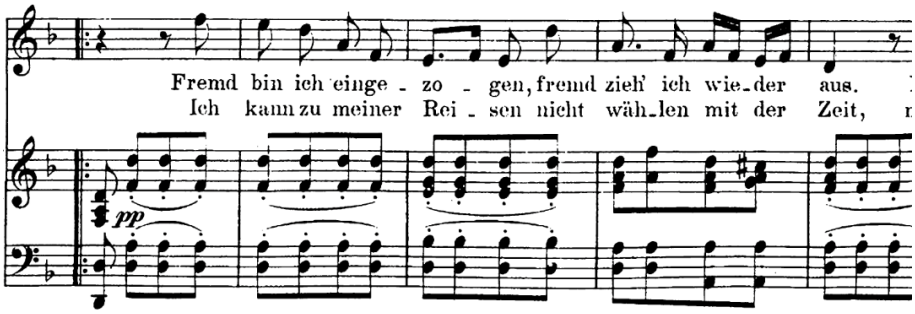
> One of the most alarming things I always find, when performing this work, is that there is actually so little on the page. He gets the most extraordinary moods and atmospheres with so few notes. And there aren't any gloriously wishy-washy arpeggios to help you. You've got to create the mood by these few chords. He leaves it all very much up to the performers.

PART ONE

GUTE NACHT (Good Night)

Our traveller's grim journey begins as he bids farewell to the house of his beloved, slipping off into the night accompanied only by the shadow of the moon. The piano introduction establishes his even walking pace but is punctuated by sudden off-beat accents emblematic of his inner turmoil.

The poetic theme tying the song cycle together — alienation from emotional fulfillment and earthly existence — is summarized in the very first line he sings: *"A stranger I came, a stranger I depart."*

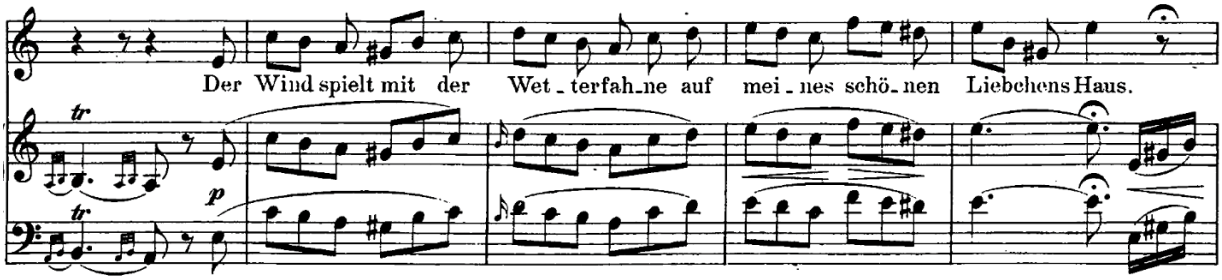


The narration drifts between his present unhappy state (in the minor mode) and happier thoughts (in the major).

"Love wanders willingly," he notes, with irony.

DIE WETTERFAHNE (The Weathervane)

The piano imitates a weathervane spinning atop his beloved's house as the singer wonders about those inside. Do their affections also change with the wind? Why should they care about him, when their daughter is marrying a rich man?

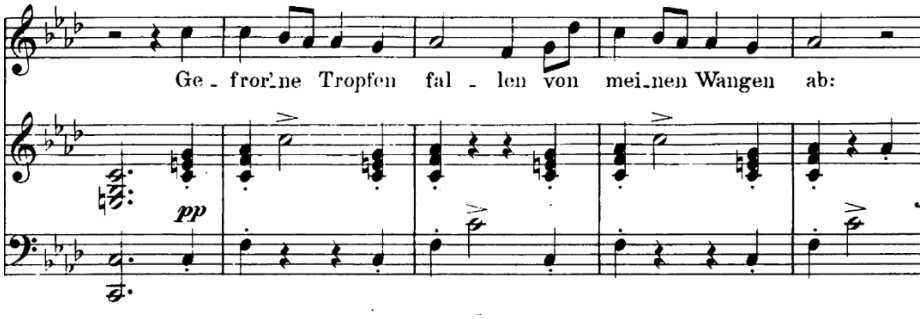


The musical texture is brilliantly evocative, with unisons between piano and singer making you feel the bitter chill in the air and trills evoking the wind blowing the weathervane around on its spindle.

GEFRORNE TRÄNEN (Frozen Tears)

The text of this song mixes anger and irony.

Against an eerie backdrop of dainty drip-drip sounds in the piano, often punctuated by a sudden sforzando accent, the singer asks how his tears can have frozen to his cheek so soon.



These tears were hot enough to melt ice when they poured from his heart.

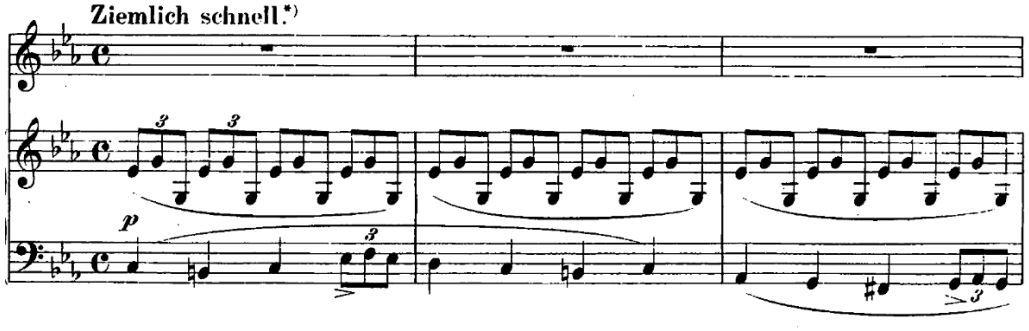
Alternating major and minor harmonies evoke both the warmth of feeling and the chill in the air of this scene.

ERSTARRUNG (Numbness)

Stunned by the loss of his love, our traveller searches frantically for any piece of green grass beneath the snow to remind him of happier times.

But all is dead around, like his frozen heart.

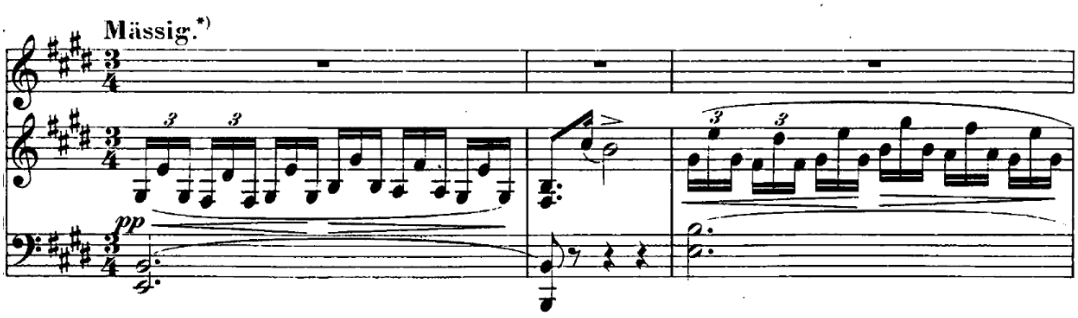
In this strange take on the classic Petrarchan figures of fire and ice, the agitated piano accompaniment



portrays the protagonist's raging inner turmoil while the avoidance of cadence at the end paints his inability to let go of the memory of his beloved.

DER LINDENBAUM (The Linden Tree)

We hear the first intimation of death in this song. As a chill wind blows through the fluttering leaves evoked by the piano,

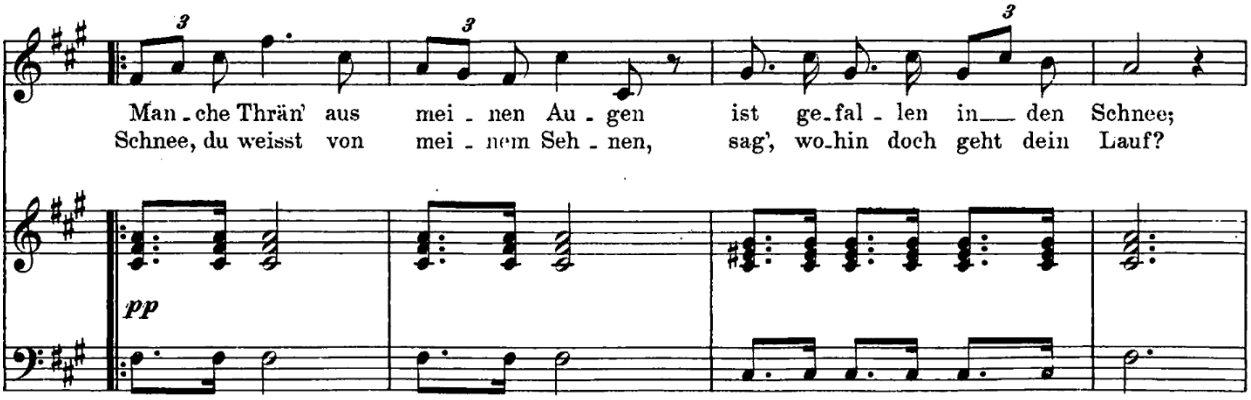


the traveller passes by a tree into which he had carved words of love. Once the emblem of his happiness, it now offers him eternal rest beneath its branches.

English tenor Ian Bostridge has pointed out that the linden tree was a popular meeting place in German towns. With this resonance of German nationalism in the setting of its text, it is not surprising, then, that this simple, tuneful melody lives on outside of Schubert's song cycle as the well-known German folksong, *Am Brunnen vor dem Tore.*

WASSERFLUT (Flood Water)

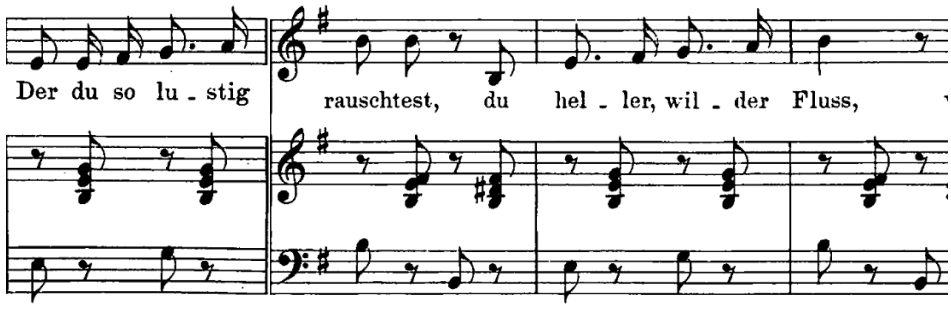
In this eerily calm, almost stately song, the protagonist muses on how the snow will absorb his tears, then thaw in the spring and flow with them into the stream. The flow of this stream will feel their warmth once again as it passes his beloved's house.



Here we find a classic example of the "pathetic fallacy" in Romantic poetry, in which Nature is imagined as reflecting and experiencing human emotions.

AUF DEM FLUSSE (On the River)

The strange tiptoe pace of this song gives it an aura of mystery, or perhaps merely tentativeness. The ice covering the river, on which the wanderer has carved the story of his love affair, is like his heart: it rages with a torrent beneath.

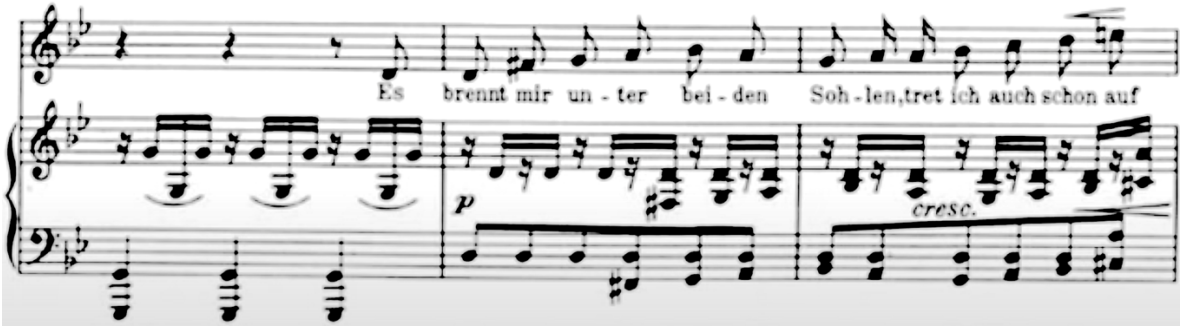


Changes from minor to major and back again are chilling, and near the end, the piano pulses with signs of his inner torment.

RÜCKBLICK (Looking Backward)

Pursued by crows as he breathlessly escapes, the wanderer casts a nostalgic glance back at the town he is leaving, once so pleasant to his memory.

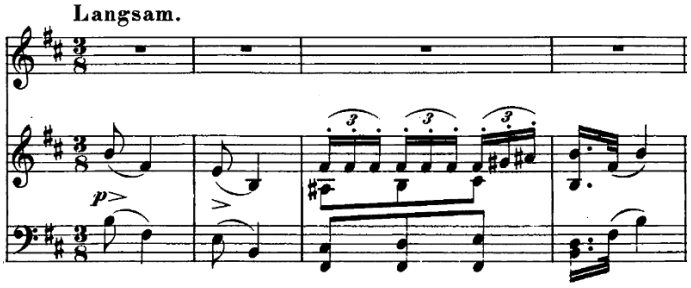
And looking back, he still longs to stand in front of her house once again.



Like many of the songs in this cycle, this one is divided clearly into major- and minor-mode sections.

IRRLICHT (Will o' the Wisp)

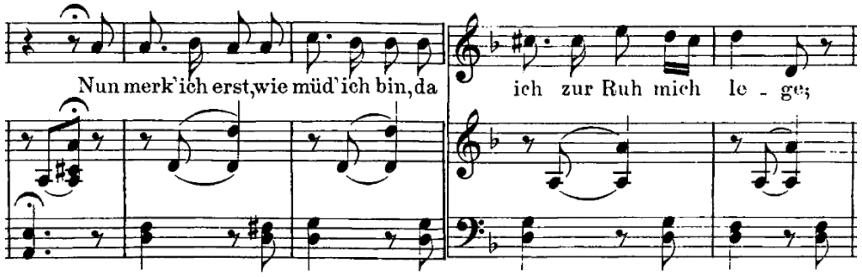
The flickering light of a will o' the wisp, imitated in the fast repeated notes in the piano,



leads the protagonist astray into a mountain chasm. He has no worries, though, for as rivers lead to the sea, so human miseries, like will o' the wisp, are but a game, all leading to the grave.

RAST (Rest)

A drowsy piano introduction finds the wanderer pausing from the fatigue of his journey.

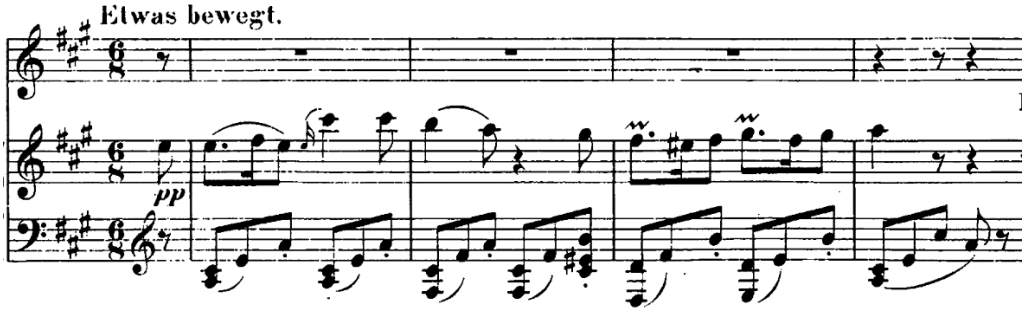


He shelters in a little hut, but this bodily respite from the cold and wind only allows him to feel more keenly the burning sting of jealousy in his heart.

The concentration of thought that has overtaken the singer is conveyed in an often speech-like, "un-melodic" vocal line.

FRÜHLINGSTRAUM (Dream of Spring)

One of the happiest of Schubertian melodies is introduced by the piano.

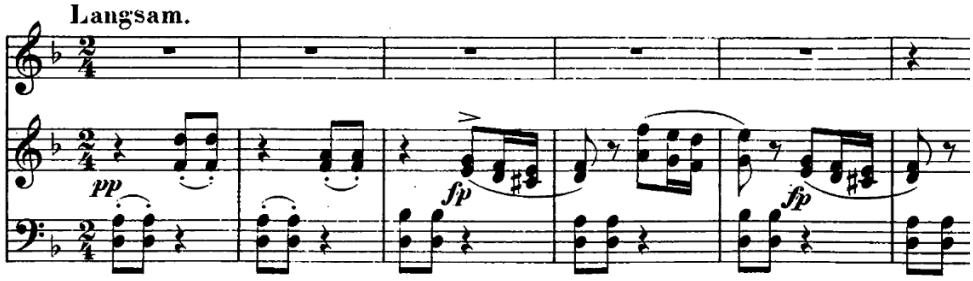


In this song we find our protagonist lost in a dream of springtime, then awakened by the rooster's call and the shrieking of crows. Drifting between a dream state and harsh reality, he longs to feel once again the warmth of love.

The piano score paints in turn the sudden shrieks of birds and the torpor of his drowsy eyelids. The change of mode from major to minor at the very end conveys his hopelessness. When will the ice-flowers in the window turn green? When will he hold her in his arms? The answer to both questions is: never.

EINSAMKEIT (Solitude)

The slow trudging pace of the piano's opening paints the protagonist's despair as he travels on his way, lonely as the cloud drifting overhead above the tops of the trees.



The stillness in the air, the brightness of the scene, are no help to his pain. When storms raged, he was less miserable than this.

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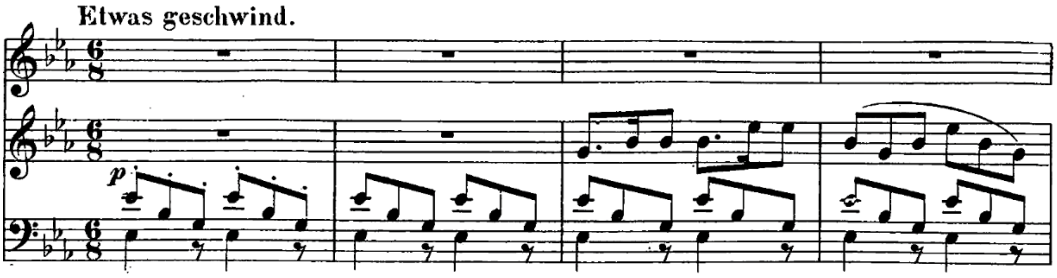
PART TWO

DIE POST (The Post)

The gallop of horses' hooves and the triadic call of the post-horn

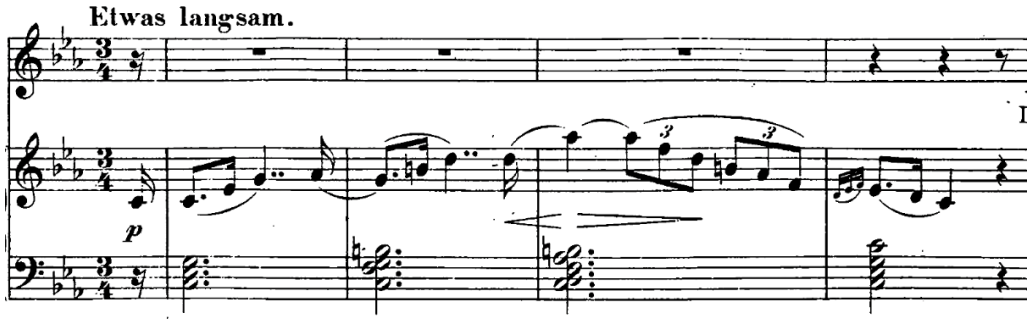


sets the second half of the song cycle in motion as our wanderer's heart leaps with the arrival of the mail coach. Does it bring a letter from her?

The upbeat tone of this song is an ironic set-up for emotional travails to follow.

DER GREISE KOPF (The Old Man's Head)

Eeriness returns in a song shrink-wrapped around the text rather than arranged in stanzas.



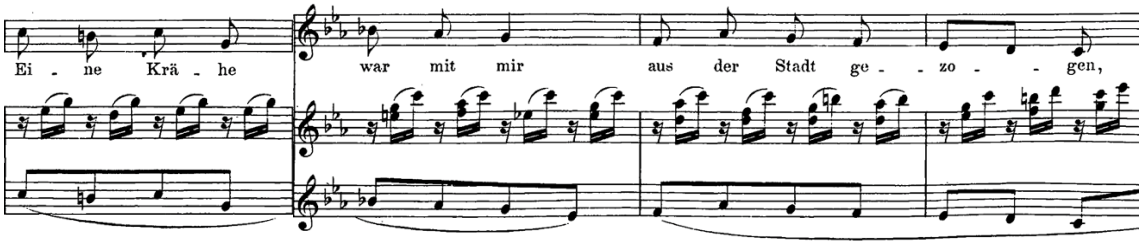
The frost on the wanderer's head has made him look like an old man, a welcome thought. Then horror sets in as he realizes he is still young, with so very far yet to travel to the grave.

The sparseness of the piano part creates a chilling stillness as a sonic backdrop to these dark thoughts.

DIE KRÄHE (The Crow)

Circling overhead, a crow has been following the wanderer. Is it waiting to feast on his carcass?

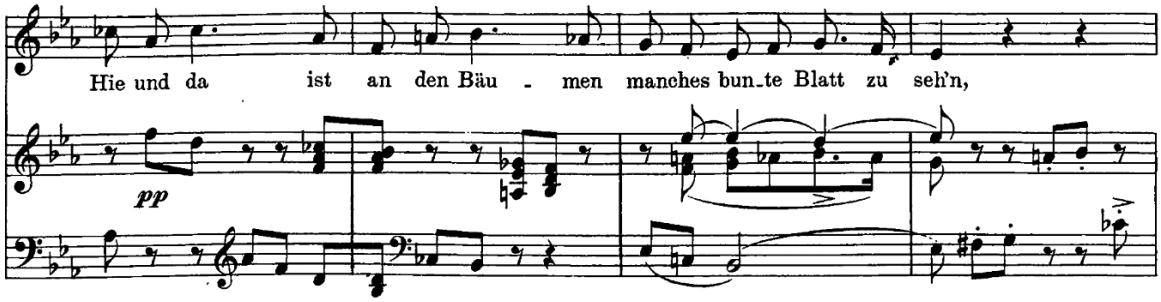
Will this crow, unlike his beloved, stay with him till he dies?



The piano, brilliantly imitating the circling path of the crow, twinkles and wafts high above the singer, creating a pictorial image in music of the two figures, one in the sky, the other walking below on the earth.

LETZTE HOFFNUNG (Last Hope)

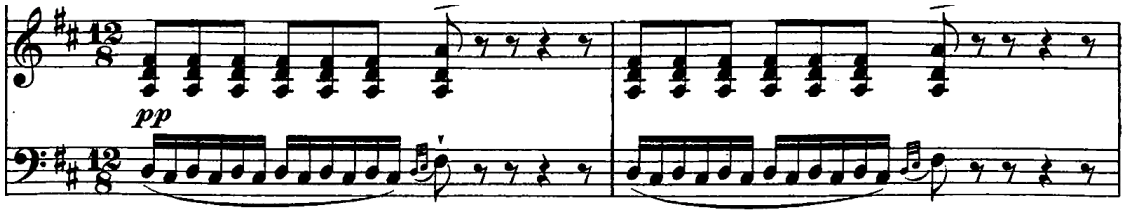
The traveller identifies with a lone leaf hanging on a barren tree, waiting to fall. If it falls, so too do his hopes fall to their grave.



The piano paints a vivid picture of leaves falling all around him. There is so little rapport between the piano and the voice, the piano seems so convincingly exterior to the singer's concerns, that one thinks of the tone and texture of Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*.

IM DORFE (In the Village)

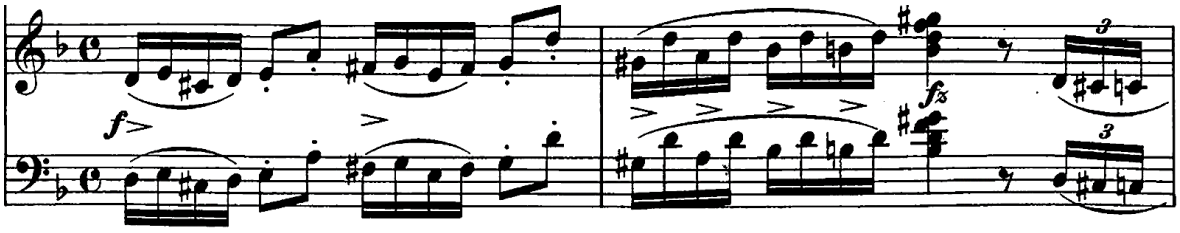
As the traveller passes through a village, dogs growl at him from the lower regions of the piano texture, rattling their chains.



Everyone is in their beds, dreaming. Why should he stay with these dreamers, when his own dreams are all over?

DER STÜRMISCHE MORGEN (The Stormy Morning)

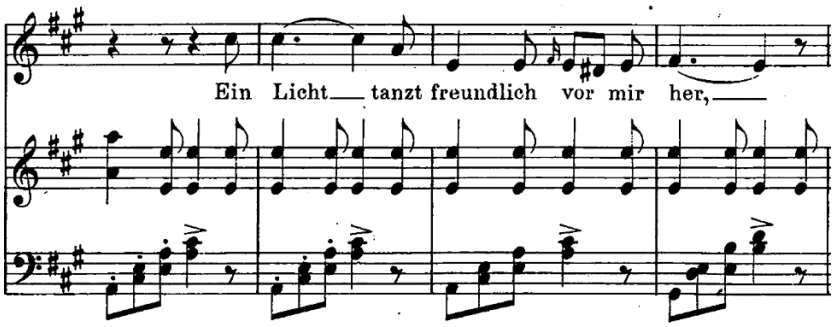
With the courage of desperation, the traveller faces an early morning storm that tears the heavens apart. Raging in the cold of winter, it is the very image of his own heart.



Unisons between piano and singer again evoke the blowing of the wind and the bitter chill in the air.

TÄUSCHUNG (Illusion)

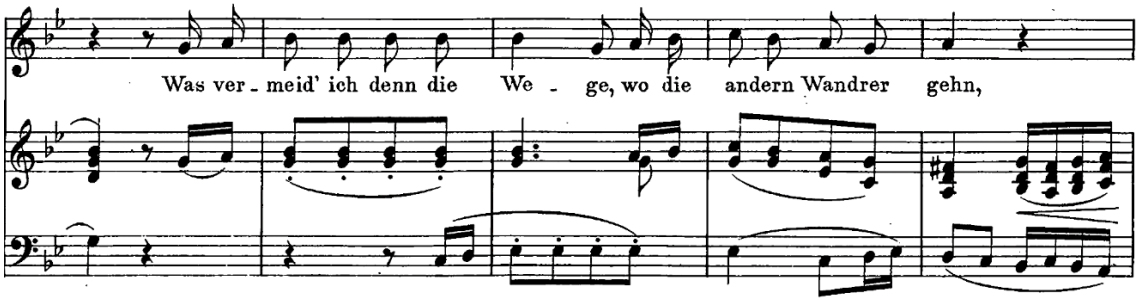
The wanderer sees a light dancing in the distance, which might be a warm house with a loving soul inside.



In the dream world he inhabits, even an illusion brings him some comfort.

DER WEGWEISER (The Sign Post)

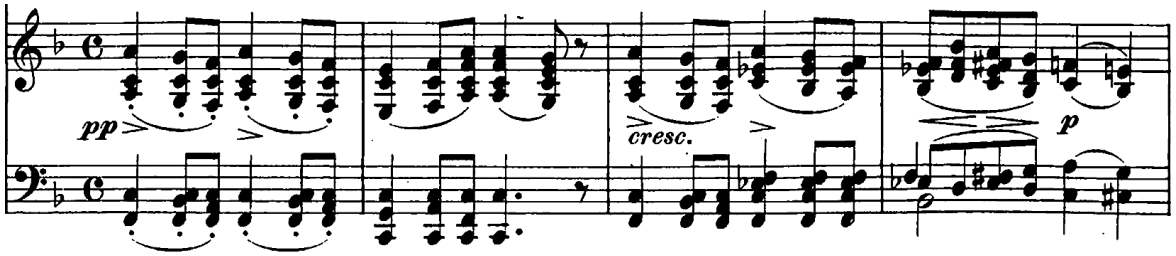
Avoiding the busy byways, the traveller heads for wild and desolate places, ignoring every sign post but one.



Here is another foreboding of approaching death: the path indicated to him is one "from which no one returned."

DAS WIRTSHAUS (The Inn)

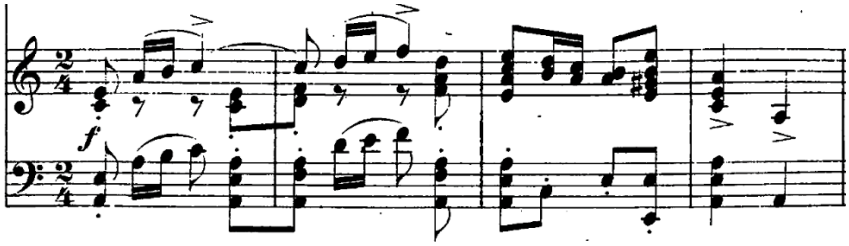
Liturgical solemnity, combined with a grim determination, pervades the scene as the traveller stops at a cemetery filled with garland-bedecked graves that beckon him like a welcoming inn.



All its rooms, however, are taken, and he is turned away, so he resolutely resigns himself to continue on his journey.

MUT! (Courage)

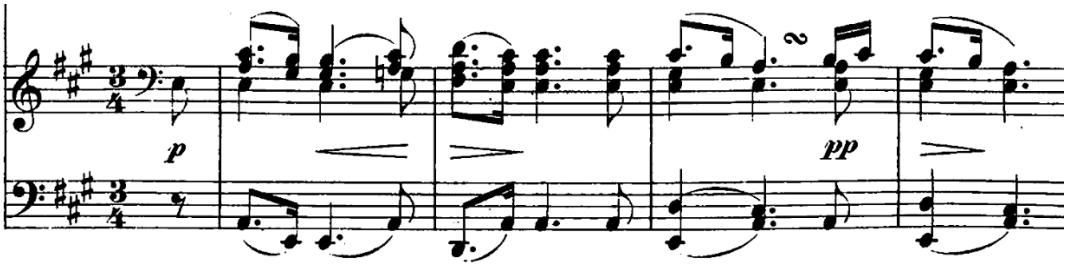
A plucky spirit overtakes the wanderer as he dispels defeatism to face wind and weather, feeling like a god on earth.



Quick changes between major and minor tonalities from phrase to phrase embody the difficulties he faces and the courage he uses to face them.

DIE NEBENSONNEN (The Sun Dogs)

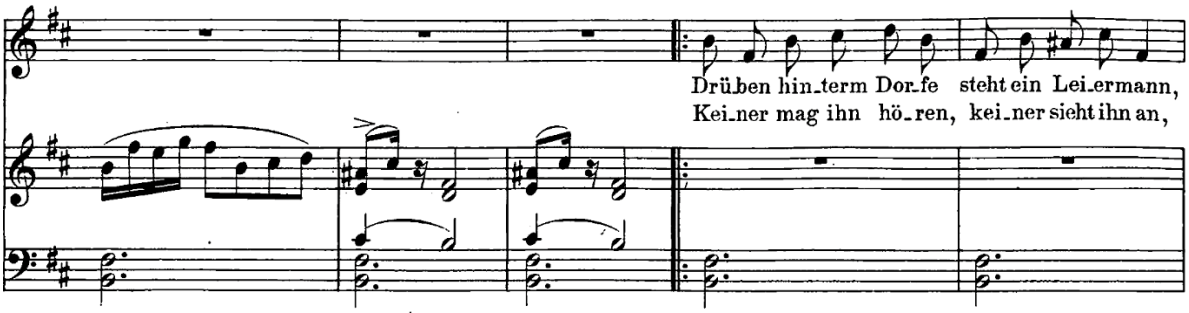
The traveller sees three suns in the sky and stares at them.



He, too, had three suns once, but having lost the two he cherished most (her eyes), he now has only one, and he wishes that would go dark, too.

DER LEIERMANN (The Hurdy-Gurdy Man)

A drone in the piano announces the forlorn figure of an old organ-grinder playing with numb fingers, barefoot in the cold, his begging plate lying empty as dogs growl at him.



This is the only human being the traveller meets on his winter journey. Shall he go with this strange man? Will the organ-grinder play his songs? The symbolic resonance of this final scene is quietly shattering.

Donald G. Gíslason 2024