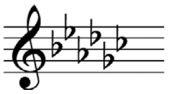Journal of the Royal Musical Association, 150.2, 573–611
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E-Flat Minor



SARAH CLEMMENS WALTZ

Abstract This article establishes the overwhelming association of the key of E♭ minor with expressions of profound melancholy. Subthemes include deep depression, ghosts, and spiritual darkness, represented by *ombra* style markers, sea storms represented by the tempest style, and representations of Scotland and Ossianic melancholy. C. F. D. Schubart's well-known statements on E♭ minor are examined concerning its use, though those statements themselves may have been conditioned by prior usage of the key, contemporary tuning systems, and the prevalent psychological association of flat-side keys with melancholy. Topical analysis is served by the history of E♭ minor, which differs greatly from its relative major.

In 1988 Hugh Macdonald published an article in *19th-Century Music* whose title consisted only of a key signature, G♭ major, and a time signature, 9/8 time.[1] Although he identified no nineteenth-century work that used both of these in combination, Macdonald contended that the increasing use of this key and this time signature, in their distance from C-major common time, represented the increasing complexity of Romanticism, the hand of the artist and virtuoso, a desire (perhaps) to distance the music from the simplicity of the *Volkslied*, and even a sort of otherworldly or sensual excess in its profligate number of flats. In terms of nineteenth-century style and topical analysis, G♭ 9/8 is an idealized topic in search of a repertory.

If we set aside the claims about metre to focus on key, one might observe that the idea of polarity to C major could be refined by considering a polarity in mode: that is, E♭ minor is a more perfect 'opposite' to C major than G♭ major is. As Macdonald and others have noted, E♭ minor came into use well before its relative major, and though full pieces in the key are rare, temporary excursions to E♭ minor (perhaps for illustrative or word-painting purposes) are far less rare even in the eighteenth century. This article will consider the affective significance of E♭ minor — one of profound melancholy — which is by no means diminished even when the key is only briefly touched upon. The

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[1] Hugh Macdonald, '[G-Flat Major]', *19th-Century Music*, 11.3 (1988), pp. 221–37, doi:10.2307/746321.

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set of E♭ minor examples through to about 1900 is both numerous enough and circumscribed enough to provide an excellent opportunity to see a key working as a 'topic' or style marker, a rare instance of long-term consistency of key affect. In fact, the use of E♭ minor seems to indicate melancholy immediately and directly, without the help of other style markers.

The Appendix shows a list of text-associated works with passages in E♭ minor.[2] In those passages, certain themes seem to dominate: death, lament, melancholy, night, and sublime encounters (either with overwhelming forces of nature or terrifying supernatural powers). Examples include Beethoven's oratorio *Christus am Ölberge*, op. 85, settings of the gruesome ballads 'Edward' and 'Lenore', and Brahms's 'Schwermut' ['Melancholy']. Instrumental works with programmatic titles or allusions present similar themes, as in Schubert's *Eine kleine Trauermusik* or Schumann's Byronic *Manfred* Overture. The textual associations of these E♭-minor works and passages can be sorted into four categories: 1) themes of depression, death, lament, and darkness, 2) ghosts, spirituality, and hell (i.e. *ombra*), 3) storms, especially sea storms, and 4) representations of Scotland and the North. These categories have clear interconnections — even the fourth, as *ombra* and sea-storm associations frequently came through literature such as the Ossianic tales and Scottish balladry. Many pieces fit more than one category. (A possible fifth association, exoticism, is not necessarily bound up with the other categories.) The four categories, along with some subthemes such as exile or lost youth, are bound together principally by the idea of melancholy, raising the question of why E♭ minor should so strongly and consistently represent this emotion. The reason for this consistent key affect would seem to be due in part to E♭ minor's immediately apparent position on the circle of fifths, in part to its early rarity (such that its use was clearly 'marked' or unusual), and in part to the strong influence of the Swabians Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart and Johann Rudolf Zumsteeg, who set out, respectively, the theory and practice of E♭ minor. An additional important factor comes from early repertory associations, such as operatic *ombra* scenes (for instance the underworld scene of Christoph Willibald Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*, with its brief passage in E♭ minor); these may have influenced the statements of key-affect theorists like Schubart. Recent scholars, such as Paul Ellison and John David Wilson, have found success in analysing repertory to identify the key-affect beliefs held by their composers (e.g. Beethoven); here, too, repertory analysis shows unmitigated support for the theoretical associations of E♭ minor.[3]

[2] Some of the Beethoven works were found in Paul Ellison's *The Key to Beethoven: Connecting Tonality and Meaning in his Music* (Pendragon Press, 2014), pp. 145–47; *ombra* scenes were found in Clive McClelland, *Ombra: Supernatural Music in the Eighteenth Century* (Lexington Books, 2012); others were found in Paul Mies, *Der Charakter der Tonarten* (Staufen-Verlag, 1948), Hermann Stephani's book of the same title (Bosse, 1923), and Macdonald's writings. I am indebted to James Porter's *Beyond Fingal's Cave: Ossian in the Musical Imagination* (University of Rochester Press, 2019) for hints to many additional works.

[3] See John David Wilson, 'Of Hunting, Horns, and Heroes: A Brief History of E-Flat Major before the *Eroica*', *Journal of Musicological Research*, 32 (2013), pp. 163–82, doi:10.1080/01411896.2013.792037; also see Ellison, *The Key to Beethoven*.

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E♭ Minor in Theory and Practice

The associations that are due to E♭ minor's position on the circle of fifths have been clearly delineated in Rita Steblin's study *A History of Key Characteristics in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*.[4] She observes that key affect evolved away from possibly arbitrary associations towards a coherent bipolar sharp/flat system, which she calls the sharp–flat principle. This dualism brings with it 'the psychological association of ever-increasing strength or brightness (or, conversely, weakness and sombreness) with the number of sharps or flats'.[5] The idea is that the circle of fifths is like a dial, and an increase of sharps represents an increase of brightness and cheerfulness (escalating to the point of mania in the realm of five, six, or seven sharps), whereas an increase of flats represents an increase of seriousness and sadness (progressing to melancholia in the realm of five to seven flats). Though the seven flats of A♭ minor are more extreme, its enharmonic equivalent comes closer to C, so the diametrically opposed keys of G♭ major/E♭ minor are 'further' from C in that sense. (Nevertheless, A♭ minor does seem to be reserved for boundary-breaking extremes of melancholy, as in Beethoven's 'Marcia funebre sulla morte d'un eroe', movement 3 of the op. 26 Piano Sonata.)

Although the eighteenth century rarely used or discussed these extreme keys, the sharp–flat principle is visible even in key-affect lists which only go to four flats or sharps. For example, Francesco Galeazzi says of A♭ major that it is 'not used much on account of its difficulty. It is a gloomy key, low, deep, fit to express horror, the silence of night, stillness, fear, terror.'[6] Schubart called it 'the key of the grave'.[7] F minor and B♭ minor — the latter described by Schubart as 'preparation for suicide' — are also almost universally regarded as melancholy among key-affect theorists.[8] Flat minor keys were often considered as a group; contemporary writers considered them tender, touching, or pathetic.[9] One direct articulation of the sharp–flat principle (and the melancholic association of flat minor keys) was August Gathy's, in 1835:

> In general the keys that are formed via flats — through sinking down and lowering the pitches — have the character of sadness and falling mood; by contrast the sharp keys, arising from raised pitches, belong to a more cheerful, happy character, to a mood raised to a higher power. […] While the sharp side progresses in rising expression of life, according to the character of the piece, up to airy elfin dance or to wild impulsivity in

[4] Rita Steblin, *A History of Key Characteristics in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*, 2nd edn (University of Rochester Press, 2002).
[5] Ibid., p. 96.
[6] Francesco Galeazzi, *Elementi teorico-pratici di musica*, 2 vols (M. Puccinelli, 1796), II, p. 294, trans. and cited in Steblin, *A History of Key Characteristics*, p. 105. Steblin's translations are used when available to maintain consistency of word choice. Where she does not also include the original language, it is included here. Other translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
[7] Ibid., p. 116. A♭ major may have been infrequent because the 'wolf' fifth in mean-tone temperaments was often placed between A♭ and E♭.
[8] Ibid., p. 117.
[9] Ibid., pp. 99 and 103. See also André-Ernest-Modeste Grétry, *Mémoires, ou Essais sur la musique*, 3 vols (Imprimerie de la République, 1797), II, p. 358; Steblin, *A History of Key Characteristics*, pp. 101 and 353.

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> B major, the other side sinks down towards the grave-song. […] The expression of deep pain which distinguishes the flat-side minor keys is by no means the property of the minor keys distinguished by sharps. […] It is inherent to the flat minor keys (E♭ minor, A♭ minor, etc.) to nourish only the deepest suffering, the greatest yearning for death.[10]

As late as 1890, Hugo Riemann, in his analysis of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, noted that as keys travel further from C major, they become 'more and more transcendent, distancing themselves from the narrow world of daily life and coming into the realm of ideal beings and feelings transported far from Earth'.[11] He viewed flat keys as more 'subjective, more lost in thought', whereas 'minor keys with many flats are the most reserved, most (so to speak) philosophical (F minor, B♭ minor, E♭ minor)'.[12]

It is true that there are some counterexamples to the sharp–flat principle; the sharp-side key of B minor, which Beethoven called 'the black key', could be thought of as gloomy.[13] These, combined with the chaos introduced by the highly individualized associations of many key-affect lists, have led many to feel that key affect is an interpretive quagmire not useful for analysis. Yet the consistency of E♭ minor suggests at least an undercurrent of support for its affective significance among composers.

The theory of key affect — that keys are appropriate to or represent different, identifiable emotions — owes something to the Greek idea of modal *ethos*, something to the unequal temperaments in use in the eighteenth century, something to the connotations of various instruments, which were constructed to play best in particular keys, and something to arbitrary or traditional associations generated either by the appearance of the key signature on the page or by prior usage of the key in notable works. Though key-affect theorists themselves often held strongly to one or another of these generating influences, the most recent scholarly consensus sees these as intermingled influences, and indeed it has even been suggested that pre-existent ideas of appropriate key affect influenced the system of temperament or the construction of instruments, rather than the other way around.[14] Key-affect theories died down as tuning progressed towards the equal temperament of the twentieth century — and even when key affect might have governed a composition, more practical considerations such as

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[10] August Gathy, *Musikalisches Conversations-Lexicon* (Schuberth & Niemeyer, 1835), p. 66; Steblin, *A History of Key Characteristics*, p. 359 (translation mine).

[11] 'Alle von den Grundskalen [C dur und a moll] weiter abstehenden Tonarten werden je mehr und mehr transzendent, entfernen sich von der schlichten Alltagswelt und werden zu Gebieten erdentrückten idealen Seins und Empfindens'; quoted in Stephani, *Der Charakter der Tonarten*, p. 66.

[12] 'Die Tonarten mit Been erscheinen, gegenüber denen mit Kreuzen, als subjektiver, mehr *in sich gekehrt* […] Molltonarten mit vielen Been sind daher die verschlossensten, so zu sagen philosophischsten (f moll, b moll, es moll)'; ibid.

[13] Beethoven's statement 'h moll Schwarze Tonart' appears in the 1815 sketch for his Cello Sonata, op. 102 no. 2, in the Scheide Sketchbook, fol. 40ᵛ. Available at the Princeton University Digital Library <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/9019s254t> [accessed 4 February 2025].

[14] Wolfgang Auhagen, 'Zur Entstehung der Tonartencharakteristik im 18. Jahrhundert', in *Perspektiven und Methoden einer Systemischen Musikwissenschaft*, ed. by Klaus Wolfgang Niemöller and Bram Gätjen (Mohr Siebeck, 2004), pp. 89–96 (p. 89); see also Wilson, 'Of Hunting, Horns, and Heroes', p. 166.

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range often trumped it.[15] Yet there are theorists late in the common-practice period who believed in key distinctions and disbelieved in enharmonic equivalence, despite admitting equal temperament is in effect.[16] By contrast, twentieth-century scholars often dismissed key affect as mere individual preference.

Contributing to a sense of the inconsistency of key affect, the highly individual and chaotic colour associations of synaesthesia occasionally influence some of the contradictory tables of key affect available in Steblin's study. E♭ minor is only occasionally described by synaesthetes; for example, Anton Gräffer described E♭ minor as 'brick-red', and Justus Johannes Heinrich Ribock, called it a 'lesser B♭ major', which in turn is 'shiny, deep crimson, and smells of cloves'.[17] Interestingly, Ribock admitted that 'this is no guarantee that I would not perhaps revoke my opinion of the more seldom-occurring keys, if I were to hear them more often'.[18] Indeed, a number of key-affect theorists claimed that they might alter their diagnoses if they heard more pieces in that key.[19] Even among synaesthetes, it is apparently the influence of prototypical pieces composed in that key that defines a key's proper emotion (as well as, perhaps, theoretical ideas), rather than the impression taken from sitting down and noodling at a keyboard. The vanishing rarity of E♭ minor led to a lack of synaesthetic associations.

Despite the fact that temperaments could vary widely in the eighteenth century, they all (if centred on C) tended towards acoustical purity for the C–E major third and towards a very narrow minor third from E♭ to G♭. Owen Jorgensen's 1991 practical survey of tuning, which proposes that the 'coloration' of any key is defined by its major thirds, suggests an acoustical explanation of Steblin's sharp–flat

[15] Many composers seemed willing to sacrifice key association in order to transpose for a singer, although Wagner is an important counterexample.

[16] For instance, Friedrich Theodor Vischer attributes the difference in keys not to distances between intervals but to the general range in which a melody must be sung or played in each of the keys (*Aesthetik, oder Wissenschaft des Schönen zum Gebrauche für Vorlesungen*, 4 vols (Carl Mäcken, 1846–57), IV, *Die Musik* (1857), p. 876). Some at the end of the century believed that choirs and orchestras still used slightly tempered intervals ('Dis-moll', *Musikalisches Conversations-Lexikon*, ed. by Hermann Mendel, 2nd edn, 11 vols (Robert Oppenheim, 1870–83), III (1873), pp. 181–82). F. A. Gevaert seems to agree, saying, 'otherwise, what would become of our lovely enharmonic modulations?'; *Traité général d'instrumentation* (J. B. Katto, 1863), p. 190 n.). Others, such as Albert Lavignac, state their faith in key affect without particular justification (*La Musique et les musiciens*, 3rd rev. edn (Delagrave, 1896), p. 423).

[17] 'E-flat minor (Despair [*Verzweiflung*], kettle-drum, brick-red [*Ziegelroth*]); D-sharp minor (Fear [*Angst*], piccolo, reddish-purple [*Graproth*])'; Anton Gräffer, *Ueber Tonkunst, Sprache, Schrift und Bild* (J. P. Sollinger, 1830), Tables III and IV, cited in Steblin, *A History of Key Characteristics*, pp. 161–62 and 369–70. Steblin notes (p. 162) that whereas the sensory associations here are individual, the affects are borrowed from Schubart. 'F major is for me a lesser B-flat major; E-flat minor, in kind'; J. J. H. Ribock, 'Über Musik; an Flötenliebhaber insonderheit', *Magazin der Musik*, ed. by Carl Friedrich Cramer, 2 vols (Musicalische Niederlage, 1783–84), I, pp. 708–09. B♭ is further described with 'majesty, quiet in its greatness, powerful-acting without operosity, pressing without pinching'; Steblin, *A History of Key Characteristics*, pp. 109–10.

[18] Steblin, *A History of Key Characteristics*, pp. 111 and 355; cf. Ribock, 'Über Musik', p. 709.

[19] For example, Rameau's *Traité de l'harmonie* (1722) states: 'The other keys are not in general use, and experience is the surest means by which to learn their properties'; Rameau, *Treatise on Harmony*, trans. and ed. by Philip Gossett (Dover, 1971), p. 164; quoted in Steblin, *A History of Key Characteristics*, p. 36.

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principle.[20] In most eighteenth-century temperament systems, the thirds determining the keys at the 'sides' of the circle of fifths (A major and E♭ major) are closest to the equally tempered major thirds and thus represent 'no special emotion or effect except that which was imagined by the composer or listener. Consequently, there was little agreement as to the meanings of these keys.'[21] By contrast, simple keys, such as C major, had small, pure-sounding major thirds with few 'beats', and difficult ones, such as G♭ major, were defined by large major thirds with many 'beats'; not coincidentally, those were the ones on which there was more agreement in key-affect theories. Moreover, the large third from G♭ to B♭ created, in E♭ minor, a particularly small key-defining minor third from E♭ to G♭; Jorgensen notes that 'the extremely depressed sounds of the middle notes of the E-flat minor, B-flat minor, and F-minor triads caused the tonalities of E-flat, B-flat, and F minor to be unusually expressive', and indeed that a piece in E♭ minor or B♭ minor was, by common agreement, 'the ultimate in mournfulness or depression'.[22] Despite the variety of temperaments in use, Jorgensen argues that they tended to have this affective result in common.[23] Nevertheless it remains unclear whether temperaments were chosen and centred to fit the desired affect, or whether the affect resulted from the use of the temperaments.[24]

In 1761, the composer (and later astronomer) William Herschel lamented the rarity of extreme keys in letters to his composer brother, saying:

> G♭ major/E♭ minor are just as good keys as C major/A minor and have just as much right to modulation as the latter. […] In the tuning of a clavier, however, one can only

[20] Owen Jorgensen, *Tuning: Containing the Perfection of Eighteenth-Century Temperament, the Lost Art of Nineteenth-Century Temperament, and the Science of Equal Temperament, Complete with Instructions for Aural and Electronic Tuning* (Michigan State University Press, 1991), p. 153.

[21] Ibid.
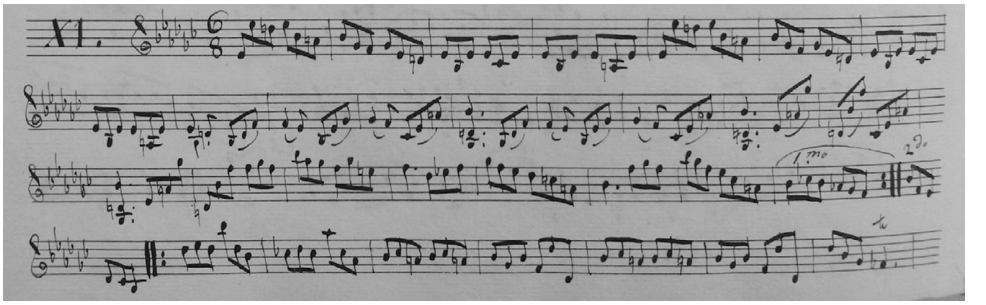
[22] Ibid., pp. 153 and 517. Jorgensen goes into further detail: 'The key of E-flat minor was known as being horrible, frightful, and depressed to the extreme. This was true because in Werckmeister's and Young's well temperaments, the minor thirds E-flat G-flat were 21.5 cents narrower than just intonation minor thirds. This was typical for eighteenth century well temperament as recorded by theorists. In Pietro Aaron's meantone temperament of 1523, the minor third E-flat G-flat was 46.4 cents narrower than a just intonation minor third, so the key of E-flat minor would have been more than twice as horrible in 1523. This explains why E-flat minor was a rarely used key before the late seventeenth century. The equal-tempered E-flat G-flat is only 15.6 cents narrower than a just intonation minor third. The E-flat G-flat in the representative Victorian temperament was 16.77 cents narrower than a just intonation minor third, so during the nineteenth century the key of E-flat minor was still a little more depressed sounding than it is today'; ibid., p. 580.

[23] Beverly Jerold takes a different view of many of the sources discussed by Jorgensen, and claims that equal temperament was in broader use than is typically accepted. In particular, she cites a notice about J. S. Bach's playing, which observed that he modulated from D minor through E♭ minor to E minor, suggesting that 'E-flat minor would be viable only with equal temperament'; *Equal Temperament in the Eighteenth Century: The Ear versus Numbers* (Brepols, 2023), p. 62. Regardless, organs could be tuned in irregular circulating temperaments at this time.

[24] Though Jorgensen asserts that 'most tuners began their keyboard tuning with the note C' (*Tuning*, p. 152), he also relates John Robison's story of tuning a pianoforte centred on D rather than C (p. 274) — evidence both that tunings were sometimes re-centred and also that it was unusual enough to be remarked upon when it happened. See John Robison, 'Temperament of the Scale of Music', *Supplement to the Third Edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2 vols (Thomson Bonar, 1801), II, p. 662.

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Example 1. William Herschel, Capriccio no. 11 (*c.* 1763). MS 791, Jean Gray Hargrove Music Library, University of California, Berkeley.



> distribute the gap between them with confidence, as such paths in these days are still little travelled. I do hope that one in time will make a *turn-pike road* concerning it.[25]

Though this puts Herschel somewhat in the avant-garde concerning the use of rare keys, it also confirms their rarity. (Herschel did write a Capriccio in E♭ Minor (no. 11, *c.* 1763) as a violin étude in which the key appears to be the featured difficulty (see Example 1); the flexible tuning of a solo violin does not provoke the tuning issues of a harpsichord.) Herschel's writings, however, also suggest a fairly early articulation of the sharp–flat principle; he also claimed in 1761:
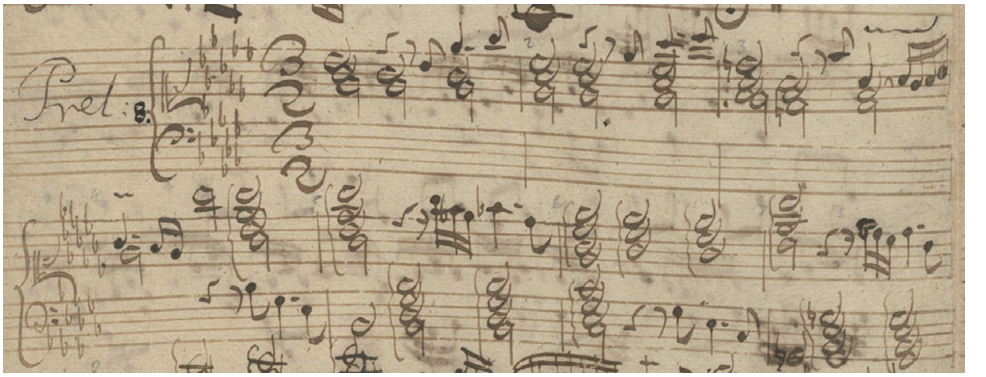
> I believe that experience will confirm that the modulation and temporary excursions towards the sharp side have a different effect than those towards the flat side. There is certainly something cheerful in the *Modulation* from [tonic] major to the sharp *major* side and something rather rough or strong and severe in the Modulation from [tonic] minor towards the sharp *major* side. By contrast, in the Modulation from [tonic] major to the flat side lies something hard, cold, rough, sublime, and serious, etc.[26]

[25] 'G♭ dur/E♭ moll sind eben so gute thonarten als C dur/A moll und haben eben so viel recht zu der Modulation, als die letzten. in der stimung eines Claviers aber kan man die lücke nur getrost zwischen hinlegen weil solche paßage heutezu tage noch wenig befahren wird. ob ich gleich hoffe daß man mit der Zeit *turn-pike road* darüber hinmachen wird'; Herschel Family Archive, William Herschel to Jacob Herschel (28 April 1761), p. 130. My transcription follows Herschel's orthography. Herschel's unpublished music treatise of 1764–66 (University of Edinburgh Ms. No. Dk.7.35) speaks of a 'usual' modulation with these keys: 'G-flat Dur [major] ought to be placed among the Modi marked with flats. For in the Modulation of a Piece of Music in that Modus, we generally pass to E-flat mollis [minor] which carries flats' (sheaf B, p. 4). As his rationale is to 'avoid a Superfluity of Signs', he may only be saying that E♭ minor is preferable to D♯ minor because of the necessity of a double-sharp in the latter; thus better to start in G♭ than in F♯ major. Still, it is interesting that he addresses the keys at all.

[26] 'Ich glaube daß die erfahrung bestätigen wird daß die Modulationen und berührungen nach der schärfen seite eine verschiedene würkung haben von denjenigen nach der niedrigen seite. Es liegt gewiß was heiteres in der *Modul* von 1dur nach der scharfen *dur* seite und was ziml. rauhes oder Kräftiges u. strenges in der Mod. von 1m nach der scharf dur seite. hergegen in der M. von 1d nach

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Example 2. 1733 MS, J. S. Bach *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book 1 (1722), Prelude VIII, BWV 853, Anna Magdalena Bach (scribe). Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Mus.ms. Bach P 202, p. 24.



Herschel's belief in the value of all keys for modulation may have to do with the reading he had been doing of Robert Smith's *Harmonics*, which proposes improved methods for a fully circulating temperament playable for all keys; his statement here perhaps has more to do with dominant versus plagal motion than number of sharps and flats.[27] Acoustical differences between the keys may not have been a factor, as sources suggest that neither Smith nor Herschel centred their tunings on C (which an acoustical defence of the sharp–flat principle's effects would require).[28] Nevertheless, Herschel's writings suggest that ideas about the affect of flat-side modulations may have preceded the practical use of the key of E♭ minor.

These intuitive understandings may explain why the eighteenth century adhered so strongly to key affect even when there are almost no prototypical associations in the repertory. Indeed, the haphazard early appearances of the key signature in print and manuscript underscore the rarity of the key: manuscripts of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* Prelude VIII in E♭ Minor (BWV 853) tend to repeat flats in the signature for clarification, making a signature of nine flats; some reveal some insecurity about where to place the flats (Example 2).[29] J. A. Eilenstein's 'Todesgedanken', published in

der nied. dur seite ligt etwas, hartes, kaltes, rauhes, Erhabenes, u. ernsthaftes. u.s.w.'; Herschel Family Archive, William Herschel to Jacob Herschel (8 April 1761), p. 115.
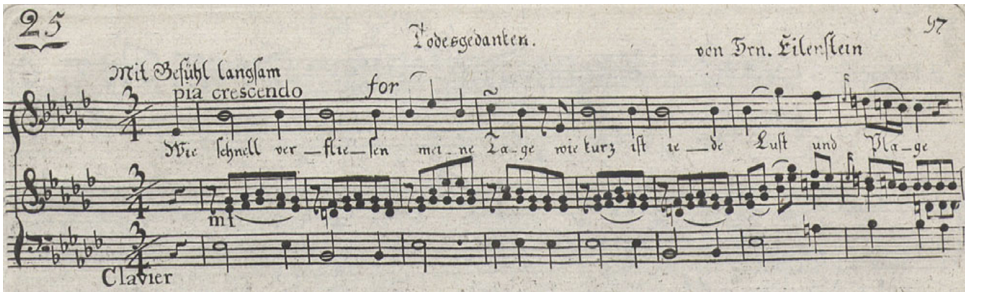
27 Robert Smith, *Harmonics, or the Philosophy of Musical Sounds* (J. Bentham, 1759). Herschel credited the *Harmonics* with leading him to Smith's *Opticks*, which in turn developed Herschel's interest in telescope-building, leading to the instrument through which he discovered the planet Uranus.

28 Jorgensen notes that Smith preferred D for centring his temperaments, for instance in his retuning of the organ at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he was professor of mathematics; *Tuning*, p. 90. Herschel, an acolyte of Smith's, left a bearing chart (giving instructions on tuning order) in his sister Caroline Herschel's notebook *c.* 1773 (Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Hanover Royal Music Archive OSB MSS 146, 3[r]) which suggests pure fifths for C–G and E♭–B♭, and a particularly narrow one for D–A — an irregular temperament with effects that may differ from standard key associations.
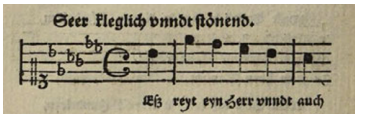
29 See Anna Magdalena Bach's 1733 MS, held by the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin — Preußischer Kulturbesitz (D-B Mus.ms. Bach P 202) <http://www.bach-digital.de/receive/BachDigitalSource_

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Example 3. [J. A.] Eilenstein, 'Todesgedanken', in *Blumenlese für Klavierliebhaber* (1785). Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, 1890842 2 Mus.pr. 1589-1785, 1, 2, p. 97.



Example 4. [Friedrich Nicolai], 'Eyn klegliche Mordgeschichte, von ey'n Herrn, der wz tot', from *Eyn feyner kleyner Almanach* (1777), I, p. 120. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, Res/P.o.germ. 1011 i-1.



Bossler's 1785 collection *Blumenlese*, mistakenly calls for F♭ rather than C♭ in the signature, again demonstrating a lack of placement conventions (Example 3).[30] Another haphazard (though perhaps intentionally comic) presentation of flats is the gruesome historical ballad 'Eyn klegliche Mordgeschichte, von ey'n Herrn, der wz tot' ['A Pathetic Tale of Murder by a Dead Man'] from Friedrich Nicolai's satirical folk-song book *Eyn feyner kleyner Almanach* (1777–78) (Example 4).[31] The exaggerated affect (*seer kleglich unndt stönend*, 'very pitiful and moaning') shows all the more clearly that E♭ minor is an extreme means of representing melancholy or gruesome subjects in the eighteenth century, beyond the pale of ordinary usage, and before almost any mention of the key in a key-affect list.

There are so few specific statements regarding E♭ minor, even through the mid-nineteenth century, that those extant weigh heavily in the assessment of its prevailing

source_00001076> [accessed 4 February 2025], p. 24; see also a 1722 copy (D-B Mus. ms. Bach P 401) involving the same nine-flat arrangement.

30 In Heinrich Philipp Boßler, *Blumenlese für Klavierliebhaber, e[ine] musikal[ische] Wochenschrift*, 6 vols (Speier, 1782–87), [IV] (1785), p. 97. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Digitalsammlung <http://reader.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/fs1/object/display/bsb11132407_00049.html> [accessed 3 February 2025]. The composer is presumably Johann Friedrich Adam Eilenstein (1757–1830). The poem 'Todesgedanken' is not Matthison's but a text beginning and ending 'Wie schnell verfliessen meine Tage […] ich fühle mich schon starr und kalt'.

31 Friedrich Nicolai, *Eyn feyner kleyner Almanach vol schönerr echterr liblicher Volckslieder, lustigerr Reyen unndt kleglicherr Mordgeschichte, gesungen von Gabriel Wunderlich, weyl. Benkelsengerrn zu Dessaw, herausgegeben von Daniel Seuberlich. Berlynn unndt Stettynn, Verlegts Friedrich Nicolai 1777–8* (Nicolai, 1777–78). The fictitious editor (Daniel Seuberlich) and the overly antique or country spellings are clues to the satirical intent.

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emotion. It is Schubart's influence that is most crucial in defining the key's character. His key affects are some of the most widely known and picturesque; moreover, his is very nearly the first list to address E♭ minor:[32]

> E-flat minor. Feelings of the anxiety of the soul's deepest distress, of brooding despair, of blackest depression, of the most gloomy condition of the soul. Every fear, every hesitation of the shuddering heart, breathes out of horrible E-flat minor. If ghosts could speak, their speech would approximate this key.[33]

A partial list of Schubart's key characteristics was published in 1787; the complete list including E♭ minor was available in 1789, and the whole was widely disseminated in the posthumous *Ideen zu einer Ästhetik der Tonkunst* (1806), as well as frequently reproduced throughout the nineteenth century. Nearly all subsequent descriptions of E♭ minor adopt Schubart's *ethos* for this key or make reference to it; most borrow his phraseology to some extent, and the statement itself is frequently reproduced (in those lists that do not still omit the key).[34] Schubart's phrases are so picturesque that his influence over later descriptions is readily apparent. For instance, E. T. A. Hoffmann's 1812 review of *Christus am Ölberge* uses the line 'if ghosts could speak'; 'the most gloomy condition of the soul' appears in Henri Weikert's (1827) and Gathy's (1835) descriptions.[35] The words 'anxiety', 'despair', and 'depression', or their synonyms, are frequently repeated.[36] Even the later nineteenth century retains these melancholy theoretical associations; Alexander Ellis, in his 1885 translation of Helmholtz, calls E♭ minor the 'darkest and most sombre key of all, rarely used', and Lavignac (1896) called it 'profondément triste'

[32] Charpentier had earlier called it 'horrible' and 'frightful' in 'Règles de composition', MS 1692; cited in Steblin, *A History of Key Characteristics*, pp. 33–34. Mattheson said the character of keys with more than four sharps or flats was 'too little known and must be left to posterity to be determined'; *Das neu-eröffnete Orchestre* (Der Autor und Benjamin Schillers Witwe, 1713), p. 251. Cf. Steblin, *A History of Key Characteristics*, pp. 41 and 304–05.

[33] 'Es-Moll. Empfindungen der Bangigkeit des allertiefsten Seelendrangs, der hinbrütenden Verzweiflung, der schwärzesten Schwermut, der düstersten Seelenverfassung. Jede Angst, jedes Zagen des schaudernden Herzens, atmet aus dem gräßlichen Es-Moll. Wenn Gespenster sprechen könnten, so sprächen sie ungefähr in diesem Tone.' See Schubart, *Ideen zu einer Ästhetik der Tonkunst* (J. V. Degen, 1806), p. 378; translation Steblin, *A History of Key Characteristics*, p. 249.

[34] Lists that omit E♭ minor include those by Vogler (1779 and 1812), Kellner and Cramer (1787), Knecht (1791), Grétry (1797), E. T. A. Hoffmann (1814), Reicha (1814), Gardiner and Stendhal (1817), J. J. Wagner (1823), Lichtenthal (1826), Seidel's additions to Schubart (1828), Ebhardt (1830), and Müller (1830), as well as the 1787 publication of Schubart's list that subtracts several of the keys. Further details on these lists can be found in Steblin, *A History of Key Characteristics*. Heinse's 1785–86 *Hildegard von Hohenthal* calls it only a 'vile rogue'; ibid., pp. 249 and 353.

[35] See ibid., pp. 249–51. Henri Weikert, *Erklärung der gebräuchlichsten musikalischen Kunstwörter* (Edler, 1827), pp. 25–27: 'Feelings of anxiety, of despair, of blackest depression, of the most gloomy condition of the soul, of fear, of hesitation, and of shuddering.' Gathy, *Musikalisches Conversations-Lexicon*, p. 66: 'Anxiety of the soul's deepest distress; fear and hesitation of the shuddering heart; the most gloomy condition of the soul.'

[36] See Steblin, *A History of Key Characteristics*, pp. 249–51. Galeazzi, *Elementi teorico-pratici di musica*, II, p. 294: 'It is extremely melancholy and induces sleep', trans. and cited in Steblin, *A History of Key Characteristics*, p. 105. J. A. Schrader, *Kleines Taschenwörterbuch der Musik* (C. G. Fleckeisen, 1827), p. 157: 'The key of the most frightful anguish and of bitter trepidation; rigid horror and black terror are sounded in these harmonies.'

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['profoundly sad'].[37] Gustav Schilling, in the widely read *Universal-Lexicon der Tonkunst* (1835), borrows Schubart wholesale, as does Ferdinand Hand (1837), both incidentally making Schubart's statement stand for D♯ as well as E♭ minor.[38]

Schubart's statement was republished for a wide readership by far more than those counted above.[39] For example, Peter Joseph Schneider reproduced it in his *System einer medizinischen Musik* (1835), a treatise that demonstrates his apparent belief that the keys, as in the old *Affektenlehre* or the much older Greek modal *ethos*, could operate on the body and thus on the health of a person.[40] Schneider further describes a case of a 19-year-old woman

> who had suffered from a full-blown melancholy for the past two years. Various other attempts to cure her had been made by several doctors, but all without success […]. We found her in the condition known as *melancholia attonita.* Partly stupefied and partly sensible, mostly mute, she sat nearly the whole day on the sofa, staring straight ahead.[41]

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[37] Hermann L. F. Helmholtz, *On the Sensations of Tone, as a Physiological Basis for the Theory of Music*, 2nd English edition, trans. and ed. by Alexander J. Ellis (Longmans, Green, 1885), p. 551. His key-affect list is condensed from Ernst Pauer's *Elements of the Beautiful in Music* (Novello, 1877), p. 23. Lavignac, *La Musique*, p. 424.

[38] 'Feelings of anxiety, of the soul's deepest distress, of brooding despair, of blackest depression, and of the most gloomy condition of the soul. Every fear, every hesitation of the shuddering heart breathes out of horrible E-flat and D-sharp minor. If ghosts could speak they would certainly speak in this key. Even Quantz considered these keys to be the most suited for the perfect expression of the most sorrowful affects'; Gustav Schilling, *Encyclopädie der gesammten musikalischen Wissenschaften, oder, Universal-Lexicon der Tonkunst*, 2nd edn, 6 vols (Köhler, 1835–42), II (1840), pp. 422–23. 'E-flat or D-sharp minor is, to be sure, designated as a horrible key, and feelings of anxiety, of brooding despair, of the blackest depression are assigned to it, or, as Quantz has indicated, it is the most suitable for expressing sorrowful affects'; Ferdinand Hand, *Ästhetik der Tonkunst*, 2 vols (C. Hochhausen & Fournes, 1837), I, p. 226. The mention of Quantz is curious; Quantz actually said D♯ major (cf. Chapter 14 in *Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen* (Voss, 1752), p. 139), but as it is in a list of minor keys, it is reasonable to interpret it, as these theorists did, as a misprint for minor. Steblin, however, views Quantz as intending major, saying 'D-sharp major was a common Baroque spelling for E-flat major'; *A History of Key Characteristics*, p. 210 n. 39. Several lists, such as Berlioz's *Grand traité d'instrumentation et d'orchestration modernes* (Schonenberger, [1843]), p. 33, list D♯ minor and E♭ minor separately, with different characters, but apart from Bach's Fugue from the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, D♯ minor is lacking in examples, most likely due to legibility concerns with the necessary double-sharp on the dominant. Indeed, nineteenth-century editions of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, such as Czerny/Peters (1863) and Busoni (1894), rewrite the fugue in E♭ minor.

[39] As Steblin notes, besides its paraphrase in many places, Schubart's list was reprinted by Ignaz Franz von Schönholz in the *Wiener allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* (17 April 1813), pp. 235–39, and also recommended by Franz Mosel's *Versuch einer Aesthetik des dramatischen Tonsatzes* (1813), the Brockhaus *Conversations-Lexicon*, and the 1819 self-published *Wiener Pianoforte-Schule* by Friedrich Starke (wherein Schubart's descriptions were actually printed before every exercise for that key); *A History of Key Characteristics*, pp. 162–63. Carl Seidel's *Charinomos: Beiträge zur allgemeinen Theorie und Geschichte der schönen Künste*, 2 vols (Ferdinand Rubach, 1825–28), II (1828), pp. 110–13, also reprinted it with footnotes adding repertory examples in a few keys.

[40] Peter Joseph Schneider, *System einer medizinischen Musik: Ein unentbehrliches Handbuch für Medizin=Beflissene, Vorsteher der Irren=Heilanstalten, praktische Aerzte und unmusikalische Lehrer verschiedener Disciplinen*, 2 vols (Carl Georgi, 1835). Schubart's whole list is reproduced (I, pp. 285–91). I am grateful to Carmel Raz for drawing my attention to these excerpts.

[41] 'welche damals schon, seit zwei Jahren an einer völlig ausgebildeten Melancholie gelitten hatte. Anderweitige Heilversuche dagegen waren von mehreren Aerzten gemacht worden, aber alle ohne Erfolg. […] Wir fanden sie in dem Zustande der sogenannten Melancholia attonita. Halb staunend

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After some treatment with cold-water baths, she was given a musical cure via an obscure instrument:

> The agreement was made thus: I would begin by improvising a prelude on the aeolodicon [wind harmonium], and then we would sing one of the four-voiced chorales that the patient had previously liked so much. […] She sat there mute, dumb as a fish, and immobile, just as in the beginning. I thus began to improvise in a key corresponding to the state of a soul sunk in deepest melancholy: E♭ minor (see [Schubart's key list] Vol. 1 p. 288). Softly, and so, swelling to the strongest *fortissimo*, and then decreasing to a moderate *piano*, sometimes full-textured, sometimes simple, sustaining pure triads, and so on through the most varied voicings and progressions of the harmony. At the beginning of the third crescendo and immediately following *fortissimo*, Zober observed a deep intake of breath and a strong shudder; that is, a complete seizure of the full nervous system.[42]

Subsequent modulation apparently produced a profound change in her condition; but the medical marvel is not so compelling for us as the use of E♭ minor as a key 'corresponding to […] deepest melancholy', for which the author actually cites Schubart.

The Influence of *Ombra* Style

In the early nineteenth century, Beethoven's oratorio *Christus am Ölberge* was the most available example of the key; Hand cites it in 1837 as his only example, describing 'what the single [E♭ minor] chord is able to do and how it makes the soul sink in terror of the holy one'.[43] Schilling's spiritual distinction of E♭ minor against its enharmonic equivalent, associating it with 'a certain heavenly mood, which speaks to the heart in a consoling and calming manner', is also likely influenced by Beethoven's oratorio.[44] Even in 1880, Hermann Mendel's encyclopaedic *Musikalisches Conversations-Lexikon* says that the key is 'almost not at all in use as a key on its own' on account of the risk of missing accidentals in performance;[45] the edition of 1883 corrects this by adding *Christus am Ölberge* as well as Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* prelude and the introduction section of Louis Spohr's Overture to *Jessonda* to the list of known

und halb sinnend, mehrentheils stumm, saß sie fast den ganzen Tag auf dem Sopha, und blickte unverwandt vor sich hin'; ibid., II, pp. 250–51.

[42] 'Die Verabredung war so getroffen, daß ich zuerst einleitend auf dem Aeolodicon präludiren, dann einen der Kranken früher wohlgefälligen 4stimmigen Choral anstimmen würde. […] Stumm saß sie da, stumm wie ein Fisch, und unbeweglich, grade wie im Anfange. Nun begann ich meine Phantasie, in einem der Seelenstimmung der, in tiefe Melancholie Versunkenen, entsprechenden Tone — Es-moll. (S. Th. I. p. 288.) Leise, und so anschwellend, bis zum stärksten *Fortissimo*, von da ab zu einem mäßigen *Piano*, vollgriffig bald, bald einfach, in reinen Dreiklängen aushaltend, und so fort durch die verschiedenartigsten Lagen und Wendungen der Harmonien. Zober's bemerkte bei dem 3maligen *Crescendo*, zu Anfange, und dem unmittelbar darauf erfolgen f.f. ein tiefes Athemholen und einen heftigen Schauder. Also ein gänzliches Ergreifen des totalen Nervensystems'; ibid., II, p. 267.
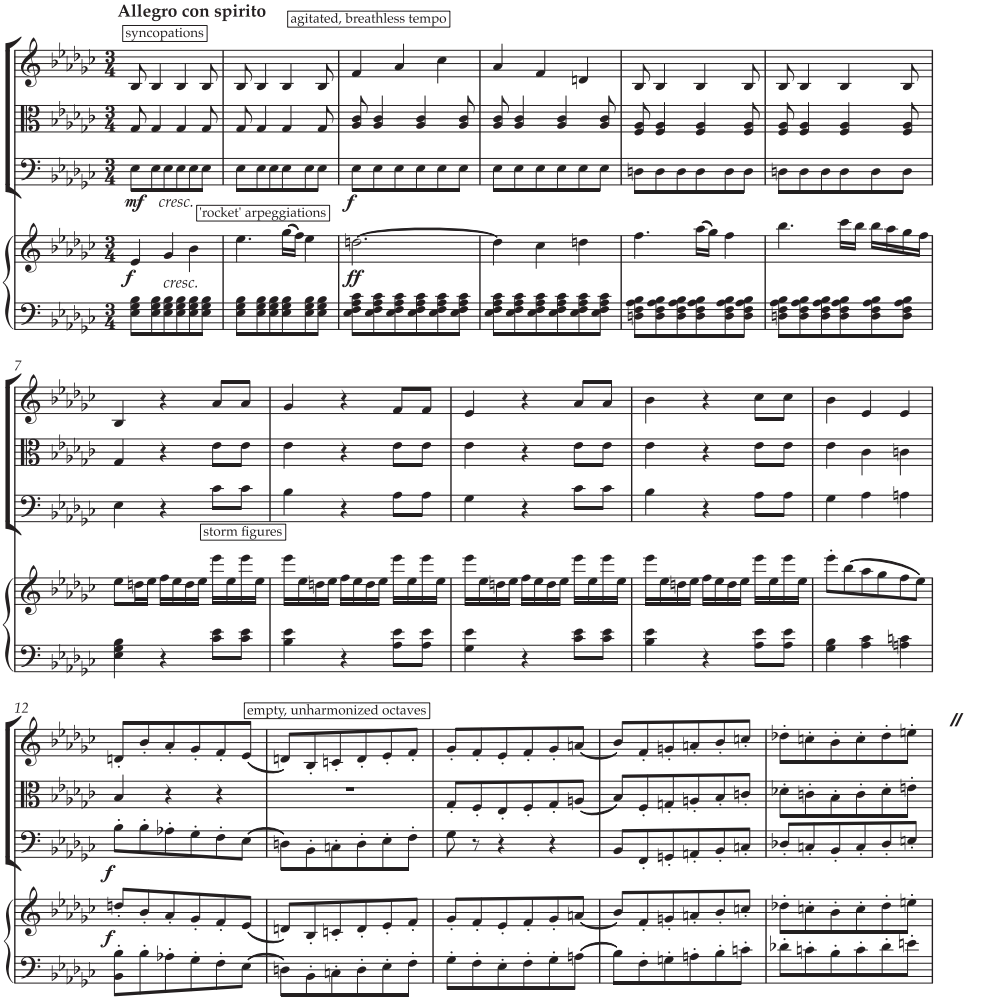
[43] Hand, *Ästhetik der Tonkunst*, I, p. 226; in Steblin, *A History of Key Characteristics*, pp. 251 and 331.

[44] Schilling, *Universal-Lexicon der Tonkunst*, II, pp. 422–23; in Steblin, *A History of Key Characteristics*, pp. 250 and 318.

[45] 'Es-moll […] kommt als selbständige Tonart fast gar nicht in Gebrauch, da es, sechs *Versetzungszeichen* (s.d.) führend, in der Darstellung zu oft eine Ungleichheit der gleichnamigen Klänge zeigen würde, weshalb wir jede Auslassung über deren Scalatöne etc. unterlassen'; *Musikalisches Conversations-Lexikon*, III, p. 424. This entry cites only 'Selig sind die Todten' in Spohr's oratorio *Die letzten Dinge* — quite incorrectly, as the section is entirely in G♭ major.

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Example 5. Beethoven, Piano Quartet, WoO 36 no. 1, movement 2 (1785/1828), bars 1–16.



works.[46] Beethoven, too, seems to have feared the potential for missed accidentals; the first published scores all include cautionary accidentals on the G♭, even though it occurs in the very first bar.[47]

Though *Christus am Ölberge* is indeed the most well-known and largest-scale piece to employ E♭ minor before 1850, it was by no means Beethoven's first foray into the key. His Piano Quartet WoO 36 no. 1, whose agitated E♭-minor middle movement has

[46] *Musikalisches Conversations-Lexikon: Ergänzungsband* (Oppenheim, 1883), p. 98.
[47] See '"Christus am Ölberge", Oratorium für drei Solostimmen, Chor und Orchester, op. 85: Erstausgaben' in the Digitales Archiv of the Beethoven-Haus, Bonn <https://www.beethoven.de/de/archive/view/node/4869416445542400/Oratorium> [accessed 17 June 2025], both the piano reduction (Klavierauszug) and the full score (Partitur) from Breitkopf & Härtel.

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Sturm und Drang or *tempesta* features (Example 5), is from 1785, too early to have been directly influenced by Schubart's published key list. Nevertheless, Beethoven was indeed known to embrace Schubart's descriptions, although Schindler hedged in saying how far:

> [Beethoven] generally agreed about the minor keys […] but he disagreed about some of the major keys, or rather in vocal music he limited their psychical significance according to the tempo of the piece of music and the number of voices singing. As for instrumental music, especially quartets and orchestral works, Beethoven generally disregarded Schubart's characterizations of the keys because many of them were ambiguous or impracticable. He did, however, accept them up to a point in his piano music and trios.[48]

That Beethoven was a general believer in key affect is demonstrated by Paul Ellison in *The Key to Beethoven*, in the examples he has collected and in Beethoven's connections with other employers of key affect, such as Antonio Salieri and Johann Caspar Vogler.[49] (Ellison also identifies other Beethoven passages in E♭ minor, such as the Septet, op. 20, whose sixteen-bar introduction to the final movement is in a somewhat funereal E♭ minor.)[50]

Hoffmann's review of *Christus am Ölberge* discusses the E♭-minor opening in detail and clearly relates it to Schubart's definition, as well as to the solemn, sublime holiness appropriate to the content:

> The content of the work [is] Christ, just in that moment in which the resolution to offer himself up as sacrifice is by no means certain; but his human side, in the pressing nearness of the decisive moment, resists and shudders before death, and the shameful associations of this particular death; the battle of the divine and the human reaches its highest, and finally the divine gloriously overcomes. The composer had this and the darkness, sublimity, and holiness of this whole moment for the story of human redemption unequivocally in mind and heart, expressing them in a not-too-long overture. With truly solemn gravity he rebuked all the higher instruments into silence at the beginning, and allowed only the bassoon in its lowest octave, the horns, the tenor trombone, and the bass trombone (entering with the last crotchet), to play an arpeggio, all in unison — and that outlines the chord of the key of which Schubart remarked, in his vigorous speech, 'if ghosts could speak, they must do it in this key, with their frigid breath-taking and shuddering tones' — namely E♭ minor. [Opening arpeggio represented.] The effect of these few elements — the simplest notes — in performance is truly wonder-inducing and great; they urgently summon us to the solemn anticipation of something sublime and holy.[51]

[48] Anton Felix Schindler, *Beethoven as I Knew Him*, trans. by Constance S. Jolly, ed. by Donald W. MacArdle (W. W. Norton, 1966), p. 367.

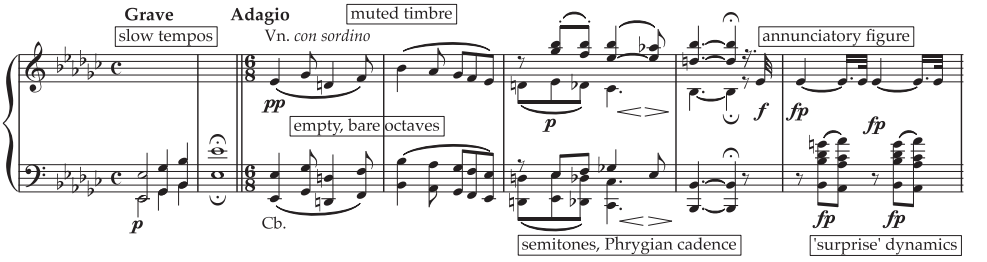
[49] Ellison, *The Key to Beethoven*, pp. 13–42.

[50] See also *Fidelio*, op. 72, Trio, 'Gut, Söhnchen, gut', bars 91–92; *Creatures of Prometheus*, op. 43, movement 9 (Adagio), bars 17–27; 'Die Liebe des Nächsten', op. 48 no. 3, bars 12–15; Piano Sonata, op. 13, bars 51–62; Mass in C Major, op. 86, 'Crucifixus', bars 151–58; Symphony no. 3, 'Eroica', op. 55, movement 1, bars 322–26; Symphony no. 4, op. 60, Adagio, bars 50–64. Many other briefer or more modulatory passages exist.

[51] E. T. A. Hoffmann, 'Recension: *Christus am Oelberge. Oratorium. In Musik ges. von L. v. Beethoven*. Op. 85 etc.'; *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, 14.1 (1 Jan 1812), col. 6.

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Example 6. Beethoven, *Christus am Ölberge*, op. 85, Introduzione (1803–04/1811), bars 1–7.



The E♭-minor instrumental opening (Example 6), which modulates towards a more normative E♭ major/C minor for the sung numbers, is a bold move for an oratorio, but appropriate for the seriousness of the conflict. It also involves features of the *ombra* style, which Hoffmann hints at in his description.

Ombra, which originated with spirit scenes in operas, is described by Leonard Ratner as a topic of 'ghosts, gods, moral values, punishments […] feelings of awe and terror', and is related to the high or elevated style (in Johann Adolf Scheibe's sense) or to the sublime.[52] (The *locus classicus* is the penultimate scene of *Don Giovanni*, with the Commendatore's statue, though any scene in the underworld or with ghosts provides opportunity for the style.) *Ombra* effects include those features calculated to induce religious or supernatural terror and awe: use of monotone 'god-speak'; repeated notes like heartbeats, footsteps, or tolling bells; ostinatos; unison/octave writing; angular lines and wide leaps; dissonant intervals; stormy passages; and violent outbursts. Also typical are tonal instability, dissonant intervals, half-steps, and chromaticism or striking progressions. Any other features intended to surprise or astonish are also common, including sforzandos, dynamic contrasts, grand pauses, and syncopations. Standard *ombra* is always slow and measured, which separates it from the *Sturm und Drang* style used in Example 5, though both styles convey agitation, awe, and anxiety.[53]
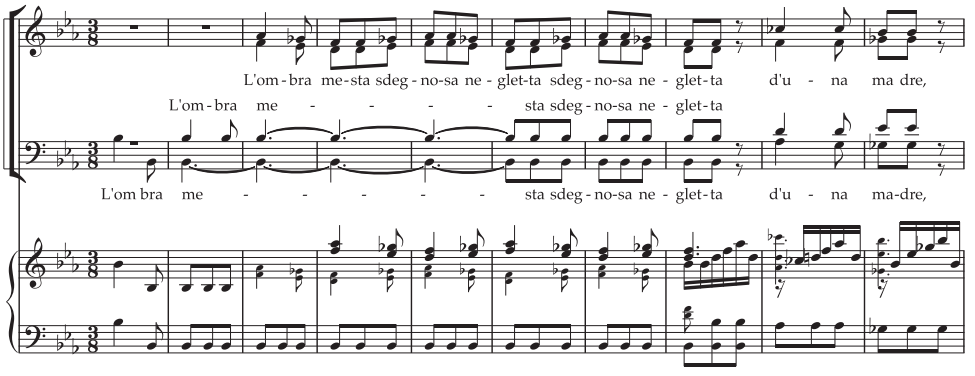
Beethoven's use of E♭ minor for *ombra* was most likely influenced by passages like the 'Misero giovane' in Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762), which Beethoven would have

[52] Leonard G. Ratner, *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (Schirmer Books, 1980), p. 24. Note that Ratner includes *ombra* under the heading of fantasia style, but it has been widely accepted that *ombra* can be separate from fantasia; see Birgitte Moyer, '*Ombra* and Fantasia in Late Eighteenth-Century Theory and Practice', in *Convention in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Music: Essays in Honor of Leonard G. Ratner*, ed. by Wye J. Allanbrook, Janet M. Levy, and William P. Mahrt (Pendragon, 1992), pp. 283–306; see also McClelland, *Ombra*, p. 5. Ratner explains Scheibe's styles from *Der critische Musikus*: 'He says that the *high style* must be stately and emphatic; the harmony must be full, the ideas fully carried through, the melody rich in invention, fresh, lively, and elevated. It should be used only for heroes, kings, and other great men and noble spirits; magnanimity, majesty, love of power, magnificence, pride, astonishment, anger, fear, madness, revenge, doubt, and other similar qualities and passions can only be expressed in the high style'; *Classic Music*, pp. 7–8.

[53] See McClelland, *Ombra*, passim. A taxonomy of *ombra* characteristics is provided in his Appendix A (p. 225).

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Example 7. Traetta, *Ifigenia in Tauride* (1763), Act II, Scene 1, 'Dormi Oreste', bars 19–28. [Sad, disdainful shade, neglected by a mother…]



known from the performance at the Bonn court in winter 1784/85.[54] Carl Heinrich Graun's *Der Tod Jesu* (1755), a Holy Week staple which Beethoven might have known and whose content overlaps with his own oratorio, was possibly another influence.[55] Though none are set throughout in the key, E♭ minor does make a number of appearances as a transitional key in opera *ombra* scenes, as can be seen in Clive McClelland's list of *ombra* scenes and their keys:[56] Niccolò Jommelli, the acknowledged father of *Ombraszenen*, preferred the keys of C minor, D minor, and E♭ major for such scenes; as some have noted, the major key is somewhat inexplicable.[57] The attraction of E♭ major as a key of majesty and elevated affect, however, is enhanced by its ability to slip into both C minor and the deeply melancholy parallel minor; both McClelland and Macdonald note that the eighteenth-century use of E♭ minor is primarily due to its accessibility from E♭ major.[58] Jommelli's *Andromaca* (Act II, Scene 15), from 1741, appears to be the first use of the key of E♭ major for *ombra*, and perhaps not coincidentally also includes E♭ minor for the ghost of Pyrrhus.[59] Some reform-era and later operas use E♭ minor to illustrate the word *ombra*, such as Traetta's *Ifigenia in Tauride* (1763), Act II, Scene 1, in which 'Dormi Oreste' slides into E♭ minor for the text 'L'ombra mesta sdegnosa' (Example 7), and Mozart's *Mitridate, re di Ponto* (1770), Act III, Scene 4, bars 60–72, in the cavatina 'Pallid' ombre' (Example 8). Other *ombra*

[54] From the database *The Operatic Library of Elector Maximilian Franz (1780–1794)*, compiled by Elisabeth Reisinger, Juliane Riepe, and John D. Wilson <http://www.univie.ac.at/operaticlibrary/db/> [accessed 4 February 2025].

[55] See the table in the Appendix for passages. It is unclear whether Beethoven actually did know Graun's *Der Tod Jesu*, which had a strong annual performance tradition in Berlin, but a copy existed in Elector Max Franz's library and was available from 1784. Jahn Czerny claimed that his father had introduced Beethoven to *Der Tod Jesu*, and that Beethoven said the fugues were 'passable, the rest ordinary'; quoted in *Thayer's Life of Beethoven*, rev. and ed. by Elliott Forbes, 2 vols (Princeton University Press, 1967), I, p. 367, who placed this around 1805.

[56] McClelland, *Ombra*, pp. 30–31.
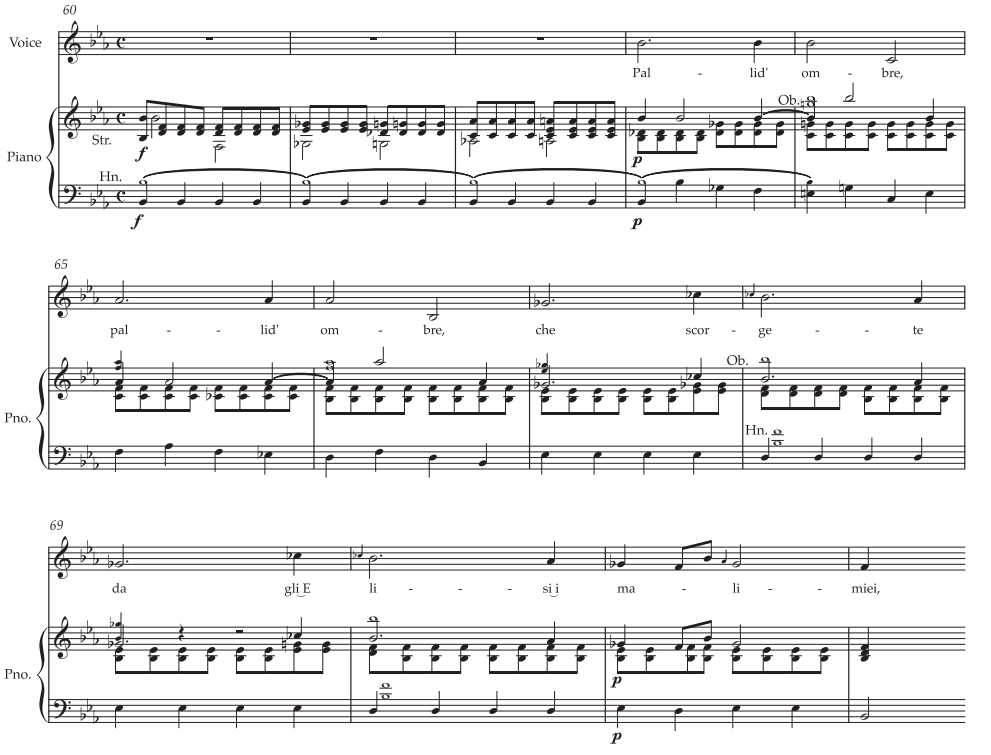
[57] Ibid., pp. 7 and 27; see also Moyer, '*Ombra* and Fantasia', pp. 289–93.

[58] McClelland, *Ombra*, p. 39; Macdonald, '[G-Flat Major]', p. 222.

[59] McClelland, *Ombra*, pp. 32–33.

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Example 8. Mozart, *Mitridate, re di Ponto* (1770), Act III, Scene 4, 'Pallid' ombre', bars 60–72. [Pale shades who see, from Elysium, my misery]



scenes with E♭ minor include Philidor's *Tom Jones* (1766), Act III, Scene 18, Piccinni's *Atys* (1780), Act III, Scene 8, and Gazzaniga's *Don Giovanni* (1787), Scene 24, whose classic *ombra* scene also accesses E♭ minor from the parallel major.[60] Of these, all but *Don Giovanni* predate Schubart's memorable statement that 'if ghosts could speak', they would do it in 'horrible E-flat minor'. Thus the use of E♭ minor for *ombra* may actually have influenced Schubart's statement as much as the converse, and E♭ major's early association with *ombra* may well be for its ability to be coloured by the melancholy parallel (as well as the relative) minor.

E♭ minor can carry its *ombra* associations into works of religious or funereal import, as in Beethoven's oratorio. Haydn had also turned briefly to E♭ minor at relevant points of his two oratorios, *The Creation* (1798) and *The Seasons* (1801) (see Appendix). Beethoven's 1790 *Cantata on the Death of Emperor Joseph II* makes an E♭-minor cadence in the opening choral movement announcing the emperor's death, in bars 84–88, as the work modulates from C minor to E♭ major; in 1798 Jozef Kozłowski composed a Requiem in E♭ Minor for the death of the Polish king Stanislaw August

[60] Ibid., p. 40.

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Poniatowski.[61] The Crucifixus of Haydn's *Heiligmesse*, Hob. XXII/10 (1796) and the Crucifixus of Beethoven's own Mass in C Major (1807) both touch on the key. Not only does E♭ minor suit the melancholy of the Crucifixus text, but text-setting conventions for the preceding 'Et incarnatus est' may well be relevant. As the three flats of E♭ major came to represent the Trinity, E♭ major might be employed for the depiction of the incarnation (which initiates the three-in-one concept of God within the Credo); Wilson also notes a 'ceremonial, quasi-religious strain' in E♭-major music after 1770 due to an association with *Tugend*, chivalrous virtue, and related to serious works.[62] In such a context the immediately succeeding Crucifixus might naturally darken to E♭ minor, as Haydn's *Heiligmesse* does.[63] Such minor-mode colouration can also be seen in Cherubini's Requiem in C Minor (1808), which turns to E♭ minor for 'De poenis inferni' ['punishment of hell'] in the otherwise E♭-major context of the Offertorium. Thus there appears to be a continuous tradition of E♭ minor in religious works consistent with Beethoven's use in his oratorio; moreover, examples of the religious sublime and ghostly *ombra* came together with Schubart's statement to strengthen the melancholy convention of the key.

Balladry, Scotland, and Stormy Seascapes

Though *ombra* scenes may have influenced Schubart, the operatic examples were soon forgotten in favour of his compelling description of the key. Beethoven's example and Schubart's statement acquired an outsized influence in part because many of the other contemporary examples were obscure or, as with Schubert's lieder, circulated in a limited way, if at all. Yet some of these obscure works may have solidified and expanded the character of E♭ minor.

Johann Rudolf Zumsteeg (1760–1802) is rarely cited by key-affect theorists, yet he seemed to adopt Schubart's key associations deliberately, especially for E♭ minor.[64] Zumsteeg spent most of his life in Stuttgart, working closely with Schubart; indeed, when the latter died in 1791, his position at the court theatre devolved onto Zumsteeg. As a composer, Zumsteeg was influenced by Jommelli and his *ombra* scenes, and so he probably also had compositional models for the use of E♭ minor.[65] Although Zumsteeg wrote instrumental music and opera — often with magical, chivalric, and exotic subjects — he is best known for his melodramatic through-composed ballads; they have illustrative accompaniments that frequently shift key, tempo, and metre according to the required affect. Many are settings of Gottfried Bürger, and his setting of Bürger's 'Lenore' (1798), shown in Example 9a, was his most famous work for years. This ghostly story, derived from Scottish ballads and published in 1773, is the very

[61] Only the framing movements are in E♭ minor; internal movements use other flat minor keys. MS copy in the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin <http://digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/werkansicht/?PPN=PPN81069266X> [accessed 4 February 2025].

[62] Wilson, 'Of Hunting, Horns, and Heroes', p. 173.
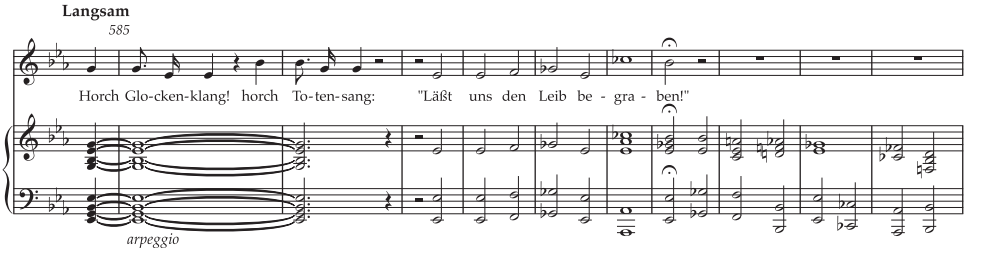
[63] Schubert's well-loved 'Et incarnatus est' for his Mass in E♭ Major is set in A♭ major, and similarly darkens to the extremely melancholy A♭ minor for the Crucifixus.

[64] Schrader's 1827 list uses a number of Zumsteeg ballads as well as Haydn and Mozart examples to substantiate its key affects; see Steblin, *A History of Key Characteristics*, p. 178.

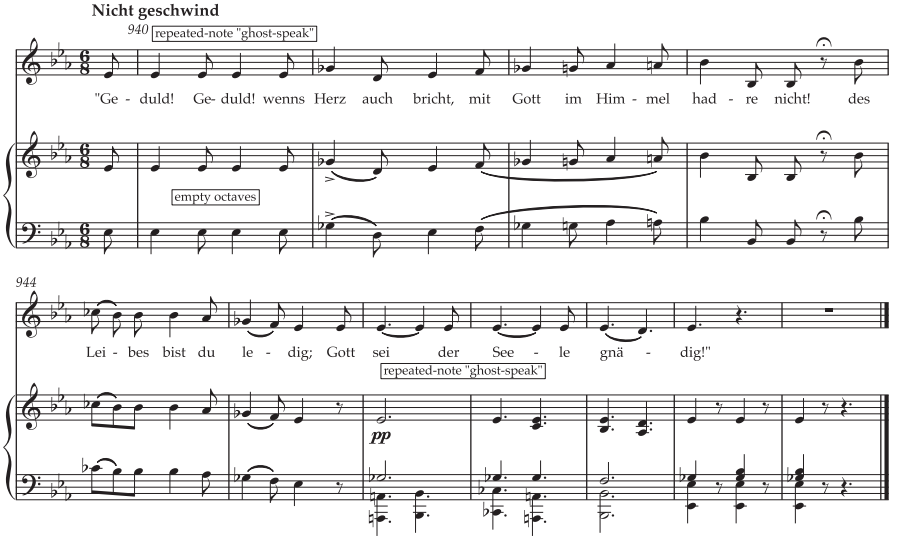
[65] 'Nachricht aus Stuttgart', *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, 4.20 (10 February 1802), col. 326.

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Example 9a. Zumsteeg, 'Lenore' (1798), bars 585–94. [Hark the bells! Hark the death song: 'Let us bury the corpse!']



Example 9b. Zumsteeg, 'Lenore' (1798), bars 940–50. [Chorus of ghosts: Patience! Patience! Even if your heart is breaking, do not quarrel with God in heaven! Of the body you are rid; on the soul, God have mercy!]



essence of *ombra* and was critical to eighteenth-century German poetry and *Sturm und Drang*.[66] Examples 9a and 9b show Zumsteeg's combination of E♭ minor with other ghostly features in the most terrifying sections of his 950-bar work: the ominous open octaves on 'Läßt uns den Leib begraben' ['Let us bury the corpse!'], clearly outlining E♭

66 Related antecedents include poems such as 'Sweet William's Ghost' and 'Margaret's Ghost' from Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, 3 vols (J. Dodsley, 1765), with which Bürger was certainly familiar (though perhaps not before writing 'Lenore'). Another antecedent to 'Lenore' is in the three-volume *Collection of Old Ballads* (J. Roberts, 1723–25), with the title 'The Suffolk Miracle: Or, a Relation of a Young Man, who a Month after his Death appear'd to his Sweetheart, and carry'd her on Horseback behind him for forty Miles in two Hours, and was never seen after but in his Grave'. It is unknown whether Bürger could have seen this ballad.

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minor, and the E♭-minor conclusion of the ballad with repeated-note 'ghost-speak' and open-octave accompaniment. (The ghostly choice of E♭ minor recurs in some later settings of 'Lenore', such as Václav Tomášek's in 1801.)

Another seminal *Sturm und Drang* text set by Zumsteeg in this illustrative manner was 'Colma: Ein Gesang Ossians', a piece which touches on all four categories I outlined in the introduction (lament, *ombra*, storms, Scotland/North). Colma is a figure from Macpherson's collection *The Works of Ossian* (1765), one of the most influential and melancholy literary works of the eighteenth century, presented as translations of the third-century Celtic bard Ossian. Artistically minded Germans found Colma's lament to be incredibly moving; it provokes the crisis in Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*, figures in several monodramas, and is one of the Ossianic texts most frequently set to music, existing in many German translations.[67]

Colma's plight mingles *Sturm und Drang* with the *ombra* encounter with death. McClelland, who suggests *tempesta* as a broader term for *Sturm und Drang*-type style features from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, notes the frequent overlap of *ombra* and tempest contexts and features, including flat minor keys.[68] Much as with other heroines of monodrama, such as Jiří (Georg) Benda's Ariadne, the scene opens on Colma abandoned to the elements, awaiting her lover in a storm that seems to externalize her own roiling fears. As the storm subsides, her fears are substantiated: she finds her lover and her brother dead, having killed each other in a duel. Example 10 immediately follows Colma's discovery of the corpses; E♭ minor is chosen to represent the moment that death is pronounced ('Kalt wie die Erde ist ihr Busen'; in Macpherson's original, 'Cold are their breasts of clay').

So many Ossianic works in the nineteenth century included E♭-minor passages that James Porter, in *Beyond Fingal's Cave: Ossian in the Musical Imagination*, notes that E♭ minor 'might be termed the tonality of "Ossianic distance"'.[69] Ossianic tales such as 'Colma' were the primary representative of northern literature in the decades before 1800, supplemented by the widely translated and imitated Scottish ballads in Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (which make up a good many of the texts of British origin in Herder's *Volkslieder*).[70] These, alongside circulation of Sir Walter Scott's novels in the 1820s, ensured that until at least the 1840s the

[67] For more on the influence of Colma's lament, see Sarah Clemmens Waltz, *German Settings of Ossianic Texts, 1770–1815* (Recent Researches in the Music of the Classical Era 100) (A-R Editions, 2016), pp. xxi–xxii and 55–91. Zumsteeg's setting can be found in its entirety here, as can concordant examples by C. F. Zelter and J. F. Reichardt.
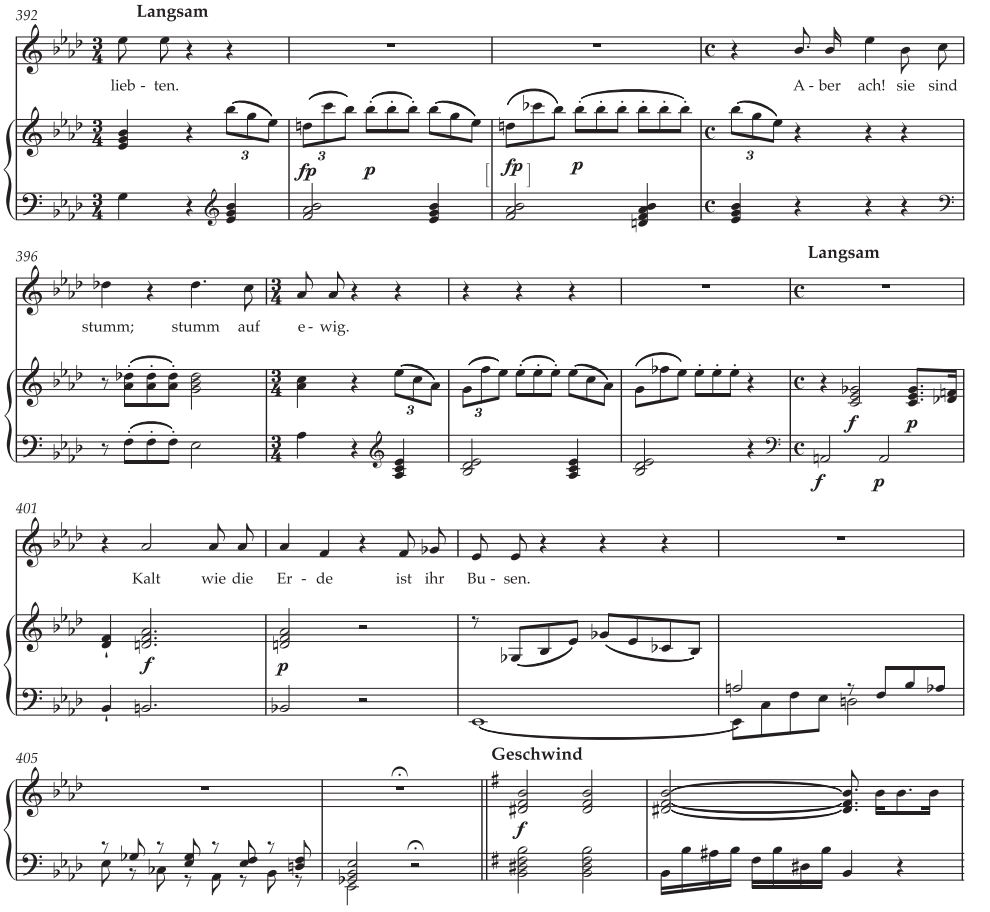
[68] McClelland, *Tempesta: Stormy Music in the Eighteenth Century* (Lexington Books, 2017), pp. viii and 219.

[69] Porter, *Beyond Fingal's Cave*, p. 209. Works he notes with this key include Kozłowski's 1805 incidental music to Ozerov's *Fingal*, Jules-August Bordier's 1885 *Un rêve d'Ossian*, Simon van Milligen's 1899 opera *Dartula*, Schoenberg's fragmentary *Darthulas Grabgesang* (1903), and Aloys Fleischmann's 1930 cantata *Dartula aus Ossian*, all of which include E♭ minor in *ombra* or stormy passages.

[70] Herder's essay 'Homer und Ossian', which compares the Greek with the so-called 'Homer of the North', is a representative essay for the contemporary consideration of the Ossianic tales as a common northern heritage; 'Homer und Ossian', *Die Horen: Eine Monatsschrift*, ed. by Schiller (J. G. Cotta, [1795]), x, pp. 86–107. This consideration supplanted the opinion handed down by Tacitus that the

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Example 10. Zumsteeg, 'Colma: Ein Gesang Ossians' (1793), bars 392–408. [Original English: But alas! they are silent; silent for ever! Cold are their breasts of clay.]
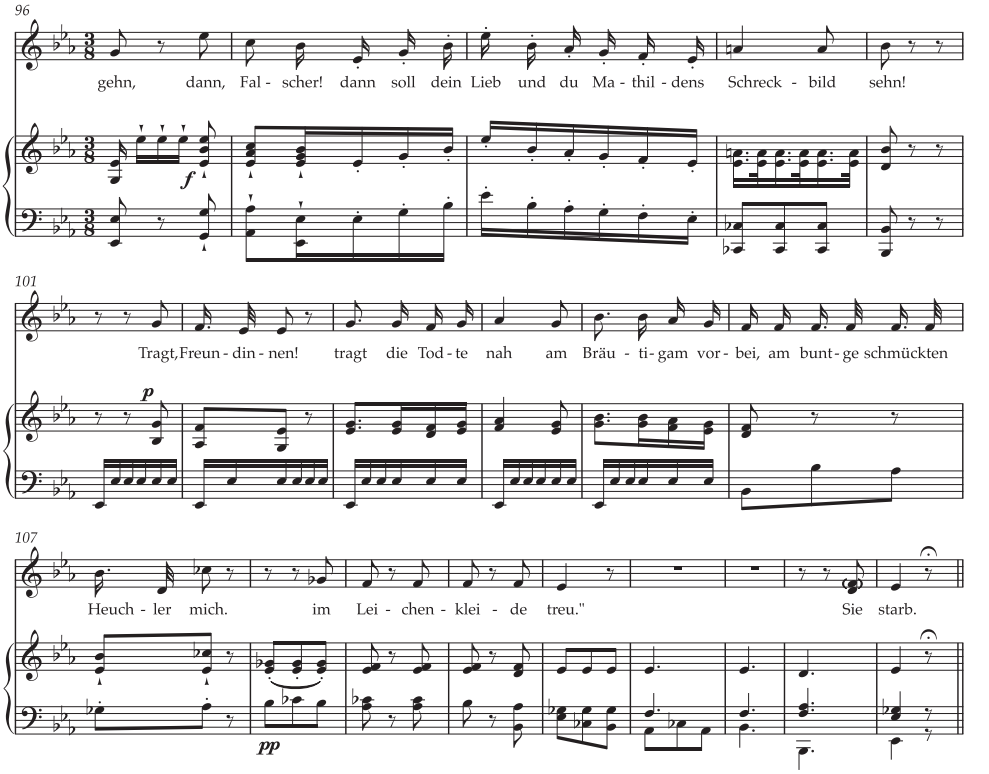


European North was represented by Scotland — and was seen as an uncanny, ghostly, and melancholic place. Example 11 shows an E♭-minor appearance in the Zumsteeg ballad 'Richard und Mathilde', another northern poem, translated from 'Lucy and Colin' in Percy's *Reliques*.[71] (It is also related to 'Fair Margaret and Sweet William' and thus is a cousin of Bürger's 'Lenore'.) In the English source ballads, a man chooses to marry someone other than his true love; the true love then dies and her ghost or memory disrupts the marriage, leading to the man's demise. As with his

illiterate Nordic/Germanic tribes had 'no art' and also opened the path for acceptance of other northern epics such as the *Nibelungenlied* and the *Kalevala*.

71 See Percy, *Reliques*, III, pp. 307–10. The northern roots of 'Richard und Mathilde' remain apparent in translation by the retention of place names (e.g. the River Liffey in Ireland). Germans often did not differentiate overmuch between Scottish, English, and Irish source material.

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Example 11. Zumsteeg, 'Richard und Mathilde' (1800), bars 96–115. ['Then, false one! Then shall you and your love behold Mathilda's terrifying spectre! Bear me, friends! bear my corpse past the bridegroom, the gaily decked-out hypocrite, in faithful winding-sheet.' She died.]



setting of 'Colma', Zumsteeg marks the uncanny death of the true love (Mathilda) by a full cadence in E♭ minor.[72]

One of Zumsteeg's successors in ballad composition was Carl Loewe. In 1824 Loewe published his Opus 1, famously including a setting of 'Erlkönig', but also (every bit as famously at the time) a setting of the Scottish ballad 'Edward, Edward' in Herder's translation (later set by Schubert as 'Eine altschottische Ballade', D. 923). The 'Edward' ballad was a widely circulated representative of Scottish or northern melancholy, first published in Percy's *Reliques* as an old Scots ballad, then gaining wide currency via inclusion in Herder's *Volkslieder* and in Ursinus's *Balladen und Lieder altenglischer und altschottischer Dichtart* (1777), a source for many lied composers. In

[72] A review praised this section as better than the setting in general, which was seen as having 'small flaws in the text-setting, whereas the passage "Sie starb" etc. p. 43 is much better' ['kleine Flecken in der Behandlung der Worte… wogegen die Stelle "Sie starb" u.s.f. S. 43 desto besser ist']; 'Recension: *Kleine Balladen und Lieder mit Klavierbegleitung von I. R. Zumsteeg, 2ter Heft* [etc.]', *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, 3.5 (29 October 1800), col. 85.

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this dialogue ballad, Edward's mother asks innocent-sounding questions and receives evasive answers:

> Why dois your brand sae drap wi' bluid
> Edward, Edward?
> Why dois your brand sae drap wi' bluid
> And why sae sad gang ye, O?
> O I hae killed my hawke sae guid,
> Mither, Mither;
> O I hae killed my hawke sae guid,
> And I had nae mair but hee, O.[73]

Under further questioning, Edward explodes with the revelation that he has killed his father. This ballad has a double revelation, however; the real twist is that the mother knew very well what her son had done and in fact seems to have put him up to it, causing the reader to reinterpret her questions as the nagging of a conspirator.

As Brahms later does to some extent in his Piano Ballade, op. 10 no. 1 'Nach der schottischen Ballade "Edward"', Loewe allows the double cataclysm (the revelation of patricide and of his mother's conspiracy in it) to determine the large-scale form, while the dialogic form is visible at the phrase level (Example 12). The choice of E♭ minor (ornamented with the flat $\hat{2}$) is appropriate to the melancholy northern mood; it removes us from the simple *Volkslied*, indicating instead a complex ballad handed down by trained musician-poets, as the Celtic bards were believed to have been. The *Agitato* affect is reminiscent of Beethoven's WoO 36 movement and the agitation of 'Colma', and Edward's replies ring out with *ombra*-style octaves and an insistent tolling pitch. Edward's patricide revelation breaks the strophic structure and initiates a key change; this 'revelation' music returns in a stormy and unredeemed E♭ minor for Edward's second revelation cursing his mother.
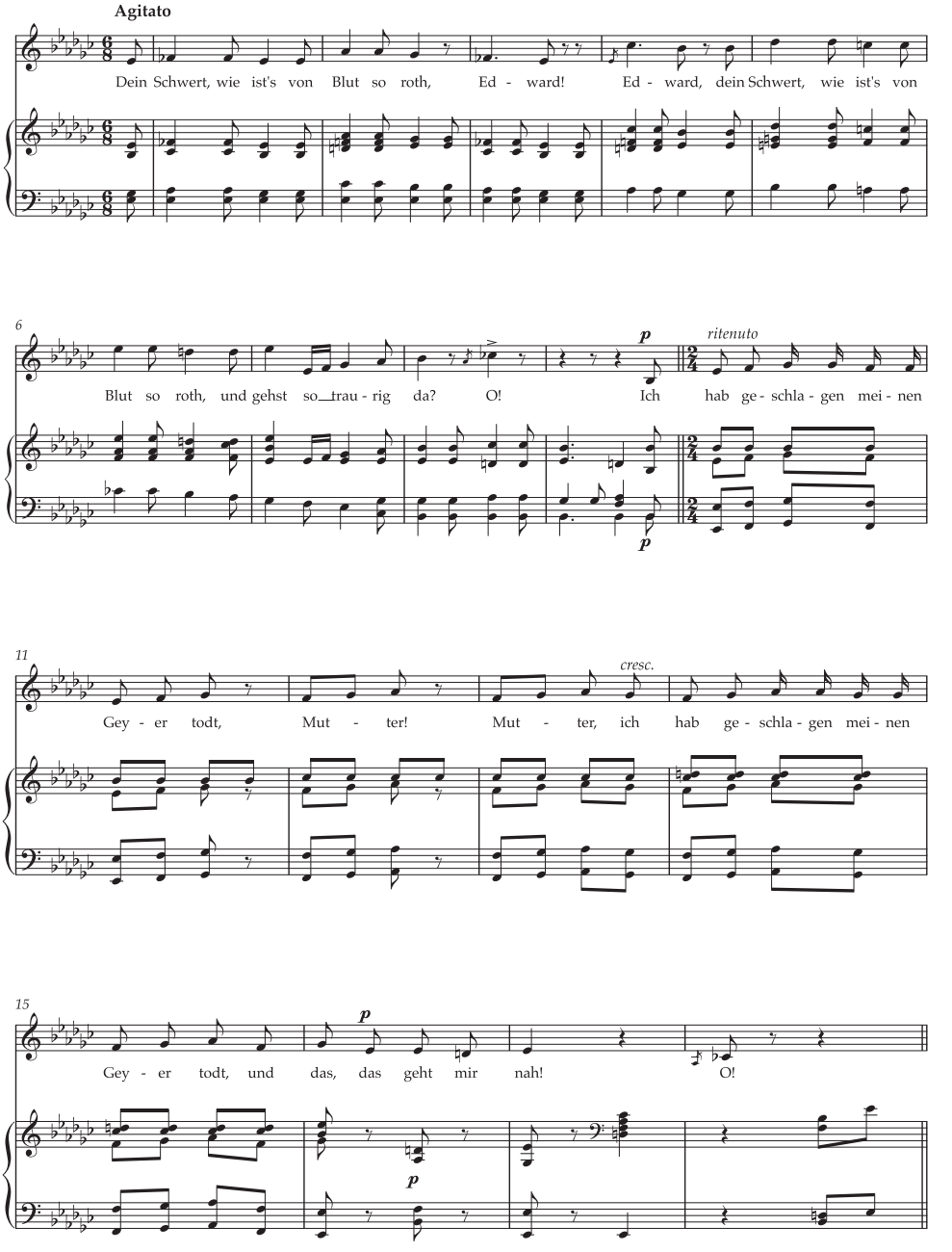
Apart from 'Edward', Loewe uses E♭ minor almost exclusively for *See-balladen*, or sea-storm ballads. Examples include his op. 103 'Gruß vom Meere' (Example 13) and op. 115 'Der gefangene Admiral', both with typically arpeggiated accompaniments representing a sea storm. A more surprising use of E♭ minor for a sea-storm ballad is by Carl Friedrich Zelter, who is otherwise generally conservative with keys. His 1812 setting of 'Die Braut am Gestade' (Example 14) is a through-composed setting faintly reminiscent of 'Colma', using E♭ minor to represent a woman lamenting on the seashore. Similarly, Example 15 shows how in 'Am Strande' Clara Schumann used the melancholy key and an arpeggiated sea-storm accompaniment to set the Scottish poet Robert Burns's text 'Musing on the Roaring Ocean'.

Both ballads and storms, especially sea storms, were strongly associated with Scotland in the early nineteenth century — the sea-storm connection influenced by literature but also, of course, the real seascape surrounding Scotland. The treacherous navigation of the

[73] This is a partial modernization of Percy's version, which uses *qu* for *w* and *z* for *y*. A fuller modernization is in Example 12.
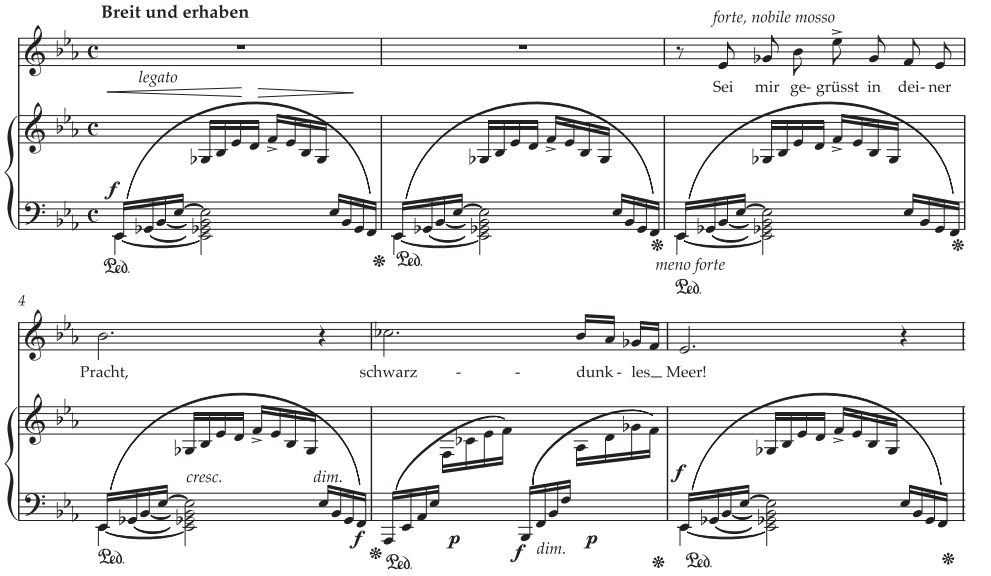
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Example 12. Loewe, 'Edward', op. 1 no. 1 (1818), bars 1–18. [Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (orthography modernized): Why does your brand [sword] so drip with blood, Edward, Edward? Why does your brand so drip with blood, and why so sad gang ye, O? O, I have killed my hawk so good (… my red-roan steed … my father dear), mother, mother; O, I have killed my hawk so good, and I had no more but he, O.]
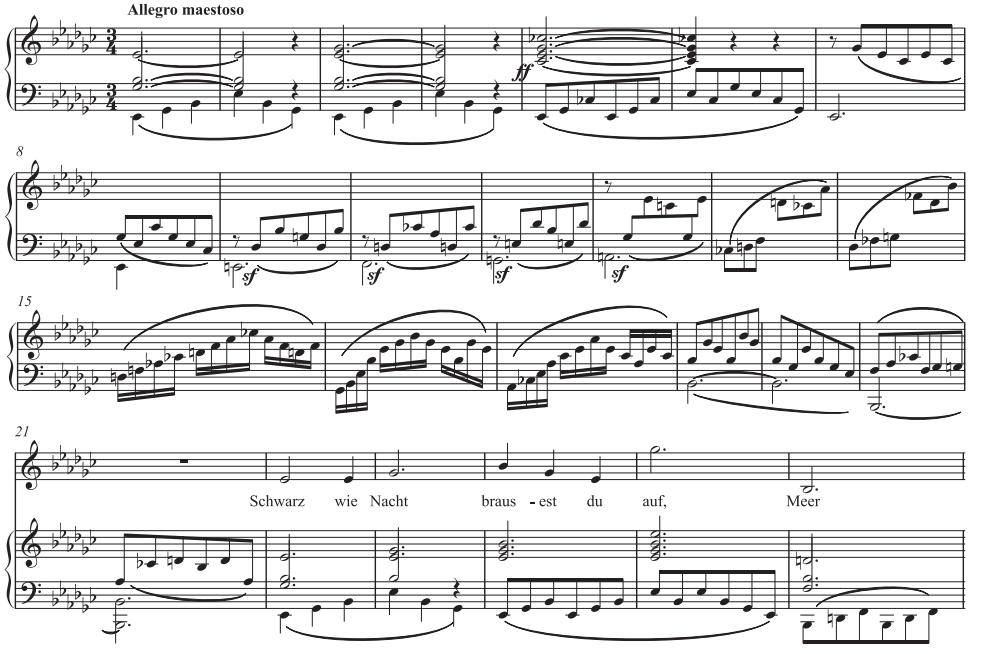


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Example 13. Loewe, 'Gruß vom Meere', op. 103 (1844), bars 1–6. [Greetings to you in your splendour, blackly dark sea!]

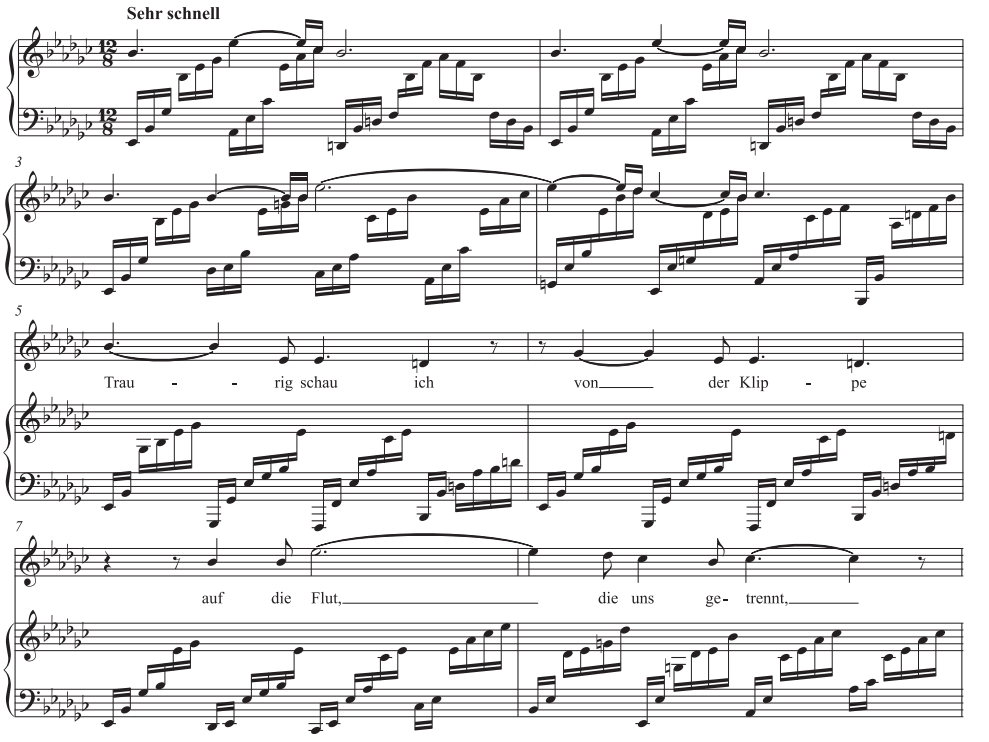


Example 14. Zelter, 'Die Braut am Gestade' (pub. 1812), bars 1–26. [Dark as night, ocean, you rage.]



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Example 15. Clara Schumann, 'Am Strande' (1840), bars 1–8. [Robert Burns: Musing on the roaring ocean which divides my love and me.]



Hebrides was known to readers of travelogues well before Mendelssohn's 1829 visit that resulted in his op. 26 *Hebrides* overture. Even as mass tourism came to Scotland in the early nineteenth century, the chances remained at least 50 per cent that a tour to Staffa (i.e. the Ossianically named Fingal's Cave) would be cancelled due to the weather.[74] (Indeed, Scotland's stormy association is part of why Wagner originally planned to set *Der fliegende Holländer* in Scotland, changing to the North Sea and Scandinavia only at the eleventh hour.)[75] The gloomy weather and rocky coasts of the country were also strongly promoted by the Ossian stories (which centre on the Hebrides and the west coast of Scotland), and the element of the uncanny in the image of Scotland increased the association between ghostly *ombra*, storms, and seascapes.[76] In sum, the

[74] See Martin Rackwitz, *Travels to Terra Incognita: The Scottish Highlands and Hebrides in Early Modern Travellers' Accounts c. 1600 to 1800* (Waxmann, 2007), p. 219. See also Katherine Haldane Grenier, *Tourism and Identity in Scotland, 1770–1914: Creating Caledonia* (Ashgate, 2005), pp. 37–38.

[75] John Deathridge and Carl Dahlhaus, *The New Grove Wagner* (W. W. Norton, 1984), p. 26. See also Barry Millington, 'The Sources and Genesis of the Text', in *Richard Wagner: Der fliegende Höllander*, ed. by Thomas Grey (Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 25–35 (p. 32). For a certain time, under the influence of Ossian, Scandinavian and Celtic nationalities were somewhat interchangeable in imaginations of the North.

[76] For the evolution of the 'Unwetterszene' or tempest scene from a seascape backdrop with a harbour or rocky coast and stormy musical representation, including the relation of *ombra* and *Sturm und Drang* elements with the sea storm, see Gudrun Busch, 'Die Unwetterszene in der romantischen Oper', in *Die 'Couleur local' in der Oper des 19. Jahrhunderts*, ed. by Heinz Becker (Gustav Bosse, 1976), pp. 161–212 (esp. p. 162).

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relationship between *ombra*, sea storms, and the North is not a distant one, and Scotland as a manifestation of a northern melancholy expressed via *ombra* and storm topics is entirely consistent with the prominence and character of Scottish representations in the period, making the melancholy E♭ minor appropriate for northern imagery.[77]

Not only Loewe but also Schubert was heir to Zumsteeg's ballad tradition, which, given the strong effect of Zumsteeg's through-composed ballads on the young Schubert, may also have served as a conduit for the practical application of Schubart's key affects (though Schubart's list was so widely published that this is not necessary to posit). When Schubert's friend Josef von Spaun reported that Zumsteeg's songs 'moved [Schubert] profoundly' in 1811, he specifically mentioned the 'Colma' setting:

> At the end of March 1811 my fate took me back to Vienna. I found my young friend grown-up and in good spirits. […] He had several of Zumsteeg's songs in front of him and told me that these songs moved him profoundly. 'Listen', he said once, 'to the song I have here', and with a voice already half breaking he sang '[C]olma'; then he showed me 'Erwartung', ['Maria Stuart'], 'Ritter Toggenburg', etc. He said he could revel in these songs for days on end. And to this youthful predilection of his we probably owe the direction Schubert took.[78]

Many of Schubert's experiments with the use of E♭ minor were unpublished at first and thus were unavailable to other composers or key-affect theorists. His early wind nonet *Eine kleine Trauermusik*, D. 79 (1813/1889), shows that he viewed the key as funereal. Several lament texts, including 'Klage um Ali Bey', D. 140 (1815/1850) and the second version of 'Am Grabe Anselmos', D. 504b (1860/1970), rely heavily on the key, while 'Bertas Lied in der Nacht', D. 653 (1819/1842), in six flats, has a clearly *ombra*-style open-octave opening to depict the night.

Schubert also employs the northern association of the key in 'Blondel zu Marien', D. 626 (1818/1842) (Example 16) (Blondel is a bard associated with Richard the Lionheart). The piece begins in bardic manner, with a harp-like accompaniment, but leaves the melancholy E♭ minor behind when the text brightens. Berlioz's use of the key in 'Le Montagnard exilé' (1823) is similarly related to bardic intent. The northern association, then, is not entirely subsumed in the sea-storm accompaniment but can also be associated with a bardic style. Bruch's use of E♭ minor for the opening of the *Scottish Fantasy*, op. 46 (1880) is, I would argue, a *locus classicus* for the direct association of Scotland with E♭ minor, using elements of what Janice Dickensheets called 'bardic style' but which could also be called Ossianic style or northern dialect: a *Grave*, funereal brass chorale opening with double dotting, harp accompaniment, and a declamatory or narrating violin line (Example 17).[79] Thus it is clear that the
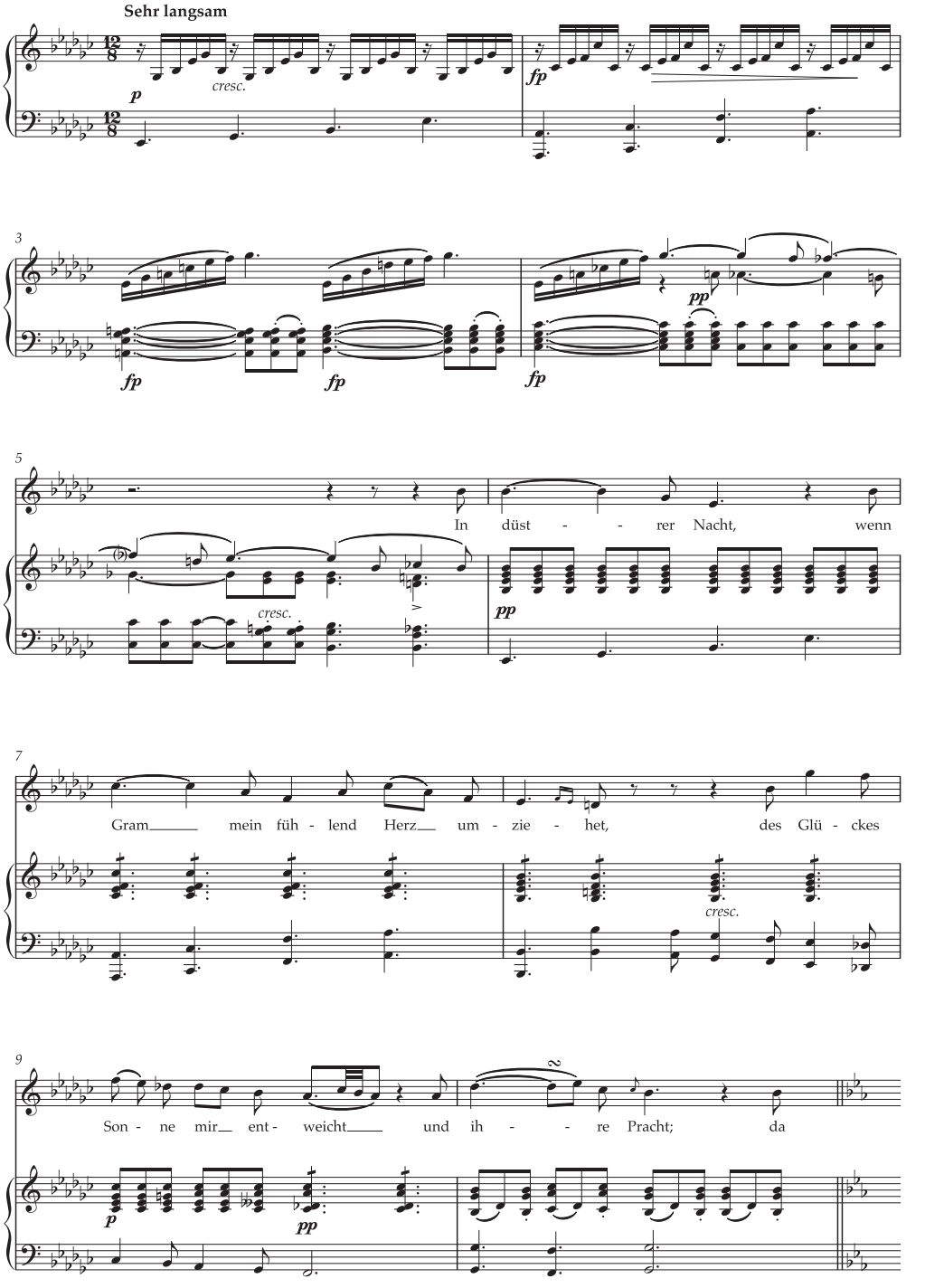
[77] Indeed, in mapping the humours or temperaments (sanguine, choleric, melancholic, and phlegmatic) onto the points of the compass, many have directly identified melancholy (cold, dry) with the North, as Robert Burton's 1621 *Anatomy of Melancholy* seems to. See [Robert Burton], *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (John Lichfield and James Short, 1621), p. 109. Others have identified the North as the phlegmatic (cold, wet) type.

[78] Josef von Spaun, 'Notes on my Association with Franz Schubert (1858)', in *Schubert: Memoirs by his Friends*, trans. by Rosamond Ley and John Nowell, ed. by Otto Erich Deutsch (Adam and Charles Black, 1958), p. 127.

[79] See Janice Dickensheets, 'The Topical Vocabulary of the Nineteenth Century', *Journal of Musicological Research*, 31 (2012), pp. 97–137 (pp. 126–27), doi:10.1080/01411896.2012.682887. See also the section on 'northern dialect' in Sarah Clemmens, *The Highland Muse in Romantic German Music* (UMI, 2007), pp. 382–86.
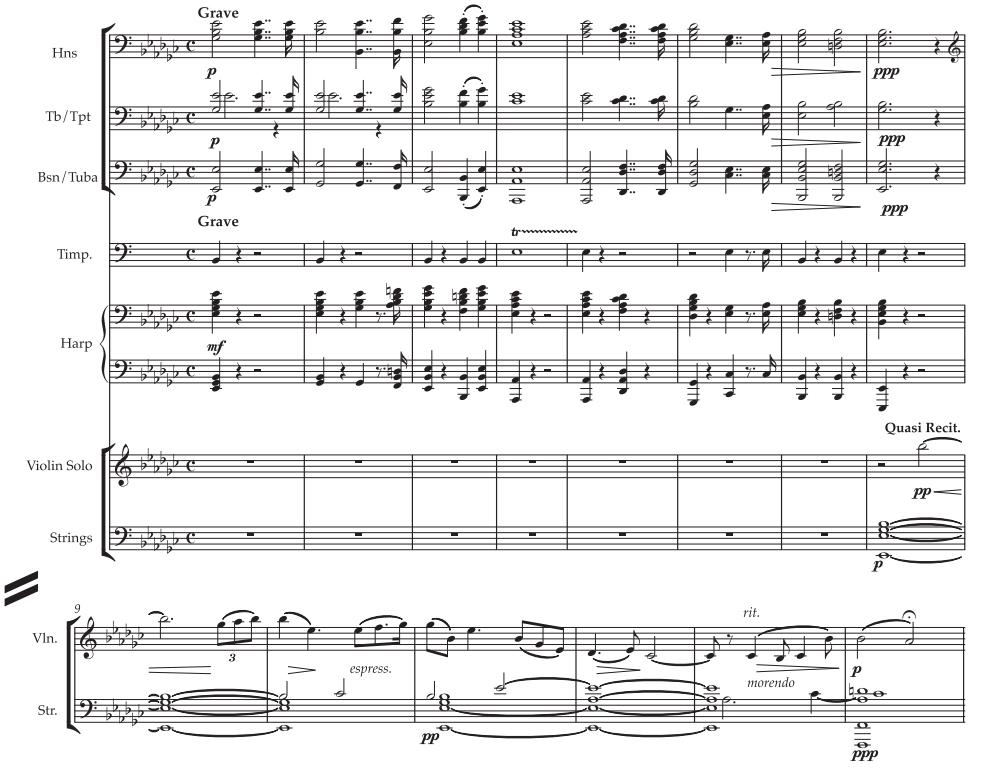
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Example 16. Schubert, 'Blondel zu Marien', D. 626 (1818/1842), bars 1–10. [In gloomy night, when sorrow envelops my sensing heart]



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Example 17. Bruch, *Fantasie für die Violine mit Orchester und Harfe unter freier Benutzung schottischer Volksmelodien*, op. 46 (1880), bars 1–14.
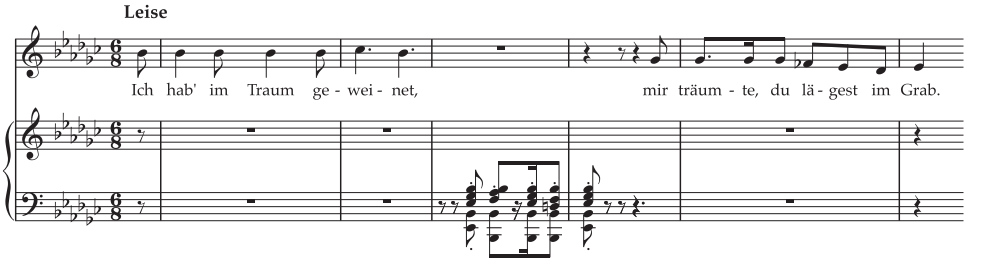


associations between melancholy and the primarily bardic image of Scotland are strong enough that E♭ minor can directly contribute to a northern, Ossianic, or bardic style without being refracted through Scotland's *ombra* or *tempesta*/sea-storm associations.

Broader Applications: Later Nineteenth-Century and Instrumental Music
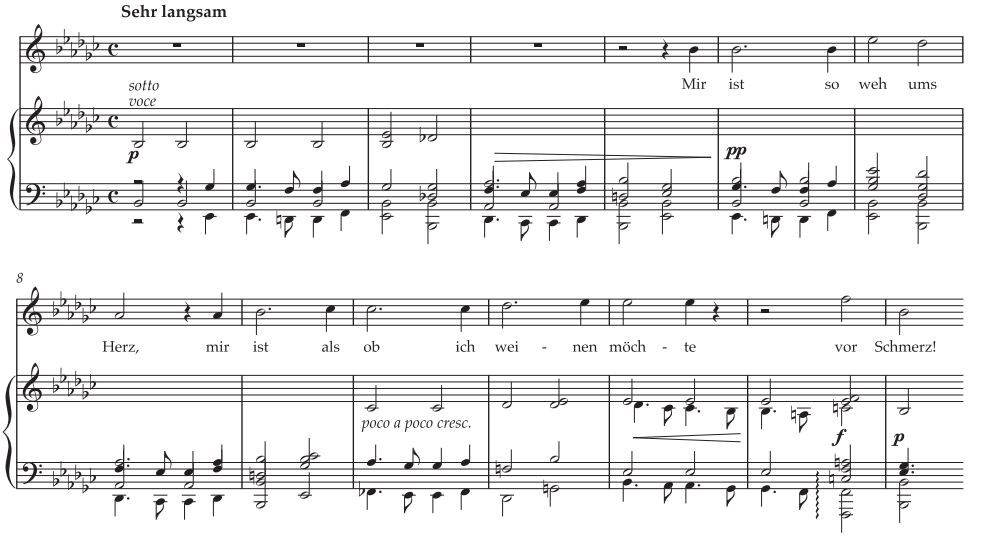
By the mid-nineteenth century, a sort of 'critical mass' of previous usage allows the association between E♭ minor and melancholy to continue without need for further commentary or reference to anything except the model of previous works and, occasionally, Schubart's statement. Even as unusual keys prevail more widely, equal temperament is approached, and many keys lose their traditional associations, E♭ minor continues to represent deep melancholy in text-associated works after 1850, often in those of a spiritual or supernatural, though not specifically religious, turn. An example is Schumann's overture to *Manfred*. The text by Lord Byron involves calling on the spirit world, self-exile, and suicidal impulses, and invites the E♭ minor of the introduction. Deep melancholy is also conveyed by Schumann's 'Ich hab' im Traum geweinet', no. 13 from the op. 48 *Dichterliebe*, with a funereal rhythm and an unaccompanied opening (Example 18). Brahms's 'Schwermut' (Example 19) also seems to be a most apposite example, with clear 'ghost-speak' or repeated note, narrow-ranged melodies, expressing the speaker's constricted focus and ebbing life.

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Example 18. Robert Schumann, 'Ich hab' im Traum geweinet', *Dichterliebe*, op. 48 no. 13 (1840), bars 1–6. [I wept while dreaming; I dreamed you lay in the grave.]



Example 19. Brahms, 'Schwermut', op. 58 no. 5 (1871), bars 1–14. [My heart weighs so heavily, it seems to me that I want to weep for pain!]



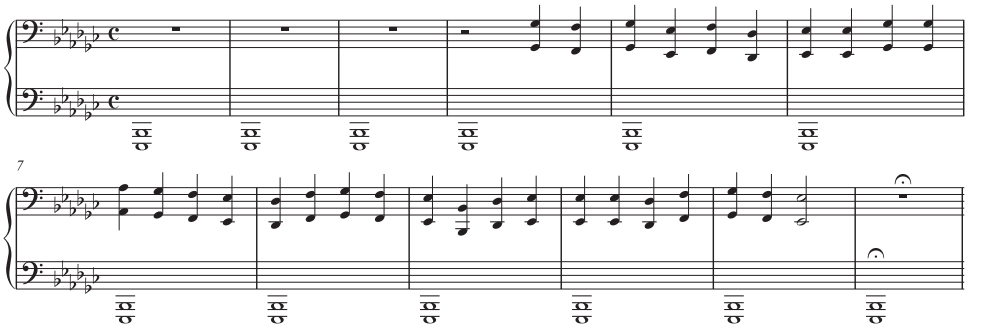
Brahms's 'Steig auf, geliebter Schatten', op. 94 no. 2, combines *ombra* (to call on spirits) with lonely abandonment.[80]

The melancholy associations of E♭ minor can be applied to hermeneutic analysis of the modulatory schemes of late-Romantic works. Gustav Mahler's 'Ich hab' ein glühend Messer' from *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* [*Songs of a Wayfarer*] employs progressive tonality, beginning in D minor but ratcheting up to E♭ minor to conclude with the line 'Ich wollt', ich läg auf der schwarzen Bahr', Könnt' nimmer, nimmer die Augen aufmachen!' ['Would that I lay on the black bier, that I could never, never more open my eyes!'] — thus simultaneously becoming more intense and more associated

[80] Mies, *Der Charakter der Tonarten*, p. 136, notes that Brahms uses E♭ minor 'strikingly often', and that his use suggests it was the key of 'highest sadness and melancholy' and indeed of 'the broken heart'.

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Example 20. Charles-Valentin Alkan, *Trois morceaux dans le genre pathétique*, op. 15 no. 3, 'Morte' (1837), bars 1–12.



with death and suicide. Wagner's *Ring* operas are clearly sensitive to key associations, and the segments in Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* identified by Alfred Lorenz as dominated by E♭ minor show the key used both as a darkened version of E♭ major and as a foil to C major.[81]

A number of intertextual examples involving E♭ minor and melancholy also cite the Dies irae from the Requiem mass. The Brahms Intermezzo, op. 118 no. 6 (1893), which famously quotes a highly altered version of the Dies irae, also uses the tempo indication 'Largo e mesto', associated with deep melancholy since Beethoven's use of the indication in his op. 10 no. 3 sonata. Charles-Valentin Alkan used the Dies irae more explicitly in *Trois morceaux dans le genre pathétique*, op. 15 no. 3, 'Morte' (1837) (Example 20), stating a lengthy portion of the theme in empty octaves in E♭ minor over an E♭/B♭ pedal.[82] The use of E♭ minor for the Dies irae is clearly a deliberate melancholy choice, as D minor would seem to be the default (the original chant is in the Dorian mode) and Berlioz's prototypical *Symphonie fantastique* quotation is in C minor.
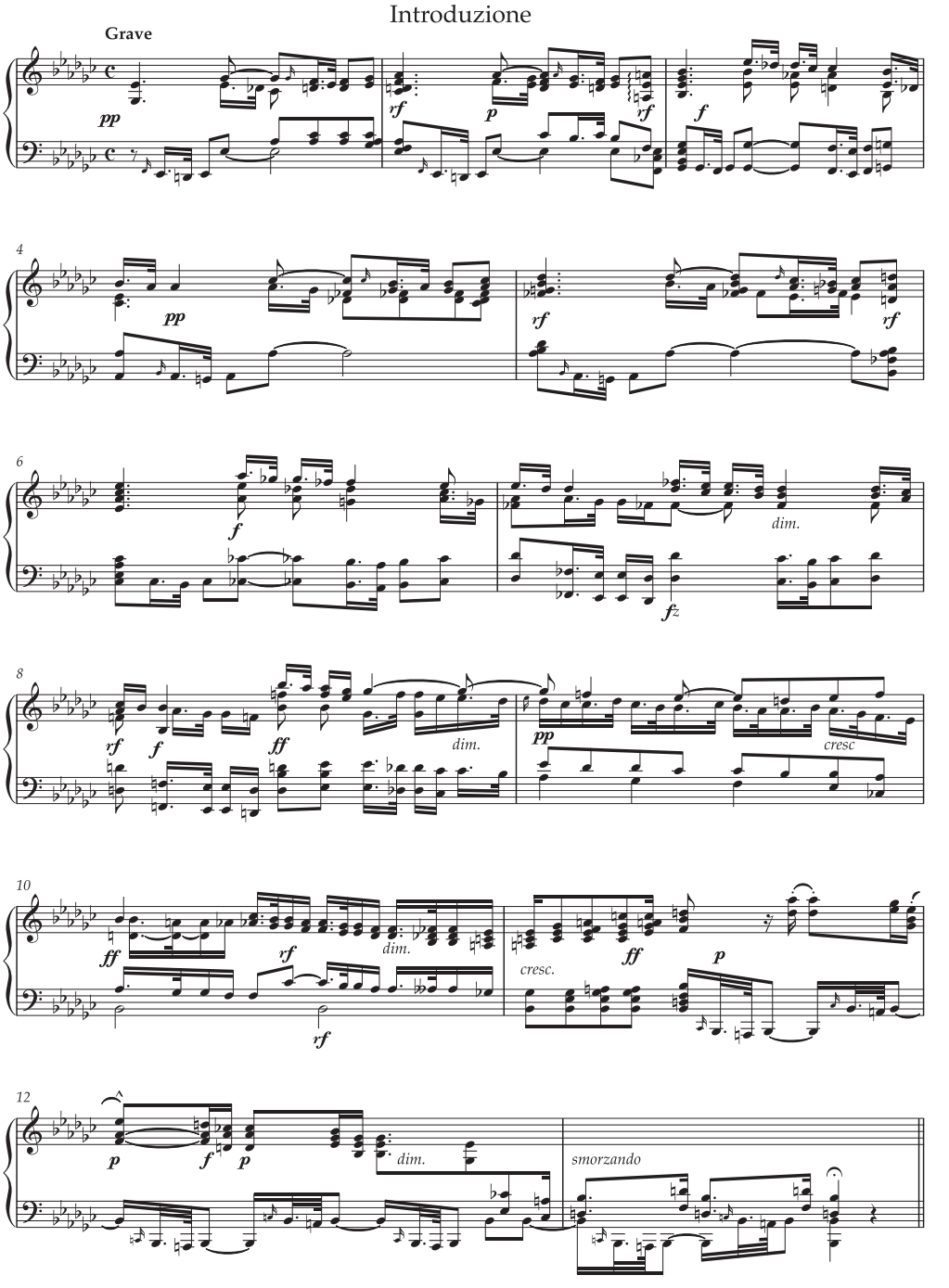
Whether E♭ minor implies melancholy in instrumental works with few or no intertextual references is an open question. Some of these instrumental pieces have associations with melancholy that strongly depend on biographical details for substantiation: for instance, Dussek's Sonata in E♭, 'The Farewell' (from 1800, titled by the composer), has a minor-mode introduction meant to convey melancholy on leaving his friend Clementi (Example 21). Yet there is musical substantiation as well; the E♭ minor in Dussek's sonata is in a *Grave* introduction similar to that of Beethoven's op. 13 Sonata 'Pathétique' of two years earlier (and, completing the circle, E♭ minor is briefly touched on via inflection from E♭ major in movement 1 of Beethoven's own farewell sonata, 'Les Adieux', op. 81a (1809–10)). Similarly, Brahms's op. 40 Horn Trio (with

[81] Alfred Lorenz identifies three periods as being in E♭ minor: the 'Nornenszene', 'Hagenwacht', and 'Brünnhilde schreit ihre Schmach in alle Winde'; *Das Geheimnis der Form bei Richard Wagner*, 2nd edn, 4 vols (Hans Schneider, 1966), I, pp. 40–44.

[82] Alkan's is an early example of Dies irae use, before Liszt began working on the *Totentanz* in 1838; it seems to refer to Berlioz's seminal use of the Dies irae to signify the demonic in the *Symphonie fantastique*, movement 5.

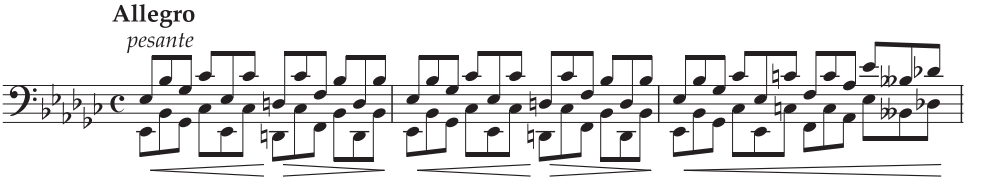
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Example 21. Dussek, Introduzione from *The Farewell: A New Grand Sonata*, op. 44 (1800), bars 1–13.



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Example 22. Chopin, Prelude in E♭ Minor, op. 28 no. 14 (1839), bars 1–3.



a slow movement in E♭ minor), from 1865, can be supposed to be related to the death of his mother in that year; the melancholia is musically substantiated by an 'Adagio mesto' indication, again casting back to Beethoven's melancholy 'Largo e mesto'.

Yet there may be additional reasons for choosing the key besides affect; for instance, cycles that employ every key, such as the *Well-Tempered Clavier* and Chopin's op. 28 Preludes, may do so merely to complete the cycle.[83] Nevertheless, both those examples demonstrate an affectively appropriate prelude in the key; Bach's (Example 2) has been cited as having 'the character of a Tombeau', and there is speculation that it is associated with the death of his first wife,[84] whereas Chopin's (Example 22) seems to express the same stormy impressions as Clara Schumann's and Loewe's sea-storm ballads, as it is entirely in low-register open octaves and with a roiling triplet perpetual motion.[85] Indeed, in *Der Charakter der Tonarten* (1948), Paul Mies analysed cycles of works in all the keys and identified two strains or 'root characters' in E♭ minor: one of deep melancholy and a second, more passionate strain which I would identify with the sea-storm influence, under which he classifies works of 'fast tempos, simple metre, and turbulent accompaniment', including Chopin's op. 28 Prelude but also works by Clementi, Stephen Heller ('Leidenschaftlich'), and Ignaz Moscheles ('Allegro agitato').[86] Many instrumental examples have the markings *agitato*, *appassionato*, or *leidenschaftlich*, all identifying them with Mies's 'impassioned' root character, if not explicitly the sea-storm character noted above.[87]

There may also be technical reasons for choosing E♭ minor from among the 'difficult' keys that supersede the affective ones. For a pianist, the number of black keys employed in this tonality might even be an asset in virtuosic pieces, as being somewhat easier to play than a more even mix of black and white keys; this may account for many quick-tempo piano pieces such as Rachmaninoff's Prelude, op. 23 no. 9 (1901), his *Moments musicaux*,

[83] Macdonald notes a number of studies in all keys besides Chopin's op. 28, such as those by Hummel, Kalkbrenner, Henselt, and Alkan; '[G-Flat Major]', p. 225.

[84] Ellison, *The Key to Beethoven*, p. 145, citing David Ledbetter, *Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier: The 48 Preludes and Fugues* (Yale University Press, 2002), p. 178.
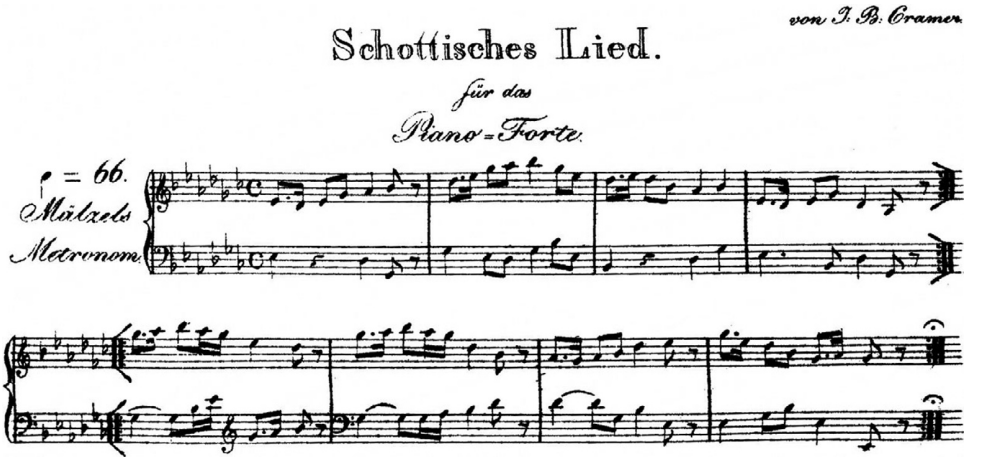
[85] Moreover, as Jeffrey Kallberg notes, Chopin associated the low register with E♭ minor in general, and his earlier sketch for the work might have considered a 'devil's trill' conceit which the dark E♭-minor key would support; see 'Chopin and the Aesthetic of the Sketch: A New Prelude in E♭ Minor?', *Early Music*, 29.3 (2001), pp. 408–22 (pp. 413 and 418), doi:10.1093/earlyj/XXIX.3.408.

[86] Mies, *Der Charakter der Tonarten*, p. 135. Clementi, 'Exercice: Vivace' (1814), *Préludes et exercices dans tous les tons majeurs et mineurs*; Stephen Heller, 24 Präludien, op. 81 no. 14, 'Leidenschaftlich' (1853); Ignaz Moscheles, 24 Études, op. 70 no. 8, 'Allegro agitato' (étude on octave passages) (1826).

[87] E.g. Henselt, *Douze études caractéristiques*, op. 2 no. 8, 'Allegro agitato ed appassionato' (1838); Brahms, Clarinet Sonata, op. 120 no. 2, movement 2, 'Allegro appassionato' (1894).

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Example 23. Cramer, *Schottisches Lied* (1818), published in *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung, mit besonderer Rücksicht auf den österreichischen Kaiserstaat*, 2.5, Beylage no. 1. ANNO/ Österreichische Nationalbibliothek.



op. 16 no. 2 (1896), and Brahms's op. 4 Scherzo (1851).[88] Ease of playing and of reading is as important as affective association in choosing E♭ minor with respect to its enharmonic equivalent, as aforementioned. Certainly pentatonic keyboard pieces are easy to play in E♭ minor; a story was circulated by Robert Burns that a non-musician had composed the pentatonic tune 'Ye Banks and Braes of Bonny Doon' simply by keeping to the black keys of the harpsichord.[89] This seems to make Johann Baptist Cramer's *Schottisches Lied* (Example 23), printed in Vienna in 1818, less a deliberate invocation of Scotland or exoticism via E♭ minor than, perhaps, an experiment in black-key pentatonicism, though it may have been received in Vienna as appropriate for either reason.[90]

A few examples do have an intertextual association that indicates a possible exotic function for E♭ minor. The overture to Spohr's *Jessonda* from 1823 has both a clearly funereal and a slightly exotic interpretation of the key, appropriate to the setting of an Indian funeral. Schubert's 'Klage um Ali Bey' has exotic features such as accented 'drone'

[88] In jazz, the use of E♭ minor for works like Dave Brubeck's 'Take Five' and Thelonious Monk's 'Round Midnight' suggests playability as a factor, in that a serviceable blues scale can be constructed based primarily on the black keys.

[89] Robert Burns to George Thomson (November 1794): '*Ye banks and braes o' bonie Doon* […] A good many years ago, Mr. James Miller […] expressed an ardent ambition to be able to compose a Scots air. Mr. Clarke, partly by way of joke, told him to keep to the black keys of the harpsichord, and preserve some kind of rhythm, and he would infallibly compose a Scots air. Certain it is, that in a few days, Mr. Miller produced the rudiments of an air, which Mr. Clarke, with some touches and corrections, fashioned into the tune in question. Ritson, you know, has the same story of the *Black keys*'; *The Works of Robert Burns*, 2nd edn, 4 vols (T. Cadell, 1801), IV, pp. 196–97.

[90] 'Schottisches Lied für das Piano=Forte [von J. B. Cramer]', in *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung, mit besonderer Rücksicht auf den österreichischen Kaiserstaat*, 2.5 (31 January 1818), Beylage No. 1.

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pitches; the key may be meant to amplify this association. It is unclear, however, whether the exotic association would be due to the rarity of the key or due to the connection with black-key pentatonicism, as with the *Schottisches Lied*.[91] Though *Jessonda* and 'Klage um Ali Bey' are also examples of melancholy, there are untexted examples, such as Dvořák's *Humoresque*, op. 101 no. 1 (1894), that seem to retain the slightly exotic flavour without any obvious association to melancholy themes.

The Romantic trend for unusual keys, noted by Macdonald in '[G-Flat Major]', may also be responsible for a number of late nineteenth-century instrumental works in E♭ minor (particularly for piano) that have no apparent or particular reference to melancholy. Nevertheless, strongly appropriate instances of the key still occur as long as keys are used at all; Shostakovich's last string quartet in 1974 (no. 15, op. 147) in E♭ minor has six movements, all adagio, including an Elegy, a Nocturne, and a Funeral March; Prokofiev's Symphony no. 6, op. 111 (1945–47), is meant to be a postwar elegy. Arnold Bax said about his E♭-minor work *The Tale the Pine-Trees Knew* (1931) that 'I was thinking of […] Norway and the West of Scotland […], of the Norse sagas and of the wild traditional legends of the Highland Celt'.[92]

***

Given the strong association shown in texted examples, the employment of E♭ minor, even in the absence of other signals of style or programmatic intent, should generally be considered a marker of melancholy throughout the common-practice tonal period. The early use of E♭ major and its parallel minor for *ombra* scenes, the influence of Schubart's description, and the perpetuation of these influences in works like Beethoven's oratorio demonstrate a distinct subtopic focused on death and *ombra*, whereas a tendency towards representation of the sea storm seems influenced by a connection between northernness, *Sturm und Drang*, and melancholy. Despite prominent and influential statements and repertory, however, the feature most responsible for the continuity of this key's symbolism may be one anybody could observe: its symbolic placement as the polar opposite of simple, cheerful C major.

[91] G♭ major seems to have no such association; Schubert, apparently, uses it to communicate 'rest' or 'death', and its other uses have been enumerated by Hugh Macdonald in '[G-Flat Major]'.

[92] Arnold Bax programme note (12 April 1934), cited in Lewis Foreman, *Bax: A Composer and his Times*, 2nd edn (Scolar Press, 1988), p. 278. Other twentieth-century works in E♭ minor include Horatio Parker's Organ Concerto, op. 55 (1902); D'Indy's *Souvenir*, op. 68 no. 6 (1911); Rachmaninoff's *Études-tableaux*, op. 33 nos. 5–6 (1911) and op. 39 no. 5 (1916–17); Oskar Böhme's Trumpet Sextet, op. 30 (1913); passages in Sibelius's Symphony no. 5 (1915); Healey Willan's Introduction, Passacaglia, and Fugue for Organ, op. 149 (1916); the first movement of Bax's Symphony no. 1 (1922); Nikolai Myaskovsky's Symphony no. 6, op. 23 (1922–23); Khachaturian's Toccata in E♭ Minor (1932); Maurice Duruflé's Prelude from the Suite, op. 5 (1933), which evokes the Dies irae; Janis Ivanov's Symphony no. 4, 'Sinfonia Atlantida' (1941); and Andrei Eshpai's Symphony no. 1 (1959).

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APPENDIX: TEXT-ASSOCIATED WORKS INVOLVING E♭ MINOR

Composed [published]	*Composer, Work, Location of Key*	*Associated Text Elements*
1741	Jommelli, *Andromaca*, Act II, Scene 15	*Ombra* scene, ghost of Pyrrhus
1755	Graun, *Der Tod Jesu* 'Nun klingen Waffen', bars 30–32 'Ihr weichgeschaffnen Seelen', bars 15–17	e♭: Peter 'weinet bitterlich' [weeps bitterly] e♭: text-painting on 'Schmerz' [pain]
1762	Gluck, *Orfeo ed Euridice*, Act II, Scene 1	e♭: 'Misero giovane' [chorus of Furies: Miserable youth]
1763	Traetta, *Ifigenia in Tauride*, Act II, Scene 1, 'Dormi Oreste', bars 19–26	e♭: 'L'ombra mesta sdegnosa' [chorus of Furies: The sad neglected shade]
1766	Philidor, *Tom Jones*, Act III, Scene 18	g ⇒ e♭: *ombra* scene
1770	Mozart, *Mitridate, re di Ponto*, Act III, Scene 4, bars 60–72	e♭: 'Pallid' ombre' [pale shades]
1775	Benda, *Medea*, bars 563–67	e♭: 'Fern von euch werd' ich sterben' [Far from you will I die]
1777–78	Nicolai, 'Eyn klegliche Mordgeschichte, von ey'n Herrn, der wz tot'	'seer kleglich unndt stönend' [very pitiful and moaning]
1780	Piccinni, *Atys*, Act III, Scene 8	e♭: 'O spectacle funeste' [lament]
1784	Paisiello, *Il re Teodoro in Venezia*, Act II, Scene 12, 'Sogno di Teodoro'	*Ombra* scene, e♭ after 'spettro terribile' [terrifying spectre]
1785	Eilenstein, 'Todesgedanken'	'Thoughts of death'
1787	Gazzaniga, *Don Giovanni*, Scene 24	*ombra* scene
1790	Beethoven, *Cantata auf den Tod Kaiser Joseph des Zweiten*, movement 1, bars 84–89	e♭: '[Joseph] ist todt! [Joseph is dead!]
1793	Zumsteeg, 'Colma: Ein Gesang Ossians', bars 392–408	e♭: 'Kalt wie die Erde ist ihr Busen' [Cold are their breasts of clay]
1796	Haydn, *Heiligmesse* in B♭, Hob. XXII/10	e♭: 'Crucifixus'
1798	Haydn, *The Creation*; Prelude bars 34–36 II. 28 'Zu dir, o Herr, blickt alles auf'	Part of 'Representation of Chaos' e♭: 'Du wendest ab dein Angesicht' [You [the Lord] turn away your face (striking us with mortal terror)]
1798	Kozłowski, Requiem in E♭ Minor	Requiem aeternam movements
1798	Zumsteeg, 'Lenore', bars 585–94, 940–50	e♭: 'Läßt uns den Leib begraben! [Let us bury the corpse!] e♭: Concluding chorus of ghosts
1800	Dussek, Sonata in E♭, 'Introduzione', bars 1–13	Titled 'The Farewell', marked *Grave*
1800	Zumsteeg, 'Richard und Mathilde', bars 107–15	e♭: Mathilde threatens that her ghost will haunt her former lover and then dies
1801	Haydn, *The Seasons*, Winter, 38: Aria, 'Erblicke hier, betörter Mensch', bars 29–97, passim	Winter reflections on death: e♭: 'Where are they now, your lofty plans'

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(cont.)

Composed [published]	*Composer, Work, Location of Key*	*Associated Text Elements*
1801	Tomášek, 'Lenore', op. 12	e♭: opening overture
1803/4 [1811]	Beethoven, *Christus am Ölberge*, Introduzione	Anxiety of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane
1808	Cherubini, Requiem in C Minor, Offertorium	e♭: 'De poenis inferni' [pains of hell]
1812	Zelter, 'Die Braut am Gestade'	[Newlyweds drowning in a sea storm]
1813	Schubert, *Eine kleine Trauermusik*, D. 79	Funeral music, *Grave con espressione*
1815	Schubert, 'Luisens Antwort', D. 319, bars 15–22	b♭ ⇒ e♭: 'Gestorben allen Freuden, leb' ich fortan den Leiden' ['All joys are dead; henceforth I live in suffering.']
1816	Schubert, 'Am Grabe Anselmos', D. 504a–b	[Graveside lament]
1816	Schubert, 'Klage um Ali Bey', D. 496a	[Lamenting an Egyptian revolutionary hero]
1818	Cramer, *Schottisches Lied*	Imitation Scottish song
1818 [1824]	Loewe, 'Edward', op. 1	Scottish ballad; theme of patricide and exile
1818 [1842]	Schubert, 'Blondel zu Marien', D. 626	e♭: 'In düstrer Nacht' [In gloomy night]
1819 [1842]	Schubert, 'Bertas Lied in der Nacht', D. 653	e♭: 'Nacht umhüllt mit wehendem Flügel' [Night veils with drifting wings]
1823	Berlioz, 'Le Montagnard exilé: Chant élégaique'	e♭: 'Ainsi Mandel, loin de la rive où coulèrent ses premiers jours, soupirait romance plaintive' [Thus Mandel, in exile from his native land, sighs his plaintive romance]
1823	Spohr, *Jessonda* Overture, WoO 53, introduction	Funeral of a rajah
1827	Schubert, 'Die Post', *Winterreise*, D. 915/13	Major context turns to minor when the post bears no letter from the absent beloved
1828	Schubert, 'Geistes-Gruß', D. 142 version a	A ghost on a tower greets a passing ship with memories of his lost strength
1829 [1890]	Berlioz, *La Mort de Cléopâtre*, H. 36, bars 151–66	e♭: 'Grands Pharaons…', Cleopatra's request to the dead to enter their realm; *ombra* style
1837	Alkan, *Trois morceaux dans le genre pathétique*, op. 15 no. 3, Morte [Death]	Dies irae reference
1838	Henselt, *Douze études caractéristiques*, op. 2 no. 8, [Allegro agitato ed appassionato]	Motto: 'Tu m'attires, m'entraînes, m'engloutis!' [You entice me, ensnare me, engulf me!]
1840	C. Schumann, 'Am Strande' (R. Burns)	'Musing on the roaring ocean'; absent beloved

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(cont.)

Composed [published]	*Composer, Work, Location of Key*	*Associated Text Elements*
1840	R. Schumann, 'Ich hab' im Traum geweinet', *Dichterliebe*, op. 48 no. 13	'I wept while dreaming'; absent beloved
1840	R. Schumann, 'Lust der Sturmnacht', *12 Gedichte von Justinius Kerner*, op. 35 no. 1	Desire for a stormy night
1844	Loewe, 'Gruß vom Meere', op. 103	Dark, black, crashing sea; absent beloved
1847	Alkan, 'Chanson de la folle au bord de la mer', op. 31 no. 8	Low register; 'waves'; major/minor alternation conveying instability; hints of suicide
1848	Loewe, 'Der gefangene Admiral', op. 115	Imprisoned admiral mourns the sea's absence
1848–49 [1853]	R. Schumann, *Manfred* Overture, op. 115 (Byron)	Invocation of supernatural, themes of suicide/alienation; *im leidenschaftlichen tempo*
1853	Brahms, 'Liebestreue', op. 3 no. 1	Sea-storm imagery mirroring internal turmoil
1856–58	Berlioz, *Les Troyens* [Cassandra's prophecy], no. 10 (Act I) [Dido's speech], no. 19 (Act III) [Dido's lament], no. 47 (Act V, Scene 2)	e♭: [Allegro assai agitato] 'Non, je ne verrai pas' [Cassandra's prophetic misgivings] e♭: Air: 'Chers Tyriens' e♭: 'Je vais mourir' [Dido's lament]
1862	Brahms, 'Marias Kirchgang', op. 22 no. 2	Sea, heartbreak imagery; religious solemnity
1863	Bizet, *Les Pêcheurs de perles*, Act III, Scene 2	e♭: Heroine fears for her lover and asks for him to be spared so that she can die bravely
1864	Brahms, 'Wie bist du, meine Königin', op. 32 no. 9	e♭: 'Durch tote Wüsten wandle hin' [Through dead wastes I wander]
1871	Brahms, 'Schwermut', op. 58 no. 5	'Melancholy': world-weary, anticipating death
1874	Musorgsky, *Pictures at an Exhibition*, 'Gnomus'	Low register, grotesque
1876	Wagner, *Götterdämmerung*, Prologue Act I, Scene 2, bars 539–92 Act II, Scene 4, bars 1010–38	e♭: The World-Ash Tree and its withering e♭: Hagen's Watch [also contrasts C major] e♭: Brunnhilde names Siegfried traitor
1880	Bruch, *Scottish Fantasy*, op. 46, introduction	Ossianic melancholy
[1880]	Rheinberger, Organ Sonata, op. 119, movement 3	Marcia religiosa, Dies irae reference
1882	Wagner, *Parsifal*, Act II, bars 123–36	Kundry summoned [*ombra* scene]
1883	Brahms, 'Steig auf', geliebter Schatten', op. 94 no. 2	'Rise, beloved shade, before me in the dead night'

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(cont.)

Composed [published]	*Composer, Work, Location of Key*	*Associated Text Elements*
1883–85 [1896]	G. Mahler, 'Ich hab' ein glühend Messer', *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* no. 3	e♭: 'Ich wollt', ich läg auf der schwarzen Bahr', Könnt' nimmer, nimmer die Augen aufmachen!' [Would that I lay on the black bier, that I could never, never wake!]
1884 [1902]	Duparc, 'La Vie antérieure' (Baudelaire)	Conclusion of lost youth; exotic text elements
1885	Bordier, *Un Rêve d'Ossian*, bars 267–70	e♭: 'he will awake our ghosts; he will say what gravestones cover these remnants?'
1892	Fauré, 'Prison', op. 83 no. 1 (Verlaine)	Concluding theme of weeping and lost youth
1906–07	G. Mahler, Symphony no. 8 (Schlußszene aus *Faust*)	e♭: intro, closely pressing rocks, forests, waves; Pater profundis: rocky abysses, torrents
1913	E. Smyth, 'Before the Squall', *Three Moods of the Sea*, no. 2, bars 63–68	e♭: 'and drifts to death among the dusty sand'

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