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Reflections Inspired by a Response

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Let me begin by thanking Dr Lorraine Byrne Bodley for her extensive response to my 'Surfeit of Musics' essay.[1] Her scholarly expertise in both Goethe and Schubert, coupled with her own sensitive interpretation of Goethe's poems and Schubert's settings, are causes for celebration. Her splendid defence of the one setting that I criticized, Schubert's later version of 'Wandrers Nachtlied', is supported by her equally splendid defence of Goethe's attitude toward musical settings, documenting his own, rather extensive knowledge of music. Indeed, I was not surprised to learn that 'Erster Verlust' was conceived as lyrics for a song, since it has the clear metric scanning that apparently Goethe found best suited to his poetry intended for musical setting. And as I noted, Schubert not only captures much of Goethe's poetic music but also enhances, through the resources of musical composition, the poem's range of meaning.

I was very surprised, on the other hand, to learn that Goethe might have at one time considered *Gehalt* (translatable verbal meaning) of greater importance than *Gestalt* (the poetic form and hence vehicle for that meaning), which, as Byrne Bodley observes, would appear to place his aesthetic closer to Schoenberg's (at least with respect to Schoenberg's claim about the essential meaning of a poem, which he grasped from a setting of Schubert's without knowing the words).[2] Although Goethe's 'formative and beneficial' portion of a poem (by which he appears to mean its ethical, philosophical or moral aspect) may well be found in such a translatable 'message', his poetry both exemplifies and develops what it already suggests in the realm of meaning through every aspect of what I call its

[1] See Robert Hatten, 'A Surfeit of Musics: What Goethe's Lyrics Concede When Set to Schubert's Music', *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 5 (2008): 7–18.

[2] In personal correspondence, Dr Byrne Bodley kindly shared with me another quote, from Goethe's letter to Zelter on 2 May 1820, that sheds further light on his aesthetic reasoning:

> Die reinste und höchste Malerei in der Musik is die, welche Du auch ausübst, es kommt darauf an, den Hörer in die Stimmung zu versetzen, welche das Gedicht angibt, in der Einbildungskraft bilden sich alsdann die Gestalten nach Anlaß des Textes, sie weiß nicht wie sie darzu kommt.
>
> [The purest and highest style of word painting in music is that which you yourself also practice; the object is to transport the listener into that frame of mind which the poem itself suggests; the imagination will then form pictures from the text without knowing how it arrives at them.]

(Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke 20.1, Briefwechsel mit Zelter 1799–1827*, ed. Edith Zehm (Munich and Vienna: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1991), 599. Translation by Lorraine Byrne Bodley in *Goethe and Zelter: Musical Dialogues* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 266.) *Stimmung* (not simply a characteristic mood, as often translated, but more akin to the meaningful spirit of a poem) is justifiably defended here by Goethe as more important than mere word-painting; I would simply add that listening to a poem's own music may guide a composer in finding a *Stimmung* that more closely captures its emergent poetic meaning.

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'poetic music'.[3] As a poet myself, I find it curious that Goethe in this instance appears not to recognize the inseparability of *Gehalt* from *Gestalt*. I would counter that the full meaning of a poem cannot simply be extracted from its poetic incarnation, which suggests realms of connotations and exemplifications that far exceed the literal semantic meanings of words and phrases. As stated most extravagantly in the final lines of Archibald MacLeish's *Ars Poetica*, 'A poem should not mean/But be', modern poetic practice and criticism speak to the utter inseparability of form and content.[4] When, in reading aloud the line 'Die Vöglein schweigen im Walde', I experience 'both acceleration and decrescendo, exemplifying the settling down of the birds in the trees',[5] this is an effect that exceeds or enhances the literal meaning of the words. And although Schubert brilliantly captures a certain rustling agitation in his setting, as I noted, I still miss the laconic dissolution of this 'sentence sound' (to borrow Robert Frost's concept) and its intonational miming of birds settling into silence.[6]

The ending of the song, where I criticized Schubert's 'too comfortably pat' 'moral reassurance',[7] is even more dissonant to the poetic *Gehalt* that I interpret from the poetic *Gestalt*, in which 'Ruh' is an 'unconsummated symbol' (to adapt Susanne Langer's term) that does not simply translate as 'rest' or (allegorically) as 'death' but glows with a numinous sense that Byrne Bodley beautifully captures in her description, and that Schubert, for my ear, fails to achieve in this instance.[8]

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[3] Quoted excerpts are from a passage in *Dichtung und Wahrheit,* III/2, HA 9: 493, as translated and cited by Byrne Bodley in her response (see her article in this issue, pp. 15–6).

[4] MacLeish's poem first appeared in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* (June 1926): 126–7. Among twentieth-century critics, John Ciardi most elegantly addresses this issue: 'WHAT DOES THE POEM MEAN? is too often a self-destroying approach to poetry. A more useful way of asking the question is HOW DOES A POEM MEAN? Why does it build itself into a form out of images, ideas, rhythms? How do these elements become the meaning? How are they inseparable from the meaning? As Yeats wrote: 'O body swayed to music, o quickening glance,/How shall I tell the dancer from the dance?' What the poem is, is inseparable from its own performance of itself'. John Ciardi, *How Does a Poem Mean?* (*An Introduction to Literature*, Part 3), (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), 667–8.

Robert Frost spoke about his discovery of this inseparability in relation to the first poem he published: 'I can remember in that poem the first sense I had of the nicety of the words – that nobody else – that I couldn't myself say differently. That is to say, I couldn't translate it even into other English'. Excerpt from a lecture in Hanover, New Hampshire, December 15, 1954, in *Robert Frost Speaking on Campus: Excerpts from His Talks, 1949–1962*, ed. Edward C. Lathem (New York: Norton, 2009), 57.

[5] Hatten, 'A Surfeit of Musics', 10.

[6] Robert Frost's concept of 'sentence sounds', developed in his letters early in his career, refers to the characteristic gestures of vocal intonation that accompany familiar phrases of spoken language. See John F. Sears, 'Robert Frost and the Imagists: The Background of Frost's "Sentence Sounds"', *The New England Quarterly*, 54 (1981), 467. These characteristic tones or intonations provide a supplement or at times a substitute for metric schemes of scansion. Sentence sounds (in this sense) have enlivened spoken verse from at least the time of Shakespeare.

[7] Hatten, 'A Surfeit of Musics', 10.

[8] Langer's first presentation of the 'unconsummated symbol' appears in section VIII of *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942): 204–45, where she also argues that the presentational symbol (as opposed to the discursive symbol) cannot be translated, and that form and content in music are inseparably experienced as one. See also *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from* Philosophy in a New Key (New York: Scribner's, 1953).

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I should be clear that I don't blame the failure on repetition alone, which I perhaps unfairly implied in my essay. Schubert has exquisitely plumbed the mysteries and resonances of repetition in many a trance-like passage from his music. The last song of *Winterreise* is a wonderful example, and one that is so remarkable as to undermine (for me) any assurance that the ending of 'Wandrers Nachtlied' represents Schubert's best compositional choice. It is his particular harmonic setting of 'ruhest du auch' that most grates against Goethe's poetic music in my ear, since Goethe's laconic ending already reverberates without the reassurances so heavily overlaid in Schubert's harmonic ending. Although his use of a particular yielding chromatic reversal that I have associated with resignation and even abnegation in analyses of Beethoven would seem highly appropriate to the *Gehalt*, its assurance in this context appears to undermine, by offering too specific an orientation toward spiritual consolation, that more resonant profundity I hear at the end of Goethe's poem.[9]

I suspect I will not have convinced those many scholars and performers (cited by Byrne Bodley) who love Schubert's beautiful setting that Goethe's even more remarkable poem suffers from its transmedialization in this way.[10] Indeed, Schubert's interpretation is consistent and beautiful on its own terms, capturing a particular *Stimmung* that emphasizes the 'peacefulness' with which the poem is infused, as Byrne Bodley's interpretation so aptly conveys. Whatever one might conclude in this case, however, my larger argument is that interpretation should begin with the poem, and its own music, before analysis and subsequent critical evaluation of any composer's given setting. I retract my implication that Goethe must have been as critical of Schubert's later setting of 'Wandrers Nachtlied'; however, despite the documentary evidence of his general aesthetic, we can never know for sure whether he would have found Schubert's version as congenial as he might well have found the much earlier setting of 'Erster Verlust', a poem conceived with musical transmedialization in mind.

I should also acknowledge that I am hearing Goethe's unusual 'Wandrers Nachtlied' with the benefit of later poetic sensibilities – those associated with

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[9] See Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 18, 56–63, and 96, for various forms and interpretations of this chromatic reversal, as used in different contexts.

[10] By transmedialization, I refer to the artistic transfer of a poetic text from its original media (as visually read or verbally spoken) to a recontextualization within the divergent media of composed vocal and instrumental music. To the extent a composer wishes to preserve significant features of the original poetic music, its form, and its expressive meaning, the composer could be understood as 'translating' the poem into musical terms, or more extremely, as creating an *ekphrasis* or secondary representation of the poem. For more on the complexities of transmedialization and ekphrasis, see Siglind Bruhn, *Musical Ekphrasis: Composers Responding to Poetry and Painting* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon, 2000).

For more on the variety of potential interactions among different artistic media in a given work (including those works originally conceived as multimedial) see Nicholas Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). His perspective highlights difference and contrast between media, and he values interactions that move beyond (mere) *conformance* to more interesting kinds of *complementation* and *contest* (98–106). For Cook, 'contest' is more characteristic of the relationship between text and music in classical art song (104); these composers presumably look for poetic texts that are sufficiently 'gapped' as to provide room for music (105). Needless to say, my perspective on 'Wandrers Nachtlied' would suggest Goethe's poem is not sufficiently gapped in Cook's sense.

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modernist poetry, where strict formalisms of metre and rhyme are superseded by variable line lengths and irregular rhyme placement. The far different pacing created by this freer approach to rhythm and metre would lead in turn to an even more flexible mode of musical text-setting, as pioneered by Mussorgsky, Debussy and Janáček, to name but a few. My more modernist interpretation of a much earlier literary work is not unprecedented, nor need it be viewed as anachronistic. Büchner's *Woyzeck* (1836), a play left incomplete at his death in 1837, appears so modernist in its structure and consequent 'meaning' that only a century later would a musical language emerge in which Berg could do justice to its more cinematic form and expressionistic subject matter in an operatic setting (although with clear liberties in scene selection, abbreviation and order). Indeed, it was only later in the nineteenth century that *Woyzeck* was first produced as a play.

I deeply appreciate Byrne Bodley's clarifications of Goethe's aesthetic positions and musical acumen, and I will thus refrain from assuming to do more than speak from my own perspective as a poet in defending his poetry. My theoretical analyses of Schubert's settings may also lead me to alternative critical stances, but they can provide rather explicit means of demonstrating to what extent Schubert has found equivalents for, or enhancements of, the poetic music and emergent meaning found in these poems, prior to any evaluation of these findings. As I noted with respect to setting my own poetry (as opposed to my lyrics conceived for musical setting as opera librettos), I personally feel a deep sense of conflict, knowing that with any musical setting some of the complex music I have already composed into the patterning of verbal sounds will inevitably be lost. Douglas Hofstadter's *Le Ton beau de Marot* is a fascinating study of this problem from the standpoint of poetic translation from one language to another.[11] Hofstadter elegantly demonstrates how translators focus to varying degrees on formal, sonic or semantic equivalences, but also how capturing everything is impossible (reminding us of the venerable Italian motto, *Traduttore, traditore*, or 'translator, traitor').

I am grateful that Dr Byrne Bodley has found interest in my readings of Schubert's two settings, and I find hers equally compelling in their own right. Clearly, we find much to value in these songs from our distinct perspectives. Just as composers continue to return to the poetry, scholars will continue to be drawn to both poetry and song in a quest to understand them more deeply. May that pursuit always be enhanced by our recognition of the surfeit of music that is already to be found in poems with such individual music already built in. And may we also appreciate the difficulty inherent in composing any setting, given the potential loss of poetic music (and the poem's already emergent meaning) as a result of that appropriation.

[11] The complete title is *Le Ton beau de Marot: In Praise of the Music of Language* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

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