

## A Suggestive Detail in Weber's *Freischütz*

Richard Taruskin

*But in Der Freischütz I could never rejoice enough or without tears at the beginning of the third act. We are still full of horrible dark impressions from the gloomy Wolf's Glen—and all at once the curtain goes up—a calm, tranquil room, in which, through the green window drapes, a ray of sunshine brightly gleams, and about the sun, in which the presence of God is so palpable, and about the clouds, Agathe and the cello sing together! There is poetry, and scene-painting, and music—all together!* (quoted in Gozenpud and Ogram 1962:234).

Thus waxed the twenty-three-year-old Alexander Serov to the nineteen-year-old Vladimir Stasov in a letter announcing his ambition to become a composer. Weber's Agathe is apt to strike even today's most sympathetic critics as "a little dull" (Warrack [1968] 1976:227), but nineteenth-century audiences loved and admired her as Weber intended. Intended? But yes. His romantic opera was one of the first to draw virtually its entire cast of characters from the peasantry, in keeping with the new Herder-inspired view that saw the peasantry as symbolic not merely of a class, but of the nation. And no one valued the peasant character more highly than the Germans, who saw it as their national character, as exemplified by the heroes of the fairytales then being collected and consumed in great numbers—yes, the "Prince Charming" values of honesty, sincerity, simplicity, and fidelity, the very ones that corrupted "French" morals saw as dull.<sup>1</sup>

Scholars never tire of pointing out that *Der Freischütz* is "really" French in form, Dahlhaus going so far as to claim, rather archly, that it ought to be called not a *romantische Oper* but an *opéra comique* with German words.<sup>2</sup> But its Germanness is real enough, as is evident in the way it was seen by its audiences as embodying the national character, and the national values, that they held so dear. Nor is it any secret that these values were symbolized musically by quoting or (more often) imitating folklore. Weber was a leader in this trend, just as he was a leader in the use of recurring motifs. Strange that no one seems to have reported the way these two traits combine in the portrayal of Agathe as an ideal German maiden. The tender melody of her Act III cavatina begins with a transformation of the boisterous *Walzer* from Act I (exx. 1a and 1b), as if to show that her purity of heart is of a piece with the heartiness of her people.<sup>3</sup>

And while musicologists seem to have overlooked this relationship, there is evidence that composers noticed it, and turned it, to some as yet

Example 1a: *Walzer* from Act I.

Molto vivace  
*ff*

Example 1b: Agathe's Cavatina from Act III.

Adagio  
*p dolce*

Und ob die Wol - ke sie ver - hül - le, die Son - ne bleibt am Him - mels -  
zelt, es wal - tet dort ein heil' - ger Wil - le nichtblindem Zu - fall dient die Welt

undetermined extent, into a trope. Is it a coincidence, for example, that Schumann used a variant of the *Walzer* motif to represent the Rhine, the grandest of all national symbols, in his Third Symphony (ex. 2)?<sup>4</sup> Or that Strauss used it (in a suitably bumptious and vulgar transformation) to represent the title character—a German hero, after all—in his *Heldenleben*?

Example 2: Weber, Piano Sonata No. 2, *Menuetto capriccioso*.

Example 3: Schumann, Symphony No. 3, main theme of second movement.

Example 4: Strauss, Hero's theme from *Ein Heldenleben*.

Agathe might not have approved of that swaggering lout, perhaps; but he surely prided himself on sharing her virtues (ex. 4).

Further than this I dare not press my point. I offer it as no more than an *aperçu*, in grateful recognition of all the lovely *aperçus* my conversations with Chris Hatch have granted me over the years.

#### Notes

1. See *New Grove Dictionary of Music*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Nationalism" (by Richard Taruskin).

2. See, for example, Carl Dahlhaus (1983) or Ludwig Finscher (1983–84).

3. It has been observed, for example by Walter Georgii (1914), and by Warrack ([1968] 1976:142–43, including ex. 31), that the type of *Vorhalt-melodik* (appoggiatura-laden melody) represented by the *Walzer*, and then by the *cavatina*, was just a stylistic tic that Weber had inherited from the likes of Dusík or Prince Louis Ferdinand. Appoggiaturas do, of course, turn up frequently in Weber's piano music,

especially in passagework, but also occasionally in themes: see ex. 2, from the third movement, *Menuetto capriccioso*, from the Second Piano Sonata, op. 39 (1816). But the cited example, and most of the others, involve complete double neighbors, which the *Walzer* theme lacks. Indeed, its direct approach to the appoggiatura from a harmonic note, I would suggest, is precisely what gives it its slightly lumpy *volkstümlich* character.

4. This relationship, though more remote than the one between the *Walzer* and Agathe's *Cavatina*, is widely recognized. It is, for example, the subject of the first chapter in Manfred Hermann Schmid (1981:11–34). My thanks to Michael C. Tusa for the reference, and for valuable consultations.

#### *References*

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