

Romantic Lied

German vernacular song

- developed into an art form
- musical ideas suggested by words
- embodied in the setting of those words for voice and piano
- to provide formal unity
- to enhance details

Poetry for Lied

- essentially began with its greatest poet, Goethe
- not its literary merit but its emotional tone
- central theme: personal, individual feeling is poignantly confronted with and affected by powerful external forces, whether of nature, history or society
- New poetry was heroic and vulnerable
- solitary as well as aspiring to the universal
- grandiose at the same time as intimate

In the words of Charles Rosen

(*The Romantic Generation*, 1996, p.236):

To ennoble both landscape poetry and painting, the late eighteenth century turned to the example of music, pre-eminent as the art of time, and this gave landscape literally a new dimension and allowed the revolutionary conceptions of Nature to be carried out in the arts of painting, prose and poetry. From the poems, the songs of Beethoven and Schubert inherited the new sense of time and found the most striking musical expression for it.

Increasingly sophisticated musical language

- natural counterpart to German poetry
- individual feelings expressed by one person: poet, composer, singer and accompanist
- piano could render orchestral sound-effects in addition to the strumming of the fiddle or guitar
- string tremolandos were reproduced at the keyboard to symbolize the sights and sounds of nature, from thunder and lightning to brooks and zephyrs, symbols that could then be used as images of human feeling in the lyric mode
- recitative and arioso could be enriched by the simpler movement and structure of popular song melody and the directness of its syllabic word-setting, and these, too, could in turn be used as symbols of emotional immediacy.

Precursors

- Many 18th-century songs were entitled simply *Gedichte* for voice and piano
- composers of opera or *Singspiele* imported the expressive devices of those forms into their songs

- Mozart: setting is musically varied yet unified, in response to the poetic mood, by the use of vocal recitative and keyboard symbolism

Another precursor was Beethoven

- can be claimed to have created the *Lied*
- his songs remain in the 18th-century tradition of self-effacing enhancement of the words
- his inventive genius often restored the balance, partly by the detail of his illustrative writing (for example, not just birdsong but nightingales, larks, doves and quails) but also by the variety and imagination of his more conceptual musical equivalents
- asserted the composer's right to independence
- implicit in Beethoven's familiar phrase *durchkomponiertes Lied*
- a continuous musical structure often superimposed on a strophic poem

Franz Schubert

- fused the verbal and musical components of the lied
- first synthesized in significant quantity the new element predicted by Goethe
- his mind was infinitely receptive to poetry, which he must have read voraciously from early boyhood on
- ca. 660 lieder
- hundreds of textual sources
- His passionate response to imaginative writing impelled him to bring the musical component of song to a level of expressiveness and unity never since surpassed
- his infinite variety of styles and forms, melodic lines, modulations and accompaniment figures are essentially the result of responsiveness to poetry
- his aim was to find an apt expressive device that could also be used as a structural element

From his predecessors, Schubert absorbed

- quasi-operatic techniques: simplified folklike melody, interpolated recitative, a range of forms from miniature strophic or modified strophic to extended cantatas, and expressive sound-effects
- inspired motivic ideas of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven
- 'typically Schubertian' brooks and rivers that flow so effortlessly through his piano parts
- musical metaphors of human motion and gesture: walking or running rhythms
- tonic or dominant inflections for question and answer
- the moods of storm or calm
- the major–minor contrasts for laughter and tears, sunshine and shade
- convivial or melancholy melodies moulded to the shape and stress of the verse.

Schubert's earliest masterpieces

- settings of shorter and more readily unifiable lyrics on his favorite theme of intense personal concern
- a girl for her absent lover (*Gretchen am Spinnrade*)

- a father for his doomed son (*Erlkönig*)
- an awestruck observer for the immensities of nature (*Meeres Stille*)
- Each is imagined against a background of moods and scenes suitable for quasi-dramatic re-creation in sound
- all three poems are by Goethe, whose genius lay in making the universal singable
- these songs were selected by Schubert for earliest publication as reflecting the greatest poet and the most modern spirit of the new age

Robert Schumann

- began with the 18th-century notion that the music of a song should just express the poem
- implied not only that songwriting was an inferior art (as he at first believed, according to a letter of June 1839 to Hirschbach) but also that the composer had a secondary role
- His maturation as a pianist and composer gave him the necessary foundation of independent musicianship
- emotional crisis of his betrothal to Clara Wieck heightened his receptivity to poetry
- his total of 140 songs written in the 12 months beginning February 1840 is unmatched even by Wolf or Schubert for quality and quantity of output in a single year, and it includes most of the best and best-known of his nearly 260 lieder
- had complete command of the musical metaphor exploited by Schubert
- his introduction of contrasting sections in related keys (such as the mediant minor) without genuine modulation yielded new and subtle contrasts
- his personal innovation was a new independence of the piano part.
- As Mendelssohn played songs on the piano and called them *Lieder ohne Worte*, so Schumann sang piano pieces and turned them back into lieder
- his piano style together with his literary leanings and personal feelings, led him to write love songs in cycles arranged by poet, often with a deliberately unified tonality
- understood better than anyone before him that *the song cycle is the embodiment of the Romantic ideal: to find—or create—a natural unity out of a collection of different objects without compromising the independence or the disparity of each member ... the large form must appear to grow directly from the smaller forms* [Rosen]
- for him, songwriting was conscious, even cerebral
- he was the first theorist of the lied
- he described the lied as the only genre in which significant progress had been made since Beethoven
- he attributed this to the rise of a new school of lyric poets—Eichendorff and Rückert, Heine and Uhland—whose intensity of emotion and imagery had been embodied in a new musical style