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Notes on a Magic Flute

The origins of the Schubertian Lied

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What are the sources of the lied? Who taught Schubert to write such songs? In setting Mayrhofer's poem on that theme (D491), the 19-year-old Schubert may have helped to settle the question. For in 1816 (and only in that year) it is possible to identify both the physical and the metaphysical sources of his inspiration: Therese Grob, and Mozart. The opening vocal phrase of his song recalls another question - can this be love? - in tones that might well have emanated from *Die Zauberflöte* (ex. 1).

Ex. 1

a: *Geheimnis: An Franz Schubert D493*



Sag an, wer lehrt dich Lie - der

b: *Die Zauberflöte, no. 3*



Soll die Empfin - - dung Lie-be sein?

Of course this might be mere trivial coincidence, especially if songs are essentially music, and hence solely sonorous, structural and autonomous. But it can also be argued that songs are essentially verbal and expressive. On that view, their musical similarities are likely to be significant, for example of a shared symbolism underlying both words and music. Thus exx. 1a and b make the same deliberately stylized inquiry (in Schubert, the turn is incorporated in the piano part) ending in the same dominant question mark, which may suggest some conceptual link. As we shall see, there are other reasons for thinking that Schubert in the autumn of 1816 was hearing *Die Zauberflöte* in his mind's ear, and had indeed cast himself in the role of Tamino.

There are thus two opposite ways of considering ex. 1; and the Schubert song may be seen as arriving from either direction. The poetic or imaginative view of its origins was memorably expressed by Capell over 50 years ago: "The true Schubertian song had no palpable ancestor. It was the assemblage by some unexampled magnetism, in a fortunate hour, of all the fiery particles of poetry and music that were in the air."¹ As the penny dreadfuls used to say: "With one bound our hero was free". Only slackness, one feels, could have permitted such a dénouement.

Later observers have scrutinized the relevant movements more scientifically; Brown and Einstein are among the leading names in this field. The evidence they can adduce seems wholly compelling. Schubert much admired Zumsteeg, for example, and took his songs as models-not just in schoolboy exercises, but in works of mature craftsmanship; and this factual finding seems to justify the analytical approach. Yet perhaps a second view remains necessary for a proper perspective. Among all Capell's "fiery particles" the vital spark surely came not from Zumsteeg but from the earlier Viennese classics, above all in their dramatic moods and modes; and that art owed most to Mozart. Schubertian song consists of oratorio, liturgy, Singspiel and opera combined, compressed, secularized, domesticated and personalized for the new middle-class individualist.

Admittedly that process can be seen at work, on a restricted scale, in the work of Zelter, Reichardt and others, as well as Zumsteeg. But its source of new power is the unifying motif, which expresses verbal meanings yet embodies musical structure. Any apparent dichotomy is thus resolved. Emotional and intellectual components, lyrics and dramatic elements, are fused together in the Schubert song; so its interpretation (whether by performers or critics) demands the same dual approach. From first to last it deploys the dramatic or Mozartian motif, with overtones that fluctuate from the very simple and general to the highly complex and specific.

Thus the maidenly moan of loss and deprivation, minor 5-6-5, voiced by Barbarina in the garden (*Le nozze di Figaro*, Act 4), is also heard from Gretchen at her spinning-wheel (D118, often hailed as the first true lied). Each character sings, in her own context, of something lost and no longer to be found ("L'ho

¹ R. Capell: *Schubert's Songs* (London, 1928), 31

perduta . . . non la trovo": "Meine Ruh' ist hin . . . ich finde sie nimmer"). So does Pamina when she tells of her mother's deprivation (*Die Zauberflöte*, no.6: "sie stirbt vor Gram"). Again, *Des Mädchens Klage* D191 laments to the strains of "Lacrimosa" from the *Requiem* K626. More tellingly still, the statue's awe-inspiring chords in *Don Giovanni* recognizably recur in *Winterreise* (D911 no. 18) at the words "Es ist nichts als der Winter", as if Schubert had imagined some vast, white, icy and implacable presence coming to claim its dauntless yet helpless victim. Similarly Death's D minor in *Der Tod und das Mädchen* D531 takes an audibly Commendatore tone, before relaxing into a warmer parental mode to allay the girl's apprehensions (also first expressed in the minor 5-6-5). Predictably, Mozartian song-motifs are also found integrated deep within the Schubertian lied. Among the clearest examples is the broken-6th quaver motion of the evening mood in *Abendempfindung* K523. Its more active Schubertian counterpart, quickened into triplets, is heard in *Der Lindenbaum* D911 no.5 and elsewhere, notably in *Abendbilder* D650. Further, Mozart's dramatic device of letting the quavers flag and fail when a distracting thought intervenes anticipates the faltering and cessation of Gretchen's wheel.

Such song-correspondences have one striking feature; the sources in question were all first published in Vienna, as if Mozart also served as *genius loci*. His only opera to be first published in Vienna was *Die Zauberflöte* (piano score, 1791); and Schubert's knowledge of dramatic sources (including *Fidelio* and *The Creation*, both available in piano score from Viennese publishers) was presumably first gained, and regularly renewed, at the keyboard. No doubt that process, like Wolf's analogous study of Wagner, helped to mould and develop the textural as well as the motivic elements of Schubert's piano style, which may in turn help to explain why that style has sometimes been called un pianistic. But in any event *Die Zauberflöte* was all-pervasive in Vienna, whether in publication or performance. It was familiar to Schubert from early boyhood, and his lasting love for it is well documented. It was an apt enough symbol for his own perpetual amorous ferment; and it seems to have played a prominent part in his attachment to Therese Grob. Much of his prodigious output of 250 songs in 1815-16 has been attributed to her inspiration. The strong "Flute" overtones reach a crescendo in August 1815 with a full-blown quotation (ex. 2).

Ex. 2

a: *Heidenröslein* D257



Sah ein Knab' ein Rös - lein stehn

b: *Die Zauberflöte*, Act 1, finale



{ Könn-te je - der bra - ve Mann
{ Nur der Freundschaft Har - mo - nie

Even Schubert's memory was creative. The Mozart melody is sung by Pamina as she regains consciousness after the spellbinding peal of magic bells has in every sense transported the slaves. Her words express a direct allegorical response to a glimpse of an earthly paradise. So does Schubert's Goethe setting, which like its text is designed to evoke a golden age of German folksong. The translation from the original Mozartian into the Schubertian vernacular, from courtly wisdom to rustic innocence, *Zauberflöte* to *Wunderhorn*, sensibly retains this expression unchanged.

Other equally clear echoes have been recorded; thus Hanslick heard an "almost comic" reminiscence of Sarastro in a Schubert *Stabat mater* (no doubt D383 no.8 of February 1816). Analogous overtones linger among the lieder ascribed to 1816 - (e.g. D342, 350, 465): By September of that year the love-song texts have assumed autumnal tints, and the "Flute" music sounds sadly valedictory-literally so in *Der Sänger am Felsen* D482. Its theme is the rejection of proffered love; each verse begins "lament, my flute"; the piano prelude is marked "Flute". Most explicit of all is the *Lied des Orpheus, als er in die Hölle ging* D474, also of September 1816. Here the "Flute" resonances sound so plainly and plaintively as to suggest some strong personal feeling and identification.

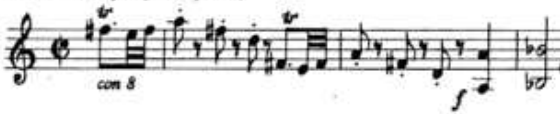
Schubert might justifiably have pictured himself as Orpheus, the demi-god of accompanied song; he unselfconsciously offers just such a comparison in one of his letters. Orpheus in turn can readily be equated with Prince Tamino, whose music tames and enchants wild beasts, and who sets forth to rescue his beloved from dire peril. He finds Sarastro's realm in every sense forbidding; its guardians cry "Go back!". Those tones begin *Lied des Orpheus* D474; its prelude can be heard trying out the doors of Hades and being rebuffed (ex.3).

Ex. 3

a: *Lied des Orpheus*, D474 (prelude)



b: *Die Zauberflöte*, Act 1, finale



In November 1816 there followed the sweetly resigned *Am Grabe Anselmos* D504, which to ears attuned to *Die Zauberflöte* shares the bereaved sentiments of the Queen of Night's Largo aria in Act 1; again there are poetic as well as musical affinities. Schubert copied this song out for Therese; he too was not far from a final fond farewell.

In all these and many other examples the mechanical models of Zumsteeg and the rest are animated and articulated by Mozartian motifs. But even these are of course no more than means to a wholly Schubertian end, namely the expression of passionate personal feelings about poetry and people.