

THE POETIC MUSE: GOETHE, SCHUBERT AND THE ART OF SONG

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Anyone who ventures into the vast regions of the 19th-century Lied meets a powerful presence almost immediately. Time and again the text is by Goethe, whose lyric imagination left an indomitable imprint on European music history. Even a cursory glance at Friedlaender's *Das deutsche Lied* bears testimony to multiple settings of Goethe's poems and the range and variety of this abundant repertoire is immediately striking. Ernst Challier's *Grosser Lieder-Katalog* gives further evidence of the musicality of Goethe's language and its location of meaning at the cradle of the Lied. Schubert's first masterpiece, 'Gretchen am Spinnrade', was a setting of a dramatic scene from Goethe's *Faust*. The earliest songs of Reichardt, Spohr, Loewe, Brahms and Wagner were to texts by Goethe, which raises the question as to the reasons for the poet's influence. Yes, Goethe was a supreme lyric poet. The binding force of form and meaning, or rhythm and sense, that characterizes Goethe's lyric poetry offered composers a wealth of material with which to cut their compositional cloth. Yes, Goethe was an object of admiration, even veneration, throughout the 19th century and the sheer quantity and variety of music his poetry has inspired signals the huge fascination exerted by his writing and his personality. Yet the steadfastness of his occupancy of the Lied goes beyond these explanations. Deeper currents must explain why Goethe's poetry goes hand in glove in our musical heritage.

From the time he burst onto the literary scene with the publication of *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* in 1774 until long after his death in 1832, Goethe was a catalyst for many composers who wanted to challenge what song could be. Musicologists searching for a tuning fork to conjure up a starting note in the history of Lieder usually commence with 'Gretchen am Spinnrade'. If Schubert was not the first composer to set Goethe's poems to music – that distinction belongs to Bernhard Theodor Breitkopf (1747–1820) alone – then he was the first composer to elevate the Lied to a major musical genre by writing with an artistry that demonstrated what an exacting and many-layered medium song could be. Many of the poems selected by him were also chosen by fellow composers: the exuberance and energy of Goethe's youthful lyric poetry ('Mailied', 'Willkommen und Abschied'); the poems to Lili Schönemann ('Auf dem See'); the 1797 ballads ('Heidenröslein', 'Der Fischer', 'Erlkönig', 'Der Sänger'); poems from the early Weimar period ('Jägers Abendlied', 'An den Mond', 'Wandlers Nachtlieder'); Mignon and the Harper's songs from *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*; and the Suleika poems of the *West-östlicher Divan* all prompted myriad musical responses. Composers used their predecessors as starting points for their innovative ideas and this continuity of communal Goethean texts inspired a unique grafting of poetic and musical traditions. In an age of rapid artistic and intellectual change, Goethe provided continuity, an uncontroversial point of departure.

Given the breadth and significance of his contribution to musical life and letters, it is time to revisit the Janus-faced portrayal of Goethe as an old baron living the life of a philistine, a traditionalist divorced from the musical life of his time. Many reasons can be identified for this portrayal of the poet: Goethe's association with the Berlin school of composers; the designation of Goethe's music theatre as 'Nebenwerke', works of secondary importance in the poet's creative canon; the philological neglect of the poet's correspondence with Zelter; and the writing-out-of-history of Mendelssohn, whereby one of the most remarkable relationships Goethe enjoyed with a composer was also submerged. But the reason most commonly and continually cited in scholarly and popular disquisitions is the poet's 'failure' to acknowledge Schubert's achievement in setting his poems.

The first attempt to interest Goethe in Schubert's work was made by the composer's most faithful friend, Josef von Spaun, who, on 17 April 1816, sent the poet a bound manuscript of the finest of Schubert's Goethe settings (now in the German State Library in Berlin). While awaiting word from Weimar, Schubert began preparing a second collection. When the first manuscript was returned unacknowledged (most likely by F.J. Kräuter, Goethe's secretary), the second book of songs was retained.

Yet Goethe's failure to respond to Schubert should not be taken as concrete evidence of a lack of musical discernment or an example of his musical conservatism. There are, in fact, many reasons for his silence. Firstly, despite his training on piano and cello, Goethe's lifelong collaboration with musicians reveals his dependency on others to bring a score alive. Goethe's 'rejection' of Schubert's first book of songs was claimed to have been influenced by Zelter, to whom Goethe supposedly sent the songs for advice. Such arguments are clearly unfounded: in the 891 letters exchanged between

these artists there is no mention of Schubert's Lieder; on the contrary, the letters prove the dispatch was never sent to Zelter, nor was he in Weimar during the period in which Schubert's first songbook arrived.

A second factor that is important to keep in mind is the sheer bulk of music dedicated to Goethe. In his later years it was not unusual for several hundred songs to arrive within a week: when one takes into account the extent and variety of Goethe's activities and the fact that music was only one of these ventures, the context of Goethe 'missing' the significance of Schubert becomes clearer. If one examines the political and personal background against which Schubert's *Liederbuch* arrived, the reasons for Goethe's silence become even clearer. The political aftermath of the Wars of Liberation, the Congress of Vienna and in particular the new constitution filled Goethe with unease; in his diary he confesses his despair. The darkness of his perception reflects events in his personal life: at the time Goethe received Schubert's first *Liederbuch*, his wife, Christiane, was critically ill and suffered a painful death on 6 June 1816. In his diary Goethe records the 'emptiness and a deathly silence in and around me'. What could a consignment of songs have meant at that time?

Nine years later Schubert himself sent the poet three more songs, this time his op. 19 Lieder: 'An Schwager Kronos', 'An Mignon' and 'Ganymed'. In their portrayal of a 'neglected Schubert', scholars have overlooked the significance of Goethe's acknowledgement of this second dedication in his diary as early as 1825. Johann Hummel, Weimar's most eminent musician at the time, and Mendelssohn, friend and musical advisor to Goethe, did not discover Schubert until 1827. Whether Goethe's failure to respond to Schubert in a personal letter of thanks was linked to his reticence in encouraging the younger members of the Romantic generation or coloured by the sad reality that Goethe and Schubert never met, one will never know. What is clear, however, from Metternich's new censorship laws, which were adopted in the entire Deutscher Bund after the Congress of Vienna, is that Schubert could not have published his op. 19 Lieder in Vienna with the dedication to Goethe on the title page without the poet's written permission. At some point, perhaps the same day as Goethe acknowledged receipt of these songs in his diary, a written missive must have been sent to Vienna to allow these songs to be published with a dedication to the poet. The presumed loss of this letter coupled with the legend of Schubert's neglect and Goethe's 'Olympian aloofness [and] blindness to new writers of talent' have fuelled assumptions surrounding Goethe's 'neglect' of 'poor Schubert'.

Whereas Goethe's response to Schubert reveals his taciturnity in accepting the new Lied, he did acknowledge Schubert's achievement at a later date. In conversation with J.G. von Quandt in 1826, Goethe appreciated how Schubert had 'expressed the sound of horses superbly' in 'Erlkönig' and of Wilhelmine Schroder-Devrient's performance, the poet confessed, 'I heard this composition once before, when it did not appeal to me. But performed like this, the whole song shapes itself into a visible whole'. Goethe's recognition of the significance of Schubert's 'Erlkönig' is indicative of a change of perception. Whereas his criticism of the through-composed Lied is evident in the *Tag-und Jahreshefte* of February 1801 and in his correspondence with Wilhelm von Humboldt in March 1803, Goethe gradually granted the composer more freedom of interpretation. As early as 1811 he acknowledges to Moritz von Dietrichstein how 'the composer appropriates the Lied, enlivens it in his own way'. The real turning point came around 1820, perhaps following extended conversations about the modern Lied with Christian Lobe and in letters to Tomaschek and Carl von Schlozer he endorses how the composer 'absorbs himself in [the poem], breathes life into it and develops it in his own way'. That he had reached this conclusion before encountering Schubert's settings is evident in his conversation in 1820 with Max Löwenthal, the composer's school friend, at which point he knew nothing of Schubert's compositions and had forgotten the dedication of 1816.

That Schubert developed Goethe's poetry 'in his own way' is evident from his very first Goethe settings and what is new in these songs is Schubert's unexpected handling of the unknown. When he wrote 'Gretchen am Spinnrade' on 19 October 1814, Schubert could count on listeners holding certain expectations and because they recognized the spinning songs as a *topos*, the song's extraordinary features could not have escaped them. Similarly in 'Erlkönig', he employed the traditional use of recitative in order to gain a singular result: at the end of the song, the narrator's voice fails, as if moved by a tragic death of the child, a strategy that draws in and actively involves the listener in a moment of dramatic climax. In both songs the keyboard part is not merely sound painting; it symbolizes the poetic self. Gretchen stops spinning when lost in reverie about Faust; the hammered triplets convey the mounting terror of the child. This is again evident in the settings from Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahr*. In 'Wer nie sein Brot', the piano, as if struck dumb, abandons the singer to face the

terrors of his own soul and in ‘An die Türen’ the voice and piano map out separate worlds, indicating how the Harper has reached a point where contact with others is impossible. This walking song with its regular beat, expresses not only a physical motion but indicates a path through life in the sense of a personal destiny. Several of Mignon’s songs also put one in mind of the Pavane or *Totentanz*, which in Schubert’s hands gently points towards an inexorable fate. The effect produced is quite different from Schubert’s use of familiar rhythms in an unusual context to produce an effect of alienation, where in ‘Erlkönig’ at the words ‘du liebes Kind’, komme geh’ mit mir (you dear child, come, go with me), a ghostly waltz in far too fast a tempo makes the enticement of the Erlkönig seem especially sinister.

From his very first Goethe setting, these songs not only affirm an immediate understanding of the poet, but of the literary and social context in which the poems were written. If the sharp vicissitudes of fortune that destroyed women were hardly the sole *raison d'être* for ‘Gretchen am Spinnrade’, it nevertheless runs like a thread through Schubert’s setting. No song worth its salt is unconcerned with the world it answers for and sometimes answers to. That answering function is what makes a song like ‘Gretchen am Spinnrade’ in the deepest way responsible – capable of offering a response, but a response in its own terms. As the earliest reviews show: everything is different after this song and people comprehend song differently. This is what makes ‘Gretchen am Spinnrade’ ungainsayable and indispensable, making it a happening in and of itself. And this is one of many reasons why Schubert’s Goethe settings provide a perfect test case for the ways in which the Lieder tradition reflects human history throughout the long 19th century.

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