

Schubert's Weaknesses as Strengths

A friend of mine, a 19th century scholar, once said that Romantics share all the same assumptions as their Enlightenment predecessors, only Romantics have a growing suspicion that they might be wrong about all of those assumptions. While we might be able to make expansions on my friend's axiom, we would not be able to make contractions on it. For, whatever else Romanticism is, it is agnostic. The facile dualisms of the 18th century begin to seem incomplete in the light of the Napoleonic conquests—and Schubert himself had to take cover while a schoolboy in Vienna when one of Napoleon's artillery shells dropped in the very schoolhouse where he was a pupil. On the other side of the city, the older Beethoven too sheltered from the bombings, in the cellar of a friend's house. Beethoven had already lost affection for General Bonaparte, as the retracted dedication of the 3rd symphony would suggest, but this would not change Beethoven's commitment in his music to clear opposing forces of good and evil, joy and sorrow, right and wrong. Whereas, the younger Schubert seems, even as early as age 9, to have developed a musical imagination markedly different than the composers that surrounded him in Vienna. Schubert was born in 1797 in the same city where Haydn was, at that time, described as the sun of composition from whom all others radiated. This is only six years after the death of Mozart, whose friend would teach Schubert composition as a boy. This coincidence will seem strange to anyone who has listened to a Haydn and a Schubert sonata in the same piano recital. Haydn's rich use of received forms, his clear melodic and tonal dichotomies, and his tendency for certain resolutions make his music satisfying in a completely different way than the wandering, repetitive, self-interrupting Schubert. And, indeed, wandering and repetition have usually been the very things which critics have quietly noticed. No one would doubt Schubert's importance as a transitional composer, but very few of us would see his music, in abstraction, as having the merit of the better pieces by Beethoven, Haydn, or even Mozart. I want to spend my opening time this afternoon addressing the two most common

complaints about Schubert's music and to do my best to explain how they are absolutely necessary to his musical purposes. Schubert's music was not unanimously loved in his own life. Even after he had become well-known in Vienna (he was the torch-bearer at Beethoven's funeral) he was given this cold response after application for a large publication:

the public does not yet sufficiently and generally understand the peculiar, often ingenious, but perhaps now and then somewhat curious procedures of your mind's creations.

Schubert's piano music has routinely been described by famous performers and musicians as 'tedious'. When the famous 20th century pianist Sviatoslav Richter began to play them—perhaps for the first time famously since the 19th century—his teachers said to him 'Schubert! How tedious! Schumann fairs much better.' And Glenn Gould, a pianist famous for his recordings of Bach said, "Heretical though it may be to say, I'm not really addicted to most of Schubert's music. I find myself unable to come to terms with the repetitive structure and find that I am very restless and squirm a great deal when I have to sit through one of the longer Schubert essays." No one could misunderstand Gould's concerns and none of you will misunderstand them by the end of the semester, for Schubert's music is repetitive. Anyone accustomed to Haydn or Beethoven will find themselves anticipating new material only to be treated with what first seems like a laborious return to old material. But it is also strangely repetitive. What if the restlessness and squirming that troubled Glenn Gould were a necessary feature? Many people seem not to have noticed this possibility. The two supposed difficulties in Schubert, and the ones that lead to this criticism, are wandering and repetition. It is tempting to apply the many related terms from German Romantic poetry as a way of explaining wandering and repetition—with wandering related to Sehnsucht or yearning, and repetition in relationship to homesickness. But I think this would be to miss out on Schubert's unique contribution to romanticism which, though it can be found in poetry and prose, is hard to find in music anywhere else. At this point, it

would be helpful if I could already count on your familiarity with the very music that I propose to teach you over the course of the semester, for I could then draw on it to prove my point. But I think I can trust to my descriptive powers here and hope that your memory of this talk will help you through the ‘tedious, restless, and squirming’ moments in the music we will be studying.

Wandering is not only a common event in Schubert’s music, it is something of an archetype for him. In his own lifetime, the song *Das Wandern* (which would become the first of a cycle of songs on poems by Wilhelm Müller) would be among his most well-known and beloved works. That song is probably familiar to some of you but for those who don’t know it, it is enough to say that it is, ironically, a song about wandering that is among the most repetitive songs in the repertoire—it does anything but wander. We may find in Müller’s poem a love for wandering, but we can see wandering itself only in Schubert’s other music. Indeed, Schubert’s earliest surviving work, suggests wandering. As a boy of 9, he wrote a 20-minute-long piano fantasy that ended in a different key from the one in which it began. This would be more impacting to you if you had more familiarity with juvenile compositions as those of us who teach in departments of music often do. Usually, first works by children rarely last more than two minutes. Children who had been taught music as Schubert had been taught it (and he certainly had a thorough education in it even at that age) would never have considered finishing a piece in a different key from the one in which it began. Both the length of this early (perhaps earliest) piece and its significant wandering without a final resting place suggest that Schubert had already begun to think about music according to new terms. While the compositions that would immediately follow these were more in conformity to Haydn’s models, this early work is pointed.

Many of you know how music can articulate a formal journey of sorts, which usually leads through various key areas and sometimes various themes. We can see this as early as the Baroque and some of you know how this works in a piece like Vivaldi’s *Spring*—where in

addition to moving through three different key areas and a number of subsidiary ones along the way, we are also given a number of different sets of thematic material too, with a view of regaining the home key and home theme at the end. But Schubert's musical departures often lead to other departures, sometimes without a clear sense of what actual resolution would be like. Think of the difference between Byron's Childe Harold and Tolkien's Frodo Baggins. Byron's book is called a 'pilgrimage' in half-irony because Childe Harold has no clear sense for where his pilgrimage should or will take him. Whereas, we all know where Frodo is trying to go and what he is trying to do. Or, if it is more familiar, think of Melville's Ishmael. Does he go to sea in order to travel from point A to point B? No. He wanders because to stop is suicide. Recall his words:

This is my substitute for pistol and ball. With a philosophical flourish Cato
throws himself upon his sword. I quietly take to the ship.

It is this sort of wandering that Schubert presents for us. We know how Mozart—in either of his two minor symphonies or his two minor piano concerti—can present tragedy. For the 18th century composer, tragedy is when a problem of haunting minor mode gains the upper hand at the end of a movement and a theme, first met in major, reappears in minor. Sure, among these composers tragic endings are rare and often are undone in later movements (think Beethoven). But the 18th century composer had his tragedies—tragedies like Jacques-Louis David's Horatii—Cato throws himself upon his sword. Schubertian tragedy is the tragedy of agnosticism. When his pieces finally gain the major mode, they then stop as if to question whether this were really the key we actually wanted anyhow, and then perhaps shift elsewhere or explore new music. Schubert's wandering is not, then, the long pilgrimage that takes us from the opening bars of Beethoven's 5th symphony to that glorious c major second theme in the second movement, or of the death and rebirth that yields the promethean theme of the 3rd symphony's last movement. Instead, Schubert sets and achieves short-term musical goals that turn out not to be goals so much as mirages. He

then leaves these to wander elsewhere. This is why, I say, his music is the saddest music imaginable. Christians in the room might be able to see why this is such an attractive music for us to study—those who are content with simple dichotomous naturalistic answers to the problem of life—for Pope, Leibnitz, Spinoza, for Lucretius as well as Lord Russell—there's little inroad for the gospel. But for those who are looking for one good reason not to end it all, who feel strongly that there is a Being out there, but not are not at all sure that he's on our side, we can find friends and allies.

It is striking that the last song in Schubert's first song cycle has the brook telling the self-slain miller's apprentice that 'wanderer, tired one, you are home' and that one of the most chilling songs from Schubert's second cycle has a Linden tree speaking to the wanderer and inviting him to rest in him—that is, to hang himself. Perhaps even his own biography had something to do with this, since he rarely lived in the same place for more than five years, and changed residences sometimes as quickly as every few months. He lived in his family home, in schools, with friends and dignitaries, often simply passed out and sleeping where he was, after a long night of private performances and heavy drinking. And yet, for all this wandering from abode to above, he almost never left Vienna. This leads me to my second problem with Schubert—the problem of repetition.

My very first music appreciation teacher, a middle school band director, began his class by telling us that the fundamental principle of music appreciation was that we like to hear music we know but that too much repetition was boring. We've seen how Schubert is in danger of overemphasizing the second half of this axiom. Now we need to address how he is in danger of overemphasizing the first—of giving us so much of the music we know that we stop liking it and are bored by it. That he runs this risk, even in many of the individual movements we will study, is doubtless. Perhaps most striking for you will be the last movement of his string quartet no. 15 in g, where he seems to cycle through the first and

second themes again so many times that at points we find ourselves in the rather unusual position of predicting that we will hear new material only to be *surprised* to hear music we know. The psychological process usually works the other way in rondo-like forms. But it is here that Schubert gives us what may be his most significant contribution to Romanticism. For, and as I've illustrated, the idea of wandering is by no means unique to Schubert, at least if we consider poetic forms of romanticism. To understand Schubert's repetition, I want to refer to a somewhat indecorous source—a foc's sail song from the 19th century called 'The Coasts of Peru.' It is a venal bit of folk poetry to be sure, which merely describes sometimes in fairly prosaic ways, the journey of a whaling vessel from England to the calm Pacific fisheries. After four or so stanzas chronicling the journey around Cape Horn and the laborious hunt itself, and the 500 pounds Sterling that the ship will gain from the blubber of that one whale, the sailor poet writes:

We're bound into Tomaz with our manly power.

Where a man buys a whorehouse with a barrel of flour.

We'll spend all our money on them Spanish girls ashore

and when it's all gone we'll go whaling for more.'

The ethics of sailors is not my interest here. My point is only to demonstrate this popular understanding of cyclicism. For the sailors, who merely make money in order to spend it, there's little else to do, once the spending is done, then to go out to sea again. The only thing that stops that cycle is a stove boat. There is, for the Romantic mind, a macabre take on the old adage 'if at first you don't succeed, try try again.' But how does one present this in a linear narrative like what you meet in most music? For Schubert, it means returning to your starting place and setting out again. I would urge you to see almost every return of thematic material in Schubert, perhaps excepting pieces that are decidedly in sonata form, as

fundamentally different from the way we normally think about returning material in older music.

In a Haydn last movement—and these are often Rondos—the composer will typically present to us a catchy reprise. This theme will be fairly light-hearted. We will depart from it for an undisclosed period and hear a contrasting bit of music. This prolongs our anticipation of the return of the light-hearted reprise theme. He'll then give that reprise to us, and depart again for a bit, only to set up another homecoming. For Schubert's music, I posit, this is not so. For Schubert, we must think of the return of older material as a 'do-over'. The departure we made from it evidently did not yield and we've found ourselves exactly where we were before. We must therefore depart again. This then emphasizes not the arrival at the new material—for often those arrivals will be so numerous as to be a disappointment not a relief. The emphasis is the newfound setting out thereafter. Think of them not so much as coming home at Thanksgiving, but as a New-Year's resolution. It is as if Schubert says, 'now, this time, I'll get somewhere.' But of course, he doesn't. His wanderings may go further and further afield. They may try new and more remote key areas, but in the end, he'll be back with his opening theme and have to set out once more. We will be left with the recognition that the opening theme was not a 'home' any more than the departures from it offered a 'resolution'. They offered various distractions—like Childe Harold's pilgrimages.

And here too, we might see parallels with Schubert's own life. In the period of his life when he worked solely on composition (as opposed to teaching schoolchildren as he did early in life, and suffering from syphilis as he did at the end) his days were a fairly regular cycle—according to the testimony of his friends. He started composing at 6 in the morning and smoked continually, eating and drinking nothing. Lunch was around 1 and it was coffee and more tobacco. He continued in this feverous hard work until the late afternoon and then met up with friends for dinner. They would then retire to one of their abodes and read

through music or poetry together and engage in various forms of dissipation until about 1 a.m. Schubert would often be in an unfit state to return to his own home and, as I have suggested, would pass out on someone's sofa until sufficiently recovered. He would then go home in time to start writing again at 6. One of his friends said that Schubert's 'body, strong as it was, succumbed to

the cleavage in his – souls, I would put it, of which one pressed heavenwards and the other bathed in slime.'

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Any of my colleagues looking at this syllabus might be surprised that I have given only two meetings to the form of music that was Schubert's most prolific—art song. Of course, his songs supply the 19th century with practically half of its distinct melodic imagination (the other half coming from Chopin). But I think his songs are so easy to enjoy that you do not need my help. I'll give you some tips when we study the four that we study, and leave you to it. But I think to focus on Schubert's art songs exclusively is to miss out on these two great contributions from Schubert, which have been sometimes understood as his great weaknesses—cyclicism and repetition. By these, he gives us, more than any other composer, agnosticism. He is unsure where to go. He strikes out anew, only to fall back into his old material. He strikes out again, and even harder, only to find himself adrift in a new and distant key just at the time when the piece should close.

Of course, Schubert does have legitimate weaknesses. I think the most significant of those is thinness of his counterpoint. His music has great primary melodies, but what of their contrapuntal accompaniment? It is usually so very secondary as to be ignored. Thus he never gives us (and perhaps never realizes the importance of) Beethovenian density. Rarely does Schubert ask you to think about more than one thing at a time. Schubert is also no formal mastermind. His efforts at preexisting forms show that he has not sufficiently

understood how to manipulate them to his advantage in the way that Haydn or Beethoven did, nor in the way that Brahms would. But these are both forgivable offenses and I will not spend any time apologizing for them in light of all the very good music Schubert leaves us.