CrossMark

Nineteenth-Century Music Review, 13 (2016), pp 103–104. © Cambridge University Press, 2016
doi:10.1017/S1479409815000543
First published online 28 March 2016

Response to James Sobaskie

Susan Youens
University of Notre Dame
syouens@nd.edu

'Print is forever', a favourite colleague of mine said to me once when I was making the first tentative steps towards publication of my neophyte efforts. He meant it to be reassuring to someone who had to revise and rewrite and revise again and again: 'Those efforts will be worth it', in effect. But I had no real idea – how could I? – of what his words would come to mean. It is always a daunting experience for anyone in the white-haired set to which I now belong to revisit earlier writings in light of ongoing scholarly changes; I am now old enough to have seen various trends come and go, leaving in each case some sort of marker, a difference in the way we think, whether or not we subscribe wholesale to the methodology or ideology of the day. When I was very young (apologies to A.A. Milne), it was, for example, frowned upon to draw overt connections between the composer's life and his or her art; sarcastic comments about links between Beethoven's breakfast on a given day and the start of work on the Ninth wafted one's way. The same colleague (who could, after all, have said, 'Print is ephemera – don't worry' with just as much validity) insisted that life and art are entirely separate quantities, and I, not adept at compartmentalization then or now, thought to myself, 'How does one *do* that? Is it even possible?' Of course, music has a purely abstract nature, in which the gravitational forces between tones and harmonies, the interplay of rhythmic patterns, the bending and shaping of formal structures, rule supreme, but it is also affected, and deeply, by life, culture and society. What James Sobaskie has done so well is add to my prior study the biographical component in which I have for many years now believed wholeheartedly to be relevant, and he has made clear the connective tissue between specific compositional choices and ongoing events in Schubert's life.

There is perhaps another way to put the relationship between these two songs in a life-based framework, one in which I am still drawn most strongly to the later song, for different reasons than those espoused in my earlier screed. Almost everyone has the experience of falling in love at an age when life is often at its most turbulent, often for vocational reasons, and its most idealistic, before love becomes a matter of real life, with as much prose as poetry. If the novelty of love is also fraught with uncertainties and doubts, there is a hefty component of pure sweetness, as anyone listening to Ferrando's 'Un'aura amorosa' in *Così*, act 1, can hear; whatever the risible foolishness of the quartet of young lovers, Mozart ensures that our sympathies for this fleeting, precious state are fully engaged and that we mourn when the soap-bubble illusions are smashed to bits by the end of this problem-comedy. In 'An die Geliebte', we hear a uniquely Schubertian lied version of first love, this in a genre whose larger, grander purpose is to delve into the human psyche; it seems like the essence of youthfulness in this instance to dispense with an introduction and plunge directly into the heart of the matter. Everything about the 'perfect page' that is 'An die Geliebte' bespeaks this fragile

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409815000543 Published online by Cambridge University Press

state of being on the cusp between love as something new, as it seems to have been with Schubert and Therese Grob, and love as something known, with all its complications and impossibilities. The lack of any rest in the vocal part until bar 16 and bar 20 is one such feature: the singer of course must and does breathe every fourth bar, but the breath must be snatched in passing in this near-seamless trance of love, filled with musical indices of expectation, as Professor Sobaskie has so aptly pointed out. For him, the triplet embellishments in the vocal line at the end of each stanza seem nonchalant but betray uncertainty; to me, these quasi-Italianate bubbles of lightness also tell us that genuine 'Schmerzen' of the sort that wound have not yet visited this protagonist, while the reverence of young love is capped off each time by that plagal gesture at the end, this in a song that begins as if in C major before wending its way slowly and gently to the G major home key.

By the time of 'An die Nachtigall', however, that moment has passed, and the new song built from the old is an exercise in the 'art of memory', one in which the former Song of Innocence has now become a Song of Experience. That memory *re-creates*, whether by cutting away youthful excess or by embellishing the original with the complications of adulthood, is something we all know, and know even more as we age. We cannot step into the same river twice, and Schubert seems to have realized this, as much else, preternaturally early in his life. What the older, wiser, inevitably more melancholy self can do is endow the memory and the artefact fashioned from it with bittersweet knowledge, the retrospective gaze different from the one immersed both in present delight and uncertainties about the future. The piano introduction to 'An die Nachtigall' always seems to me the herald of a new purpose for the song: to remember and, inevitably, to transform. And it has always seemed significant to me that this introduction is self-contained, with a definitive ending, and that it falls the length of a perfect octave, from the crystalline treble into the low bass. We traverse the experiential span from innocence to experience summed up in this instrumental passage before a word is sung, before we realize that adult Eros is present on the scene.

It is those elements of 'An die Nachtigall' added to those inherited from 'An die Geliebte' that I find most compelling. Claudius's and Schubert's woman retains a thoroughly adult capacity to recognize when she is most completely her own, apart from the lover, and to laugh, with both regret and perhaps a bit of self-mockery evident in the bird call figuration. In the fermata-prolonged silence, placed with melancholy irony just after the verb 'freu'n' in bar 29, she realizes that she treasures the chance to *be* herself *by* herself, and the realization impels the darkening move to poignant minor mode. And yet, Amor, both the lover sleeping beside her and Cupid himself, retains the power to inspire. At his very name, a twofold brightening and warmth ensue, first to the E-flat major singularity in the song – a tiny clarion call hailing an all-powerful god – and then back to G major. (This is the same key, one notes, as the Schubert-Schulze masterpiece, 'Im Frühling', whose ascending chromaticism-adorned postlude has always struck me as related in obverse fashion to the exquisite postlude of 'An die Nachtigall', with its descending chromatic passing tones. That song too is of love in a mood tinged with regret.) Whatever the sense of loss, the potential for grief in love now something known, Schubert insists upon acknowledgement of its beauty and importance. Sobaskie is right: this is not revision, as I wrongly characterized the relationship between the two songs when I was young, but something deeper. 'An die Nachtigall' is the conscious recollection both of an earlier state of being and the music born of it in order to re-fashion those strains to tell of a later stage of erotic experience. *Ars memoriae* from a 19 year-old: what a marvel.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409815000543 Published online by Cambridge University Press